

ELEMENTS

An African Perspective

ELEMENTS: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Earth, air, fire and water are the basic elements used in various cultures. There are also others, including wind (which may just be another way of saying air or mean something completely different all together) and mineral/stone. Among the Dogon people/religion, there are four primordial elements: Water, Fire, Wind, Earth.

...the Dogon myths describe creation from water and define the four primordial elements of water, fire, wind, and Earth. - Laird Scranton

In ancient Kemet, the four elements, according to Rosemary Clark, are associated with the Creation Cycle.

- Water - South - Manu - Khemenu (Hermopolis - located near the boundary between Lower and Upper Kemet). Manu is “horizon of waters”. This is where the elements of creation emerge. “Its image is a watery mass of undefined powers, where all possibilities are articulated, but not manifest.”
- Air - West - Ament - Waset (Thebes - located along the Nile River in the middle part of Upper Kemet). Ament is the “horizon of the west” and “represents the phenomenal world that we experience, where cyclic forces govern the conditions of existence—birth and death”.
- Earth - North - Rostau - Iwnw (Heliopolis - located in Lower Kemet). Rostau is the “horizon of spirits” and is “symbolized as a mound upon which the forces of the upper worlds come to rest”.
- Fire - East - Aakhut - Aneb-Hetch/Inbu-Hedj (later known as Men-nefer - Memphis - located in Lower Kemet). Aakhut is the “luminous horizon”, a “fiery form of light that illuminates the primeval waters and impels patterns or forms to come into being”.

Embodying The Elements

According to the Dagara, everyone embodies the elements. One may be more dominant than the others, but no one has just one of them.

1. Earth - Tends to take care of others
2. Mineral - Has great social skills, connects with others
3. Fire - Has vision and passion, always active and involved in activities
4. Water - Has deep focus, tends to seek peaceful solutions to conflict



Dagara Wheel
Copyright © Malidoma Patrice Somé

...Mineral is the storage place of memory, the principle of creativity, resources, stories, and symbolism. In the cosmological wheel, mineral is located in the west and is colored white. It is the elemental energy that allows us to remember, to communicate with one another, to express our feelings, to receive messages from the Other World, and to remember our origins and purpose in this life. These functions are what the human skeletal structure, made of mineral, is all about. In Dagara physiology, our bones, not the brain, are the storage place of memory. In the village it is not uncommon to hear an elder say, "This is in our bones as it was in the bones of our ancestors." In the West there is a similar saying, "I knew it in my bones," which refers to a deeper, more elemental knowing than is possible through rational thought. - Malidoma Patrice Some

There are also those who embody nature.

...a person who can't stand phoniness, who finds it impossible to pretend, who can only be himself or herself, embodies nature. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

The element of nature signifies the principle of change. It is transformation, mutation, adjustment, flexibility, cyclicity, life, death, and magic. Nature is vegetative, therefore it is all plants and landscapes; and it is all animals as well. In the cosmological wheel nature is situated in the east, opposite mineral, and its color is green. Nature invites us to change consciously and to welcome change. Just as mineral stores information for our benefit, nature's complex paradigm is a library to those who pay attention. The magic we crave and our attraction to the supernatural are nature in their essence. This is because the tree, the plant, the landscape, and the serpentine river zigzagging downhill on its way to the ocean are all golden hieroglyphs capable of bringing a deep understanding to those willing to pay attention. Indeed, to the indigenous it seems that the tree is the essence of consciousness. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

Ritual is for the purpose of restoring balance, the essence of health, to individual and community. It serves no purpose to know the fundamental meaning of these cosmological elements if the ultimate reason is unconnected to ritual. To the extent that ritual is born out of the understanding of the cosmological wheel, the elements are its molecular tools whose proportion to one another must be monitored and restored when needed. The procedure for this is ritual. Fire rituals rekindle the connection to the ancestral fire and the fire within with vision. Water rituals cleanse and reconcile, restoring peace. Earth rituals ground and comfort, bringing a sense of home and belonging. Mineral rituals restore memory and light up a sense of knowing. Nature rituals restore the natural self and open us up to the magic and wonder around us. - Malidoma Patrice Some

In African religion, there are a variety of conceptions of being. Water, air, fire, and Earth play a critical role in African creation myths. But the fundamental notion remains that humans share a profound kinship with the whole created world. - Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

Earth

Earth represents the universal feminine principle. Important keywords include fertility, grounding, nurturing, loyalty, empathy, stability, survival, healing, unconditional love and transformation.

Most traditional African societies regard the Earth as sacred. The implications of this philosophical idea are numerous. In fact, Africans take the Earth to be a major spirit—not just the carrier of all the other spirits, but a vital, living entity. - Molefi Kete Asante

The Akan accept the idea that the Earth is the principal source of life for all humans. - Molefi Kete Asante



Meaning

Literal: The Earth Has Weight
Symbolic: Divinity of the Earth

Authority, Divinity, Might, Power,
Providence, Wealth

Tumi nyina ne asase.
All power emanates from the earth.

Asase Yaa (Mother Earth, Aberewa) is the great fertility spirit of the Akan. She's the wife of Nyame and mother of Bea/Bia, Tano and Anansi. She's the nurturer of earth.

The Akan regard the earth as a female spirit because of its fertility and its power to bring forth life, and they further personalize it as a mother because human beings depend on it for their continued nurturance and sustenance. Asase Yaa is of paramount importance to the Akan because it is through her, by way of libation and dance, that they gain access to and maintain familial connections with their ancestors. - Yaba Amgborale Blay

Thursday is her day in the Akan language. Asase Yaa is the upholder of the truth, and one could swear on a part of the soil. - Molefi Kete Asante

The Earth is not worshipped, and there are no priests or priestesses dedicated to an earth temple in Africa. Yet humans are supposed to take care of the Earth, to ask her permission before digging to bury the Dead, and to seek her blessing that the child returns to Earth. - Molefi Kete Asante

Geb is the ancient Kemetic Netjer of the Earth. He's one of the Ennead of Heliopolis. The son of Shu and Tefnut, he's the brother/husband of Nut (Sky Netjert).

He was also called the "Rpt" (the hereditary, tribal chief of the gods), and the earth itself was referred to as "pr-gb-b" ("The House of Geb"). Earthquakes were thought to be his laughter and it was he who supplied the minerals and precious stones found in the earth, as a god of mines and caves. The sign used in his name became associated with vegetation and the lush farming land by the Nile. It was said that barley grew on his ribs and he was depicted with green patches of vegetation all over his body. As a god of the harvest, he was sometimes considered to be the spouse of Renenutet, the cobra goddess. - J. Hill

In the ancient narrative of creation told in the African Nile Valley, the Supreme Deity created Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture, and Nut and Geb, sky and Earth. Thus, Geb, the Earth, was at the very beginning. As a deity, Geb was considered one of the sacred elements of the universe. The Earth as a deity must be treated with respect and deference if the universe is to be held together. - Molefi Kete Asante

Earth symbolizes the mother on whose lap everyone finds a home, nourishment, support, comfort, and empowerment. Representing the principle of inclusion, earth is the ground upon which we identify ourselves and others. It is what gives us identity and a sense of belonging. Produced as the result of the encounter between fire and water, earth represents survival and healing, unconditional love and caring. Earth loves to give and gives love abundantly. In other words, earth cares as much for the crooked as it does for the honest. Both of them are allowed to walk on her. In the Dagara cosmological wheel, earth is located in the center and is colored yellow. This central position in the wheel stresses the importance of visibility. Earth is the power to notice, to see and to thrill in being seen. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

Among the Ibo/Igbo of Nigeria, Ala (also known as Ale and Ane) is the Alusi (spirit) of earth. Known as Earth Mother, her name means “ground”. She’s the highest/most important Alusi and is married to Amadioha (sky Alusi). Ala is a Creator and Queen of the Dead/Underworld. She rules over community laws, morality, oaths, harvest, earth, death, cycles, luck, joy, cleansing and creativity.

Obasi-Nsi is the Earth spirit among the Ekoi/Ejagham people of southeastern Nigeria. Also known as Nna Obasi (Lady Obasi), she’s married to Obasi Osaw (Sky Spirit). A tortoise-shelled spirit, she rules over the fertility of the earth. Obasi-Nsi is also known as Ison, Eka Obasi, and Ibibio.

An interesting thing about all of the spirits mentioned above who are associated with Earth are all married to sky spirits.

- Asase Yaa (Mother Earth) is married to Nyame (Lord of the Sky)
- Geb (Earth Netjer) is married to Nut (Sky Netjert)
- Ala (Earth Alusi) is married to Amadioha (Sky Alusi)
- Obasi-Nsi (Earth Spirit) is married to Obasi-Osaw (Sky Spirit)

Air

Air represents the masculine principle. Important keywords include balance, sustaining life, communication, intellect and protection.

In Kemetism, Shu (Kemetite Netjer) represents air, light, wind, breath, sunlight and the atmosphere.

He was generally depicted as a man wearing a headdress composed of ostrich feathers carrying a Was sceptre (representing power) and an Ankh (representing the breath of life). Alternatively, he wore a headdress of a single ostrich feather (like that of Ma'at) which represented the breath of life. Occasionally, he wore a sun disk on his head due to his connection with the sun god. His skin was often painted black, possibly to represent his connection with Nubia or to emphasise his role in the rebirth of the sun god. He is commonly shown standing on the body of Geb with his arms raised to support Nut. When he is linked with his wife Tefnut, he often appears as a lion and the two were known as the "twin lion gods". Less often he is given the hind parts of a lion and the body and head of a man. - J. Hill

...Shu, as air, was responsible for lifting Nut above Geb, that is, separating the sky from the Earth. In this function, Shu assumes a crucial responsibility in maintaining balance. Should Shu disappear then the sky would collapse onto the Earth and humans would be unable to survive. Should Shu lift the sky too far away from the Earth, then humans would also die because of the lack of protection from Nut. Thus, the role of air was one of sustaining life, maintaining balance, and protecting humans. - Molefi Kete Asante

In the tradition of ancient Egypt, the deity Shu represented air, breath, and the atmosphere. As the god of air and sunlight, Shu's name means "the one who rises up," which is related to the idea that breath and air rise. - Ana Monteiro-Ferreira

In other African societies, Yoruba, Akan, Zulu, Kikuyu, Bakuba, and so forth, the air is a sustainer of life and also the container of numerous powers and energies. - Molefi Kete Asante

Looking at the spirit world (the Ancestors, Orishas, Alusi, Netjeru, etc.) as a whole, they are air. As stated at the end of the previous section, there is a marriage/connection between the Earth spirits and the Sky spirits. Earth, which represents human life and sky which represents the Supreme God is balanced and supported by the spirits/powers/energies. That makes sense, seeing that we contact our Ancestors and Spirits because of the belief that God is out of reach. So the spirits/air are the sustainers of life. Air is also connected with communication and protection.

Fire

Fire represents the masculine principle. Important keywords include creation, destruction, transformation, purification, energy, activity, passion, power, vision, anger, strength and courage.

According to Dagara cosmology, fire exists in everything. They also believe that “fire collided with water, which gave birth to life on Earth”. If you look at this from the aspect of balance you have fire (destruction) colliding with water (a life-giving force), therefore the two of them balance out each other. You can also look at it from the same perspective as death, which is something ending so something new can begin - fire is the ending and water is the new beginning.

For the Dagara, cosmology begins with the story of creation. In the beginning there was no earth as we know it. In its place was a burning planet, a ball of fire combusting at high speed. Therefore, fire is the first element of the Dagara wheel. Fire is present in everything, and everything needs fire. It was not until this moving and burning sphere encountered a huge body of water that things began to change. Water became the second element in the cosmological wheel. The shock resulting from the collision of fire and water not only slowed the combustion process, but also chased fire into the underworld, leaving the surface as a hot steamy place, fertile for the breeding of all kinds of life forms. This surface, hospitable to life, is what is known as earth, which constitutes the third elemental principle of the Dagara cosmological wheel. The various hard components of the earth provide structure and connection and are known as mineral or stone, the fourth element in the cosmological wheel. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

Fire is the original element of origin, the one that was present at the beginning. Its primal nature is combustion, warmth, vision, and feeling. Its position in the wheel is the south, the underworld, and its color is red. It is the state to which everything eventually returns, the state the ancestors are in...Fire opens the doorway to the Spirit World and allows our psyche to commune with other life present, past, and future. Fire is like a connecting rod, an open channel. In fact, fire is our psyche, the spirit part of us that knows what has always been. It is our ability to act, emote, and intuit. A person on fire is craving a connection. In this person, fire is translated into restlessness, a great deal of emotion, and strong dream experience. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

In many African cosmologies, fire represents the first element because, accordingly, it represents the state in which the world/Earth originated—“a burning planet”. Thus, fire is central to how African people understand the structure and order of the universe. More specifically, the universe is conceptualized as a spiritual force providing for the sustenance of human existence in both physical and spiritual realities. Therefore, fire is an aspect of all African spiritual systems connected via some spiritual essence, suggesting a harmonious relationship between humans and natural phenomena. - Weckea D. Lilly

The element of fire is also representative of particular personalities and cultures. A “fire person” is believed to possess high levels of vision and passion and is active. Additionally, because fire is seen as the doorway to the world of the ancestors, one possessing this characteristic is able to interpret dreams and lives in the future and is often misunderstood. However, a person possessing the negative aspects of fire is filled with restlessness, resulting in eventual death. In many African societies, the culture of fire is believed to be one of destruction. - Weckea D. Lilly

Water

Water represents the feminine principle. Important keywords include creation, destruction, transformation, purification, energy, activity, passion, power, vision, anger, strength and courage

The water of the physical ocean is one of the primary elements of life. This water is likened to life-giving and life-sustaining blood, fluids of the womb, and semen. Water cleanses, purifies, and nourishes. Water as an element has the distinct property of being purer than what it touches.
- Denise Martin

Life, as Dagara people say, began underwater. Thus, every living form on the earth got its life signature in the waters and continues to live intimately with water. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

Life forms inside an amniotic sac. This sac protects the fetus, helps with temperature control, controls any infections, helps with development of not only the lungs and digestive system but also with muscle and bone development, it acts as lubrication and helps support the umbilical cord.

The amniotic sac is filled with clear, pale, straw-coloured fluid in which the unborn baby floats and moves. The amniotic fluid helps to cushion the baby from bumps and injury, and maintains constant temperature for the baby. It also helps your baby's lungs, digestive system and musculoskeletal system to develop. The amniotic sac starts to form and fill with fluid within days of a woman conceiving. Amniotic fluid is mainly water. The unborn baby swallows the amniotic fluid and passes tiny amounts of urine into the fluid. The amount of amniotic fluid increases gradually during pregnancy until about week 38, when it reduces slightly until the baby's born. - NHS

Among the Dogon, before the universe was created, it was first designed with signs drawn with water. However, Amma had placed too many things in creation, and water left the whole. Amma was dissatisfied with creation and began again keeping water, a seed, and the elements of fire, Earth, and air. - Denise Martin

The element fire is the doorway to the ancestors, but water is the doorway to the Other World, the kind of world that is referred to as the world of the kontomblé and the other nonancestral spirits. This is why shamans can walk into the Other World through the waterways. In fact there are countless places in water where these same veils still remain active. These veils are the umbilical cords, the gateways, linking our world to others. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

The element water reconciles and quiets down that which is trapped in the crisis of combustion. In effect, water cools the burning psyche. It stills the restless consciousness and bestows serenity upon a person in turmoil, returning focus to a chaotic existence. As an elemental unit in the cosmological wheel, its position is the north, opposite fire, and its colors are blue and black. Water seeks to cleans, reconcile, and balance that which is in agitation, emotional disorder, and self-danger. When water succeeds, it restores or enhances life where there was the threat of death. Hence the connection between water and life. To seek water is to seek to reconcile and balance that which is constantly in danger of being thrown out of balance, that which is caught in the fiery loop of speed and consumption. - Malidoma Patrice Somé

The last sentence in the above quote brings to mind the lyrics of the song “Looking For Water” from David Bowie.

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