

The Elements

Anika H.



The Elements

Throughout time, religions have deified and imbued the elements (water, earth, fire, air) with personalities, relationships to each other, and human-like emotions. While these practices are fascinating, I am drawn more to religions where the elements are worshipped, but not humanized. I am especially interested in exploring elemental worship as it appears in Wiccanism because of my own personal and familial ties with it. This project served as an opportunity to better inform my limited understanding of this belief system.

These softground and aquatint etchings are portraits that represent the elements, with hand-painted colors traditionally associated with each. They are arranged according to their Wiccan directional alignment, with the letters above their heads coinciding with this alignment. Each portrait is rendered with minimal facial features, and are easily recognizable as human figures, yet are still abstracted. This idea of only partial individuality is how I chose to represent the ambiguous, preternatural nature of the elements in Wiccan worship.

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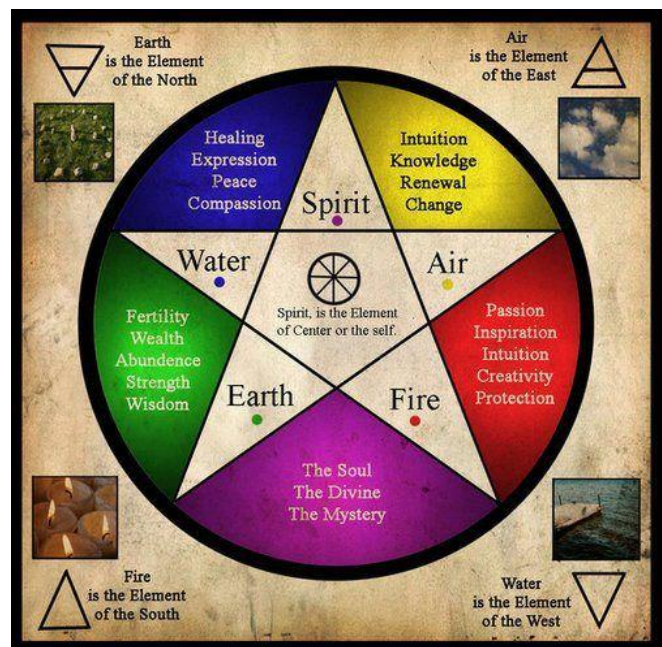
The elements, commonly known as Water, Earth, Fire, and Air, have been personified and worshipped in religions across the globe throughout history. They were given names, motivations, and relationships to each other so that people could more easily understand them, and so that they could explain and attempt to influence natural phenomena. While there are some differences in the way that their personalities are portrayed in different cultures, a surprising amount of the lore around them remains constant. This lore is what drew me to the topic originally; I wanted to better understand my Celtic roots, as well as explore aspects of Wiccanism that I was not as familiar with. This paper is the result of that exploration into those two practices, with a few additions that I wasn't expecting. My driving questions through the research process were, "How did the personification of the elements change in different time periods and areas of the globe?" "What personality traits did cultures agree on, and which were different?" "What is reflected about human nature when people personify concepts or objects?" With these questions in mind I spread my research across geographically and culturally distant locations, as well as into different time periods.

Wiccanism

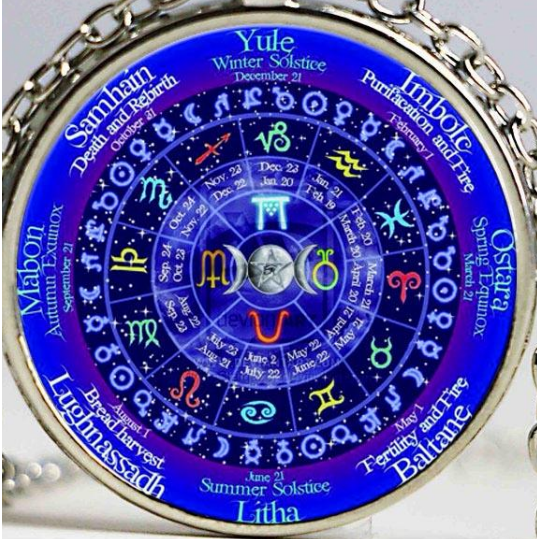
One major constant in much of my research was the directional preference of an element, if a culture associated them with directions. Earth and Fire are almost always associated with North and South, this is true from ancient Celtic worship to modern day Wiccanism. The main difference that arises in directional alignment is the mixing up of East and West in relation to Air and Water, which fluctuates across the globe.

Wiccanism is a nature-based spirituality revolving around seasonal, personal, and mother goddess worship. It is one of the relatively few religions left today where directional, elemental worship still plays a large role. When a Wiccan Circle is called, the opening and closing ceremonies are devoted to calling and thanking the directions, and asking for their specific influences. As in many historical religions, each element represents different aspects of the human and natural world, and are often called on specifically when a worshipper wants to influence a certain part of their life. For example, if someone needed increased clarity of the mind and spiritual connection, they would call on the spirit of the East, or Air in its elemental form (Fox). One important distinction in Wiccanism is that, while the elements have traits, they are genderless and, for the most part, personalityless in Wiccanism, which is unusual in elemental worship. This is because they are considered more as conduits than deities, and therefore are called on to influence or assist the caller. While they are worshipped, they are kept much more conceptual and ambiguous as entities than in many religions.

The Circles where this worship takes place often relate to Wiccan holy



days and other seasonal milestones, such as the solstices, equinoxes, and cross quarter days. These, too, relate to the elements, in that certain times of year are associated with a specific element; summer is Fire, fall is Earth, winter is Air, and spring is Water. These times of power for each element relate to their properties, such as Fire being worshipped in the summer because



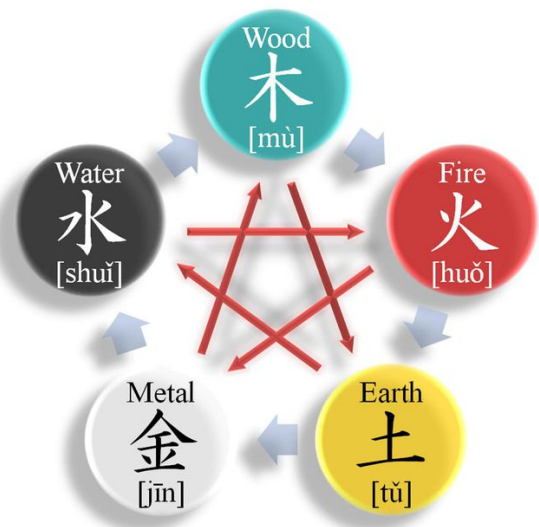
of the heat, light, and ritual burning at the end of the harvest. Or Earth being worshipped in fall, due to the recognition of the dead returning to the soil that comes with Halloween; a custom that has been, and is still observed around the world. In Wicca, Halloween is a time for recognizing that all people will one day return to the Earth, and also for honoring those that have passed. It connects to a recurring theme in Wicca: the return to the Goddess (Fox). This theme can be seen in many places, one example is the songs sung at circles. One common song goes, "We all come from the Goddess, and to her we shall return. Like a drop of rain, flowing to the ocean." (Fox)

The periods of seasonal power are also believed to influence a person's personality based on when their birthday is, much like the zodiac. For example, a person born in September is an Earth personality, meaning that often they are grounded and connected with nature, in touch with themselves, and caring.

Taoism

This kind of personality typing based on the elements can be observed in many other cultures as well, especially in Asia. Taoism is a Chinese, nature-focused religion heavily based on elemental worship, and still practiced widely today. The Taoist elements are slightly different from most others, in that there are five, not four. They have Water, Earth, and Fire, but instead of Air they have Metal and Wood. This five-element structure is the basis of all seasonal and personality typing in Taoism, as well as the foundation of much of Chinese medicine. Each element has a season, planet, direction, symbol, color, part of the body, gender, and yin or yang affinity. Taoism is one of the most detailed religions around the elements, and uses them not only for worship and personality typing, but for medicine as well (Levitt).

This intricate categorization of the personality of the elements is used in Chinese medicine to locate the source of health problems, as well as assess possible risks for each elemental type personality.



➡ 相生 / Generating Interaction
 ➡ 相克 / Overcoming Interaction

For example, an Earth type personality may have a predisposition for stomach and spleen problems, and therefore should avoid sweet and overly rich foods, which they tend to have a taste for. Stomach problems and Earth imbalance can be identified by deep facial lines around the mouth. While each elemental type has specific predispositions to health problems, it is possible for any type to develop an imbalance in any element. This is caused by abusing the body part associated with said element, or becoming out of touch with the natural rhythms of the seasons and elements (Levitt).

Because of the five element structure, Taoism does not line up with the Wiccan directional alignment, but instead creates its own, with Earth as the main difference. Because there are only four seasons and four directions, Earth exists in a separate space; it is aligned with center, and its season is the transition period between the other seasons, specifically the last 18 days of each season. The other elements relate to the four seasons; Fire with summer, Metal with fall, Water with winter, and Wood with spring.

Another notable difference about the Taoist structure is that, because of the dualistic nature of the yin/yang symbol, the elements can sway and change their affinity. The yin/yang principle states that all things have two sides, and have the ability to express either one. This means that, although an element may be traditionally yin or yang, they may go back and forth, and effect the human world. The genders and yin/yang affinity of the elements affect the personality of an element in stereotypical ways; masculine means a tougher, more reliable element than feminine. Their changing back and forth has to do with seasonal and personal triggers, and the gender of the element is often considered important to determine a cure for an ailment. For example, although Fire is masculine, yang, and red, it may present as feminine, yin, and purple when its affinity changes (Levitt).

Celtic

Both Wiccanism and Taoism are still widely practiced today, but many of the major historical elemental religions have lost their followings over the centuries, or been marked as pagan, demonized, and wiped out. One of these ancient worships was the pre-Christian Celtic religion. Based in Ireland, and the main religion until 452 AD when St. Patrick pushed Christianity, the Celts believed in a polytheistic, nature-based spirituality that involved elemental worship. Water, specifically in the form of healing wells called Slán, were worshipped as deities, and the Celtic land of holy rest was said to be under a great well somewhere beyond the reach of men. Fire was an extremely important part of most Celtic festivals, specifically around May and June, when bonfires were lit to honor the fire god Bél (Joyce). These bonfires are still lit today,



however Christianity has erased the history of the elemental origin, as it was deemed evil and pagan because it was once a celebration of fertility and sex, both properties of elemental worship associated with the spring. These fires are now lit as a celebration of Mayday.

This censoring is true of many of these customs that were once elemental: they still exist,

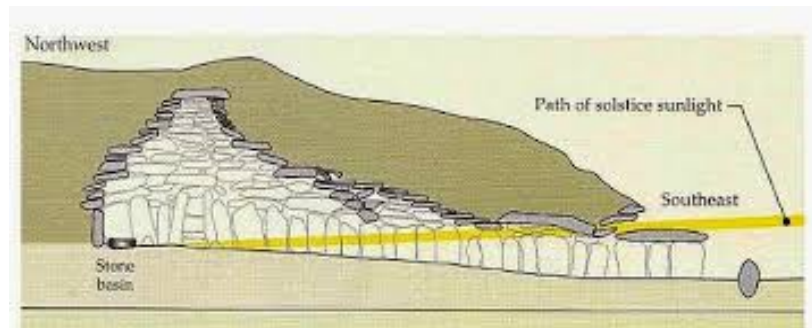
but with changed meanings. For example, people most commonly “swear to god” around the world today, but it was once considered more binding to swear by the elements than to swear on the Gods in Ireland. People would, “Swear by the Sun and Moon, Water and Air, Day and Night, Sea and Land,” and were said to suffer horrible consequences if they broke their promise (Joyce). Today, people still swear by the Stars in Ireland, but most do not know the origin of this condensed term.

Even pre-Celtic people in Ireland worshipped a form of the elements, in the form of Sun worship, the oldest worship aside from that of the Mother figure. Monuments such as Newgrange (shown at right), Knowth, and Dowth, which are man-made hills with tunnels and arranged stones, were aligned with solstices and equinoxes so that the sun would enter and touch the sacred stone at the heart only on those days (shown at right).

The same is true of Stonehenge in England, this alignment of the sun served as a marker of these solar holy days, which are still celebrated in many elemental religions today.

Ancient Persia

Another elemental religion in which sun worship was prevalent is that of the Ancient Persians. The pantheistic religion (meaning the worship of the powers of nature as a manifestation of god) that was practiced there was known as Magism, and involved the worship of the Sun and Moon under the names Mithra and Homa, as well as elemental worship. They worshipped the same four elements that we know today, with an emphasis on Fire. They also worshipped Genii, which were elemental and spiritual beings associated with travel. These Genii were influenced by the character of the humans that they came into contact with, as well as their elemental affiliation. This meant that if a person had an evil heart and met a Genii, they would often be punished, but a kindhearted person would receive help and safety in passage.



Within the common threads of direction, season, color, personality, etc. that have been linked to the elements throughout time and across the globe, the similarities are quite incredible.

The idea of personifying and deifying natural phenomena is distinctly human, and I believe that it shows the human need to understand and relate to things in a very concrete way. Although many nature-based religions have nearly died out, some are still practiced, and some, such as Wiccanism, have been rapidly gaining converts in recent years. Even those that have died out have left us with holidays and practices that, although not always understood, are integral parts of our culture. In this way, elemental worship is still prevalent today, it just may not be as obvious as it once was.

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