



The Dagara cosmology

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The healing wisdom of Africa

Finding life purpose through nature,
ritual and community

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Embodiment of the five elements

People and cultures each embody one or more of the five elements, knowingly or not. The most commonly seen elements at the level of culture are fire and water. Indigenous cultures identify with water. They are mostly peace and harmony seekers. On the contrary, modern cultures identify with fire. They challenge everything and everyone at the great risk of cosmic disruption.

Within these cultures, the individual are born embodying one of these elements as their essence and carrying the rest at a variety of levels as support elements. No one can be just one without the presence of the other four. Your essence is your genius. Your destiny is to allow your genius to come out wrapped in the colors of your character. A person with vision and passion, who is involved in countless activities embodies fire. A person with a deep focus who tends to seek peaceful solution to conflicts, who always sees harmony instead of discord, embodies water. A person who tends to take care of others, accepting them as they are, embodies earth. A person with great social skills who is always drawn to connect with others and who holds the stories of others, embodies mineral. Finally, a person who can't stand phoniness, who finds it impossible to pretend, who only can be himself or herself, embodies nature.

Fire

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. As we walk the earth, we are warmed by the heat of the ancestors coming from the underworld below us. 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, to 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.

The fire person is someone with an eye to the world of the ancestors and the spirit. He or she is in charge of the gateway between this world and the other, the ancestral. This person understands dream imagery and can translate and interpret dream images to people. The fire person lives at the edge between human culture and ancestral culture. His or her task is to go back and forth between the two worlds. There is a unique aspect to such a person due to this ability to see into both worlds. Shamans fit into this category because they live in two worlds. They are not part of the common people who fit well into their culture. They can see the culture from the perspective of the world of the spirit. Similarly, people who feel at the margins of their society may be dealing with the fire of their culture. They cannot quite fit in, and other people have problems understanding why they won't behave like everybody else.

The fire person is often misunderstood by contemporaries because, with respect to this world, a fire person lives in the future and therefore finds the average person too slow. His or her behavior can be seen by the average person as impatient, hyperactive and sometimes intolerant. A fire person cannot stay idle. However his or her fire may be translated into a warm, gentle flame that keeps a whole village, community, town, or culture of its vital relationship with Other Worlds.

If a person or culture forgets its crucial relationship with Other Worlds, that is, with the ancestors, a fire is ignited that becomes a destructive force in society. When that happens, a person or a culture suddenly perceives almost everything in terms of fire. Fire becomes equated with power, speed, hierarchy and value. All this is symptomatic of a culture in combustion. When one's culture is burning, it is impossible to sit still and keep focused. Like a ball of fire moving at high speed, a culture on fire is fascinated with speed. This speed shows up as horsepower on the surface, but deep within it is orchestrated by combustion. The burning within is symptomatic of some kind of crisis that drives people to remain endlessly "on fire".

The following description of a fiery culture may seem negative and unattractive. However, it is necessary to balance the positive elements of the fire person as an individual with the negative picture of a culture on fire. The reality is, that fire is dangerous; when it runs out of control, it destroys everything in its path.

When a culture is caught in fire, its people's perception of the world is red. They rush ceaselessly forward with a consumer's mentality, they pollute everything in their way, conquering and destroying anything that interferes. Fire culture promotes consumerism and cultivates scarcity in order to increase restlessness, then uses the restless, burning psyche as energy to increase production and consumption. Meanwhile the culture on fire is fascinated by violence. As a matter of fact, violence proves to be highly marketable and stimulates the fiery nature of the culture as a whole. Consequently, a fire culture is a war culture. It sees solutions in terms of fire and conflicts as fires that can be resolved with more fire. Such a culture will require a lot of water to heal.

Water

We mentioned earlier that water encountered fire to produce the positive changes that generate life. The fiery earth was cooled and firmed, which allowed it to support life, and so became a whole realm to which water could now give life. We are in this story the children of water. Any person who understands the value of being the parent of a child knows that this is a great benefit. Water can claim us as her children. We can say that we come from Earth, but Earth did not exist until water showed up. So water can lay claim to anything that is alive. Without water, nothing can be purified, nothing can be authentic. Water allows us to maintain the kind of consciousness that links us to the Other World, and hence we see in so many mythologies the idea of water as the "water of life", with water crucial to the spiritual experience and the spiritual journey.

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 el-

emental unit in the cosmological wheel, its position is the north, opposite fire, and its colors are blue and black. Water seeks to cleanse, 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 seek is to seek to reconcile and balance that which is constantly in dangers of being thrown out of balance, that which is caught in the fiery loop of speed and consumption.

To seek water is to seek the vitality and blossoming that comes from successful self-immersion. Water encourages a positive slowdown that permits one to notice things that are usually overlooked at high speed, and for this reason water is associated with focus. The water person is slow, shows great understanding and is eager to make things work for the greatest good. He or she perceives the world in terms of possibilities. The water person thinks of community, relationship, love, and harmony. Water is therefore also grief. Among other causes, grief arises from recognizing the loss that occurs from our failure to notice, and grief comes also from recognizing the wide gap between what is possible and the impossibility of getting there. The salted taste of tears of grief is the cleansing taste of reconciliation, of the desire to reconcile, because water cleanses and washes away the impurities of our failures. Grief is the enemy of denial. An elder once told me: "My tears say that my soul has heard something about the Other World."

When the world is out of balance and unreconciled, the waters are polluted, mistreated. They become the dumping ground of the world's ignominies. So pollution is not a sign of progress. It is the sign of crisis and the inability to reconcile. Pollution is the exhaust system of human denial. The disabled water lies useless while humans in the midst of fire speed along their way looking for a means of reconciliation. Meanwhile, life-sustaining water must be rationed in many areas. It is as if fire doesn't like the presence of water.

A water culture likes to keep things the way they are. Such a culture does not want the natural and environmental harmony to be perturbed. It is a slow culture with very little temper. It prefers to see the potential good in anything. People who have too much water have little ambition. They are not in a hurry to do or to complete anything. They think about all the things they never accomplish, and if they are badly out of balance in the direction of water, they do not even have regrets about them.

Earth

Earth symbolizes the mother, in 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 a 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, the earth is located in the center and is colored yellow. This central position stresses the importance of visibility. Earth is the power to notice something, to see and to thrill in being seen.

Earth people, or people with a lot of earth energy, is a lover of the world, of the earth. Unlike water, which seeks a way always toward one place, the ocean, earth finds comfort everywhere, anywhere, and loves to give it. Earth people, i.e. people with a lot of earth energy, are nurturers, who like all grandmothers, want everybody to feel fed, content, respected, and loved. Earth people can't stand the presence of scarcity; they would give away everything they had before before they gave anything to themselves. Making others feel good makes them feel good. The earth person takes care of other people spiritually, materially and emotionally.

A person without earth is in crisis, or is homeless and in exile. Such a person has lost his or her grounding. A person without earth feels empty, alone, and confused. She or he suffers from invisibility and anonymity. This unbearable situation can cause a whole to sell homes or parcels of earth to each other. This because home, in the symbolic or literal sense, is the basic ground for identity. If you remove people's home from them and then offer it to them for sale, people will have to buy it, because being homeless is unendurable. Thus pieces of our mother have entered into our trade system with great success. Is this why Western culture feels odd in front of homelessness? Is it why it doesn't know what to do with those people who can't fit economic expectations? Land and the earth are now a commodity, and this fact will not change.

My point here is that the development of industrial economies and the movement of vast numbers of people into the cities has not changed the essential connection between human beings and the earth that engendered them; it has only caused them to forget. When the people of a culture no longer remember that they are but a thread of the web of life on Earth, then they all become homeless.

Building community is difficult, if not impossible, if people have lost contact with the ground as their point of strength. For it is only from a place of grounding and centeredness that anyone can give something back to their world, to their community. Without grounding people will tend to take as much from the world as possible, since they are missing the nourishment that earth offers. Yet after they have gained all the material things they need, they will still feel uncertain about themselves. It indicates that they have not yet felt invited to give something to the world. To take without prior giving is like putting the cart ahead of the horse. You are not grounded. Deep down you do not know where you come from, and therefore you are unsure about where you are going and why Earth, the spiritual shrine of our being, is the center of being deeply human.

Building a home

Because Earth is our deep center, it is the center of rituals concerning the building of a home. It is appropriate to dwell on the ritual of house building among Dagara people, to highlight its relevance to community and the sense of belonging. Among the Dagara, because the house is the most visible symbol of the earth, home is sacred. Similarly there is a link between home and relationships, especially the relationship between family and community. It is as if building a house is building a relationship.

According to Dagara custom, men build the structure of houses, and women make them come alive. Before a man builds a home, he must bring a gift of 1,500 cowrie shells and a

chicken to the village's earth shrine. The cowrie shells represent abundance, the chicken represents life. The priest of the earth shrine takes the gift from the future homeowner and presents it to the earth spirit mother with a prayer of support. This prayer of support often takes the form of an invocation to the earth spirit to assist in the birthing of a new family. Then both the priest and the prospective homeowner strike the ground together with the same hoe. This gesture of cracking the ground open is symbolic of planting one's roots, even though it is not the place where the new home is built.

After this the prospective homeowner notifies the priest of the ancestors' shrine, who is usually the chief of the village, of his intention to build. The next ritual will take place at the building location and will involve the priest of the ancestors' shrine and include, once again, the scratching of the ground while praying for community. The prayer translates roughly as: "This is the expression of a desire to come together, not to part together." To form a community requires the blessing of the ancestors if it will sprout and grow.

From then onward the house is built by stages, each of which is ritualized with sacrifices and offerings to the spirit of the ground and to the ancestors. All of this takes months to complete. The section of the home for animals is built first, because of the respect due to animals. Almost at the same time as the animal section is finished, a roof is placed over a small section intended for people. A home becomes a home when it has a roof, for at that moment the spirits that support the family move in. Someone of the family must move in immediately, to keep the supportive spirits from leaving, for an unoccupied house invites evil spirits. Soon after the roof is put in place, the women's quarters are completed, and the women and children move in. No bathroom is built into the house, since people use nature for sanitation, and human waste fertilizes the farmland. The man of the house will be the last one to move into the new home.

People occupy the new house, but the true owner is considered to be Tingan, the spirit of the earth. Because, every household problem is a message from Tingan, including sickness and relational crises. When such a crisis occurs, it is the result of a distancing from Tingan, and family members must consult a diviner to find out what Tingan wants.

The home is a direct extension of the relationship between members of a family and the village. The breaking of the new ground must, therefore, be undertaken with the presence of the community. The gradual move is made necessary because the process of shifting the location of the relationship is a delicate one. The extensive set of rituals serves the purpose of allowing the existing relationship between the family and the community to be transferred safely to a new location, a new ground.

There is no move-in ritual, because the move does not take place the day you change location of the actual move, but the day you think about changing location. In this case, the ritual done with the priests of the earth shrine and the ancestors at the beginning of the process can be considered the move-in rituals.

Mineral or stone

From the element earth we move to the fourth element, mineral. 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 en-

ergy 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.

To the indigenous person, mineral is also equivalent to stone. As they say, the bones of the earth are the stones and rocks we see. To know the true story of our earth, including the story of ourselves, is to listen to the rocks. They are the conduits through which earth passes information on to us. Any creature that is born with bones is said to be born already possessing some knowledge. This where the indigenous derive their belief that no one comes into the world without a genius, and that this genius must be opened to the person shortly after birth, first through the name and later on through initiation. All those in Western culture who wander without purpose are perhaps stripped of their genius and are in exile, searching for ways to remember. These are people in mineral.

Indigenous people think that our bones are the minerals in which we store thousands of years of information. They store, which we need to remember. This makes me wonder if many problems of the West are a result of forgetting. I wonder also if those in Silicon Valley, who shave stones to their essence and put them in machines of memory perhaps already know somehow that stones have always managed information. My sense is that those who experience midlife crises are responding to the pull and push of masses of information they have not have not been using because they can't fully remember. For example, if there were a way to help people use the deep memories that they brought with them into this life, it would make a tremendous difference in their sense of direction and purpose.

I wonder also if part of the modern world's fascination with the Internet can be traced to this vast memory gap. People are searching for something, and when the information stored in our bones is neglected, one feels the urge to go outside the self in search for it. If the information out there echoes the information inside of us, could it be that the great turmoil of unrecognized wisdom within us is forcing us to race along the information superhighway, hoping that we will discover what we already have? The proliferation of various software, to make the venture even easier for us, would support this thought: does Windows 95 suggest the promise of a peck into the Other World?

Indigenous people don't learn by looking outside themselves; instead, they learn how to remember the knowledge they already possess. The person who has a mineral nature speaks a great deal because mineral expresses in discourse what is stored in coded form within the bones.

Mineral people are storytellers, fascinated with myth, tradition and rituals, versed in dealing with metaphors and symbols. In Africa, they are the town criers, who know what happens now and what has happened for countless generations. They constantly remind us in stories, proverbs, songs and poems the deep healing significance of staying connected. They know how to praise and how to warn.

A culture weighted too heavily with mineral is frenetically involved with communication at every level. In such a culture, language is an impressive instrument of power. The only problem with such a culture is in finding an audience, or someone to listen. A mineral person's love for argument, for different ways of saying the same thing, and for eloquent ways of saying nothing can baffle the nonmineral person. In truth, a mineral person or culture is extroverted, almost bombastic, but almost always has a point. The gift they present to their society and the world is the gift of remembering, through words and stories, one's origins and purpose.

Nature

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.

Landscapes and physical geography to indigenous people are a language, a writing that can be read. Elevated areas function very much like antennae, relaying or downloading information from faraway places, from the outer world to the inner world. Waterways take this information down to the underworld and carry messengers to the underworld.

Barren and flat landscapes emit a fast moving energy that is dangerous to isolated individuals. The Dagara see a desert as a place where faraway beings meet day and night. During the day they are not busy and the light hides them, but at night they are active and are much more visible. Since one can get caught in their world and never find one's way back, only medicine men and women venture into wide open places at night.

In heavily forested areas the moisture of nature and the trees protects and shields human beings from the Other World. But at the same time, the tall trees are engaged in some mysterious activities, especially at night, normal people should not be exposed to them, for they emit an energy that could affect their psyches as well as their bodies. This leaves the ideal living place, for the Dagara, as the savanna, with its sparse trees and tall grass. Because such a place is sandwiched between the two highly charged geographies, it is a refuge for human beings.

Every life form is touched by this galactic communications system located in the geography. This is why unlike in the West, where nature and magic are often opposed, the indigenous see the two as inseparable.

The nature person is seen as a person with great power to adjust, to change shape and shift. He or she is a witch, a magician. I have often wondered if the Puritans did not destroy witches because of their fear of the great power of nature within them. Western history is full of persecution of the natural and of nature. Today, even if witches are no longer

burned alive, it remains that nature itself is being destroyed. Every time a tree is cut down, a witch is wiped out. Every time a tree is felled, another witch is terminated. Every time a place is cleared by a developer, a magical gift from the earth is crushed. Progress seems to point to nature as its main enemy. Justified by economics, it acts in disgust toward nature, as if nature were standing in its way.

Nature people challenge us to be real, to be ourselves. They challenge us to drop the mask that the world expects us to wear and they challenge us to see what is around us as it truly is. That challenge comes in the form of humor, play, and joy, which has tremendous subversive power. Nature people trick us through humor and jokes into being real. A nature person is like a child who loves to play and sees life as a challenging play. In such a person, pretense is hard to come by. The power of nature is not just in its magical abilities, but also in the kind of change it pushes us to make.

For this reason, a culture dominated by nature will be extremely sensitive to the cycles of life. Its spirituality is dominated by seasonal rituals to keep time with the changing rhythm of nature. The mythology and stories of such a culture will be crowded with trees and animals that speak, with beings that live underneath the waterways and inside mountains and hills. The people will tend to see living spirits behind birds, trees and other animals, and will have complicated protocols for interacting with them. In the indigenous world, this is so true that an outsider may wonder how people manage to live with this consciousness. The shadow side of nature is black magic, the kind that is believed to harm other people. This is why even though a witch is not a black magician, he or she is feared because of knowing how such magic works.

It is my sense that if incorporating any of these five elements poses a challenge to modernity, then the challenge posed by nature is the most difficult of all. Indigenous peoples think that to be modern requires a move away from nature. They can't see how nature can be combined with modernity, for modern technology sets itself up in opposition to nature? But indigenous people also know that nature does not make compromises. It does not flinch when confronted, because its own destruction means our destruction. For this reason, indigenous people embrace to the wisdom of living close to nature and respecting its wishes.

The five elements and community

I have been using names such as water people, fire people, earth people, mineral people and nature people. Indeed, these five elements are also definable by clan; people are born into one or another of the clans, much like being born under a certain astrological sign. It is the time of your birth that stamps the element it carries on you. The decision of when to be born and therefore which element to embody is considered by indigenous people to be prenatal and is sealed by the individual.

The five elements, which make up five clans, together allow the entire village to form a cosmological wheel. The village can then balance itself by keeping the various elements in balance. For the wheel to be balanced, there must be an overwhelming representation of water. Just as the earth is essentially water, and just as the human body is essentially water, a community needs a large number of water people to maintain its balance. There

must be at least three times more people of water in the village than people of fire. When there are not, symbolic heat creeps in and rises, resulting in crisis. The difficulty of forming community in the modern world seems to arise from this, for when the people coming together are predominantly of fire, friction is produced more often than balance.

This is why there are healing rituals aimed at coping with problems of imbalance. Water rituals help calm the fire and produce reconciliation with nature. Indeed, when the proportion of water is more than three times that of the fire, the earth becomes moist enough for nature to flourish. Water feeds nature, so the presence of water results in a vitally growing plant and animal life. A healthy relationship of water, earth and nature will result in clean air to breathe. When these three elements are not in balance, the air we breathe is poor in quality. To upset the balance of elements is to throw the community in danger.

The principal task of a community is to maintain balance, a state in which all five elements are functioning smoothly echoing one another. To achieve this requires great diligence on the part of community. This effort need not be undertaken through the application of sophisticated theories of economics or social welfare. It is first necessary to determine which elements are troubling the community. We will have ample space to explore this in the chapters devoted to the elements and ritual. It is sufficient for now to know that there is an elemental way of understanding social and economic problems, and that there is a way to solve these problems through ritual.

The elemental wheel exists in each person just as it is present in each clan and in every community. This means that each person, on a smaller scale, must maintain a state of balance at all cost. Each person needs to keep the waters of reconciliation flowing within the self, in order to calm the inner fires and live in harmony with others. Each person needs to nourish the ancestral fire within so that one stays in touch with one's dreams and visions. Each person needs to be grounded in the earth, to be able to become a source of nourishment to the community. Each person needs to remember the knowledge stored in one's bones - to live out one's own unique genius. And each person needs to be real, as nature is real, that is, without pretense, keeping in touch with a sense of mystery and wonder and helping to preserve the integrity of the natural world. To be out of balance in any of these areas is to invite sickness to come dwell within..

A person who is out of balance threatens to throw the entire community out of balance. In the village, the illness of any one person calls forth the energy of the entire community. If any individual is sick, then the village is sick. A community is healthy when everybody in it is healthy. The fire of one person who is in an emotional crisis can easily expand out to other people and before the problem is identified, the entire community can be ablaze.

In the modern world ideological or dogmatic thought can be quite dangerous in a similar way. Ideology and dogma contain an elemental fiery energy of a distinct signature that can surge. Without protective efforts, the surging energy can spread to other circuits and enflame a whole system, a whole culture. Individual healing can be seen as a protection of life's energetic, for only when all of the individuals in a community are healthy can there be health in the community itself.

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