Understanding Spirituality in Avatar: The Last Airbender

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore and describe the spiritual meaning in the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender using James Fowler's theory of spiritual development. In this series, the elements of fire, water, air, and earth are used to illustrate the spiritual journeys of its characters. Fire, as a symbol of love, strength, and transformation, is evident in Zuko's journey, reaching the Reflective-Individualistic stage where he chooses the path of goodness, and in Aang's decision not to kill Ozai, reflecting the Conjunctive Faith stage that transcends rational thought. Water, as a symbol of life and emotion, is represented by Aang, who initially flees from his responsibilities, residing in the Conventional-Synthetic stage before eventually accepting his destiny as the Avatar. Air, symbolizing freedom and intelligence, demonstrates Aang's journey in understanding opposing elements literally at the Mythic-Literal stage. Earth, symbolizing stability and resilience, is reflected in the struggles of Aang and his friends, who reach the Universalizing stage, seeing all humanity as one and committing to the common good. This research employs a qualitative method with descriptive analysis, collecting data through literature studies that include the analysis of written texts, episodes of the animated series, and related literature. The results of this study show how the narrative and symbolism in Avatar: The Last Airbender can teach profound spiritual values, offering new insights into the study of popular culture and spirituality. Through popular media, this research aims to be an effective tool in conveying and teaching spiritual values, helping individuals find inspiration and guidance in their spiritual journeys.

Keywords: Avatar; James Fowler; religion and spirituality; spiritual meaning; The Last Airbender.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and often stressful modern world, the search for meaning and balance in life is becoming increasingly relevant (Choirin et al., 2024). One unexpected yet significant source of inspiration comes from popular media, particularly the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender. This series not only offers entertainment but also presents profound spiritual themes relevant to everyday life. Created by

Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, Avatar: The Last Airbender first aired in 2005 (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). The story centers on the adventures of Aang, the Avatar who can control the four elements of nature: water, earth, fire, and air. During their journey, Aang and his friends learn about the importance of balance, harmony, and personal growth. These elements are not only physical strength but also spiritual symbols that teach profound values such as wisdom, stability, transformation, and freedom.

This animated series is known not only for its engaging adventure story but also for its profound spiritual meaning. Avatar Aang's adventures teach many aspects of spirituality relevant to modern life, such as elemental balance, connection with nature, and self-discovery. These elements are not only important within the context of the story but also have broad relevance in the study of spirituality and character development (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). Spirituality in Avatar: The Last Airbender is explored through various interacting elements that reflect the principles of balance and harmony. The balance of the elements not only depicts harmony in the physical world but also balance in personal and social life (Mabaquiao, 2022). The connection with nature in this series demonstrates the importance of human relationships with nature as a source of spiritual strength and inspiration. The search for self experienced by the characters, especially Aang, depicts an introspective journey that is important in understanding the meaning of life and one's spiritual purpose.

In the world of Avatar: The Last Airbender, the balance between the four elements (fire, water, earth, and air) reflects the harmony needed to create a balanced and harmonious world. Each element represents not only physical aspects but also profound spiritual and emotional values. Fire, with its energy and transformation, symbolizes a fiery spirit and the ability to transform. Water, with its wisdom and healing, teaches emotional flexibility and the ability to heal oneself and others. Earth, with its stability and connectivity, demonstrates the importance of strength, resilience, and connectedness to the surrounding environment. Air, with its freedom and flexibility, reminds us of the importance of liberty, innovation, and the pursuit of enlightenment (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020).

The balance between these elements is not only crucial within the narrative context of Avatar but also offers profound lessons for us in real life. Within the spiritual and emotional context, viewers are taught to find balance within themselves, integrating various aspects of character and emotions to achieve internal and external harmony (Li & Cui, 2022). Amidst the challenges and increasingly massive developments of modern technology, human spirituality is increasingly questioned. Therefore, many methods are often used to revitalize human spirituality, so that humans do not experience spiritual dryness, because the guiding path and morality are clearly called spirituality, which in this context is expressed in the animated series Avatar (Wahyudi, 2023).

Based on the above phenomenon, the author intends to conduct research and interpret the aspects or dimensions of spirituality in the Avatar animated series. This research aims to describe the meaning of spirituality contained in Avatar: The Last Airbender, and how this series teaches these values through narrative and characters. The research problems that will be answered include: how to interpret spirituality in the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender represents the concept of spirituality through natural elements (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). By understanding concepts such as balance, connection with nature, and the search for identity through the lens of this animated series, it is hoped that new ways can be found to teach spiritual values to the younger generation.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analysis method. Data were collected through a literature review involving the analysis of written texts, episodes of the animated series, and related literature discussing the theme of spirituality in the context of popular culture (Rahardjo, 2011). This approach allows researchers to explore and describe the meanings contained in the narrative of Avatar: The Last Airbender in depth and comprehensively (Sugiyono, 2013). By understanding spirituality in Avatar: The Last Airbender, this research contributes not only to the study of popular culture but also to the fields of spirituality and psychology. The results of this study are expected to provide new insights into how popular media can be an effective tool in conveying and teaching spiritual values. Furthermore, this research can also help individuals find inspiration and guidance in their spiritual journey through the media they consume daily. Through this research, it is possible to understand how the narrative and symbolism in this series teach spiritual values that can help achieve balance and harmony in life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religion, Symbols and Spirituality

Religion exists as a guide that addresses the spiritual existence of individuals within social dynamics or the journey of community life (Adnan, 2020). It becomes a cultural system manifested through symbols, enabling humans to communicate, preserve, and develop understanding and attitudes toward life. Each religion is unique, with symbols and narratives that convey meaning about life, which develop according to each religion's beliefs and cultural context. One of the leading figures in religious studies, Clifford Geertz, views religion as a researchable fact because he considers religion to be part of the cultural system. Geertz suggests that the study of religion can begin through cultural analysis (Riady, 2021). According to Geertz, culture is a document or text of action that is public in nature, has a deep context, and is something produced and expressed through social behavior (Geertz, 2022). This definition emphasizes that humans are symbolic beings, where communication always involves the use of symbols (Halliza, 2024). Through these symbols, humans create meaning that forms a cultural network.

In society, culture is not only explained but also discovered and understood through existing symbols. Geertz describes culture as a running text whose meaning must be interpreted, similar to understanding the message within a text (Elfimov, 1992). This approach leads to an interpretive method known as "thick description," a term introduced by Gilbert Ryle. Ryle illustrated this concept with the comparison of two blinks of a child's eye, where the intentional blink has a specific meaning that needs to be interpreted (Hustwit Sr & Bouwsma, 2023). Geertz emphasized that researchers should not only describe the life patterns of tribes, explain religious rituals, or observe celebrations of holidays, but also discover the meaning behind these actions or rituals (Elfimov, 1992). This meaning is public and is a product of history passed down through symbols or rituals to the next generation. Furthermore, culture has a dynamic meaning structure and can change according to the influences and conditions of the times (Geertz, 2022).

Research to discover these deeper meanings is microscopic, with researchers selecting specific regions such as clans, clans, tribes, rituals, or villages. This aims to uncover more detailed and specific meanings, as Geertz did in Mojokuto, a small town in East Java (Effendi, 2020). In Mojokuto, a cultural confluence occurs between local Javanese wisdom, Islamic practices, and Hindu traditions, resulting in a local cultural system rich in symbols and meanings. Geertz identified three social groups within Javanese society: abangan, santri, and priyayi. These three groups differ not only in religious practices but also in their social structures and political ideologies. Each group has a distinct interpretation of the values of everyday life (Sairi, 2017). The abangan community, for example, combines Islam with local traditions in their religious practices, such as the slametan ritual. Meanwhile, the santri community places more emphasis on formal religious practices based on Islamic teachings. The priyayi group combines Islamic teachings with other elements in their rituals (Riady, 2021).

Socially, these three groups also differ. Abangan communities typically occupy the lowest social strata, often working as farmers. Santri communities, generally traders, occupy a higher stratum than abangan, with easier access to economic networks and external connections. The priyayi occupy the top position in the social structure, and despite their relatively small numbers, they exert regulatory control over both abangan and santri communities (Geertz, 2022). Geertz views religion as a cultural phenomenon that transcends mere sacred texts and transcendent teachings about heaven and hell. Through religious behavior, one can understand social networks, positions, and roles of individuals in society. Religion also serves as a tool of legitimacy in the context of power politics. Therefore, the religious behavior of these three groups has the potential to become a source of conflict and dispute (Elfimov, 1992). Symbols are an integral part of religion, as they give meaning to actions and objects in society. For Clifford Geertz, culture is a symbolic system in which religion is a crucial element influencing social dynamics (Riyadi, 2021).

Echoing Geertz, Victor Turner views ritual and symbol as closely intertwined, with the symbol being the smallest unit that maintains the essence of ritual behavior. According to Turner, symbols possess interesting properties. First, they are multivocal, referring to many things with diverse meanings, both personal and phenomenal. Second, they are polarizing, displaying conflicting meanings because they are rich in interpretation. Turner focused more on symbols that create two opposing poles: the physical and the normative. The physical, or theoretic, pole refers to what is desired or at a basic level, while the normative pole refers to what is required or at a higher level. For example, the milk tree symbol in the Ndembu society depicts the physical mother-child relationship, while normatively it symbolizes lineage and social unity.

Third, symbols have a unifying nature, uniting aspects of the social, cultural, and religious life of a tribe such as the Ndembu (V. W. Turner & Schechner, 1988). In the context of symbol interpretation, Turner identified three dimensions of meaning. First, the exegetical dimension, which refers to the interpretation given by the original informant to the researcher, which must be understood within the social context and the informant's qualifications. Second, the operational dimension, which relates not only to verbal interpretation but also to what observers and researchers observe. Third, the positional dimension, which emphasizes the relationship of symbols to other symbols, sometimes highlighting specific ritual symbols and sometimes not at all (V. Turner, 2018). So, essentially, symbols do not stand alone but are bound up in a larger cultural unity.

Symbols in the context of religion encompass a wide range of objects, activities, relationships, events, and spaces. They integrate the physical dimensions of symbolic objects with the emotional reactions and values of groups within a society. Geertz and Turner introduced the concept of symbolic projects, illustrating the importance of interpreting or translating symbols in anthropology (Jenks, 1993). The relationship between religion and culture is mutually influential. Human responses to religion can manifest both internally and externally, through life practices. Religion, as an objective system, encompasses moral teachings and regulations, which are often closely linked to the spiritual and material life within a culture (Ismail, 2016). Furthermore, religion and symbols are also related to the spiritual dimension of individuals and the social aspects of a culture (Saroglou, 2011).

Spirituality is the study of the aspects of the soul, spirit, or soul that exist within every human being, viewed from a religious perspective as a relationship between humans and God (Ryff, 2021). According to Tualeka in Subakir, spirituality is the science and understanding of human identity and its environment based on true meaning, moral commitment, and the ability to connect in human behavior. This implies that spirituality is how humans apply religion in life (Subakir & Dodi, 2020). Magunwijaya also argues that spirituality is a religious concept that influences a person's religious attitudes. This is related to belief in the Almighty, which depends on each individual (Damanik, 2020). Meanwhile, Nurcholis Madjid states that spirituality is a person's instinct to have faith and commitment to their beliefs (Ibrahim, 2022).

Thus, spirituality refers to an individual's belief in and relationship with God or a shared faith. Spirituality is a dimension closely linked to personal consciousness, combining the physical and mental aspects of an individual (Swinton, 2001). Beyond mere physical growth, human spiritual growth considers both divine and human elements. Etymologically, spirituality comes from the root word spirit, which refers to the soul, spirit, or spirit (Sponsel, 2020). Spirituality signifies an inner power that is invisible but has an impact on life, thus closely related to awareness and honesty in maintaining meaningful things (Hendrawan, 2009). Spirituality, which describes the soul, involves the non-physical dimensions of human beings. The key to understanding spirituality is an understanding of the inner and outer worlds, highlighting the internal origins of spirituality, which are influenced by recognition, understanding, and respect. Factors that shape spirituality in humans include a calling and life choices for growth and development (Fry, 2003). Life experiences create new energy within, encouraging individuals to develop spiritual values. The drive to grow and develop comes from within the individual, forming spirituality when the individual is able to experience personal growth and development.

In *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, Jack David Eller states that spirituality is often linked to the supernatural world (Eller, 2021). Supernatural powers, often referred to as mystical, are often considered part of spirituality because they are rooted in the human mind and can only be accessed through feelings. Humans seek to manifest this supernatural power by expressing it through certain objects or individuals. Belief in mystical things continues to be preserved in people's cultures, influencing aspects of daily life and influencing cultural dynamics as a whole (Aunger, 2000). Therefore, human spirituality continues to evolve over time, in line with the development of the cultural structure itself.

In this regard, in the second half of the 20th century, theologian James Fowler introduced a framework for spiritual development that, he argued, parallels the developmental frameworks for other aspects of human nature (Boiliu, 2021). In his work, Fowler proposed that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of human existence that develops predictably, similar to the development of cognition, social behavior, motor skills, or the ability to feed oneself (Wood, 2021). Fowler identified seven distinct stages of spiritual development, reflecting how humans understand and relate to God or a higher power (Nolt, 2021). He did not define faith through a specific religion, but rather as a unique way of relating to the universe and creating meaning. Fowler proposed seven stages of development, beginning with Stage 0. He developed

this developmental theory and model in the 1970s and 1980s, with his most famous book, "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning," published in 1981 (Fowler, 1982). While developing his theory, Fowler consulted with Lawrence Kohlberg, whose six stages of moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977).

Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Stage (Birth to 2 years), in this stage, a young child learns to trust or distrust the world based on how they are treated by their parents, similar to Erik Erikson's early psychosocial developmental stage of Basic Trust vs. Mistrust (Knight, 2017). In Stage 1, the Intuitive-Projective Stage (3-7 years), children begin to use symbols and their imagination. However, they are highly egocentric and tend to take concepts of evil, demons, or negative aspects of religion literally, often referring them back to themselves. The ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy is not yet fully developed. Then, in Stage 2, the Mythical-Literal Stage (6-12 years), children organize information into stories that are understood concretely and literally. They are not yet able to distance themselves from the story to find broader meaning and see justice as a direct reciprocity. Some people remain in this stage their entire lives. Next, Stage 3, the Conventional-Synthetic Stage (adolescence to early adulthood), is characterized by individuals holding onto beliefs without critically examining them. Their beliefs are based on what they learn and see around them, with strong identification with groups and reliance on external authority, and an inability to recognize that they are within a belief system that has not been fully internalized. In Stage 4, the Reflective-Individualistic Stage (early adulthood), individuals begin to become aware of their belief systems and see contradictions in their beliefs, which can be a painful stage as old ideas are modified or rejected. Some may abandon their faith, while others reinforce it with more explicit and personal beliefs, with a strong reliance on logic and rational thinking. In Stage 5, the Conjunctive Stage (midlife), people begin to let go of their reliance on pure logic and realize that some experiences cannot be fully understood. They embrace complexity and paradox, are more open to dialogue with other religions, and are able to refine their beliefs without losing faith. The final stage, Stage 6, the Universalization Stage, is achieved by very few people and is characterized by the view that all humanity is one, as well as acts of self-sacrifice for the good of all, with a focus on the welfare of humanity as a whole (Jones, 2023). Therefore, in Abraham Maslow's perspective, spirituality is a human and universal phenomenon that is not exclusive to any religion or religious group (Maslow, 1978). The next section will present how this phenomenon occurs in the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender.

Interpreting the Representation of Natural Elements and the Spiritual Journey of Avatar

In the world of Avatar, there are four main elements (Water, Earth, Fire, and Air) that are not only used as strengths in battle, but also reflect the spiritual journey and development of the main characters (Mabaquiao, 2022). The Water element, symbolized by Katara, teaches flexibility, adaptability, and healing abilities, reflecting the importance of going with the flow of life and emotional transformation. The Earth element, represented by Toph, symbolizes steadfastness, strength, and stability, teaching us the importance of determination and courage in facing challenges. The Fire element, represented by Zuko, symbolizes energy, passion, and transformation. Zuko's journey from antagonist to hero demonstrates the struggle to find identity and use energy wisely. Finally, the Air element, represented by Aang, symbolizes freedom, spirituality, and peace, teaching us to value freedom, maintain peace, and live with simplicity and kindness (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). Through these elements, Avatar: The Last Airbender teaches viewers or readers to understand and integrate the values represented by each element in everyday life, achieving balance and harmony in life as well as deep spirituality.

In the effort to express spirituality, media plays a crucial role in conveying its forms. Films are often chosen for their ability to visualize events similar to real life. One example, according to the author, of a film that explores spiritual teachings is Avatar: The Last Airbender. Spirituality, a concept explored by various cultures, encompasses an understanding of the four basic elements: air, earth, fire, and water, which help in assessing individual strengths and weaknesses (Jeanne-Lazya et al., 2022). These elements are believed to guide in addressing personal issues. The ancestors saw the world as composed of these elements, which sustain life and regulate human existence. Balancing these elements is essential for physical and mental well-being (Fueyo et al., 2022).

Each culture symbolizes these elements, recognizing their vital role in sustaining life on Earth. First, Fire, associated with the sun, symbolizes warmth and transformation, often depicted in colors like orange, red, and yellow. It symbolizes power, represented by an upward-pointing triangle, governing the spirit and

dwelling within (Bhatia, 2023). Second, Water, calming and transformative, soothes the mind and body. Its fluid nature is cleansing and purifying, represented by colors like blue and gray, symbolized by an inverted downward-pointing triangle, residing in the sacral chakra (Buenaflor, 2020). Third, Air, essential to all life forms, energizes the mind and body. It symbolizes life itself, associated with spring and dawn, depicted in colors like yellow and blue, symbolized by an upward-pointing triangle with a horizontal line near the top, residing in the heart and throat chakras (Allen, 2020). Too much Air can have harmful consequences. Fourth, Earth, though powerful, requires the presence of other elements to fully manifest its abilities. It is often seen as more material, symbolized by stability and balance (Matracchi, 2021).

In contemporary times, the above elements are commonly engraved in tattoos and jewelry, symbolizing connection and balance. Engaging with these elements through activities such as meditation or spending time in nature helps cultivate harmony and balance (Adams, 2022). Understanding these elements can aid in self-development, as disruptions in their harmony in the human body can lead to illness (Müller & Kubátová, 2022). By reflecting on the various aspects represented by these elements, individuals can balance themselves and achieve harmony.

Meanwhile, in religion and spirituality, these elements have shaped our understanding of the natural world and influenced various religious and spiritual beliefs throughout history. The elemental framework is a common thread connecting various belief systems, symbolizing important aspects of human existence and the cosmos. In this section, the author will explore the role of these elements in past and present religious traditions such as Christianity, Paganism, and Wiccanism, as well as in popular beliefs, shedding light on their spiritual significance across cultures.

First, the Elements in Christianity. Christian theologians and scholars incorporated the elements into their religious symbolism during the Medieval period. For example, the elements were often associated with the four Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—who were depicted as winged creatures representing Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, respectively (Pisano, 2023). This symbolism underscored the belief that the four Gospels, like the elements, were fundamental to understanding and interpreting the Christian faith. Furthermore, the elements were sometimes associated with the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, illustrating their spiritual relevance in Christianity (Tyrrell, 1903). The Elements also played a role in developing the theory of the Four Temperaments, which originated with the Greek physician Hippocrates and was later adopted by Christian scholars. This theory stated that a person's personality and temperament were determined by the balance of the body's four humors, each associated with one of the elements (Musek, 2024). Melancholic individuals, for example, are thought to have an excess of black bile (Earth), while sanguine personalities are associated with an excess of blood (Air) (Verplaetse, 2020). This framework offers a way to understand human behavior and emotions in a religious context and emphasizes the importance of achieving balance and harmony in one's spiritual life.

Second, elements in Pagan and Wiccan traditions often celebrate the elements as essential components of nature and spiritual practice (Lipp, 2024). Furthermore, many of these traditions recognize elemental deities, who embody the essence of each element and serve as archetypal representations of natural forces. In Celtic mythology, Brigid is the goddess of fire, associated with creativity and inspiration; Manannán mac Lir is the god of water, who rules the sea and emotions; Cernunnos represents earth, associated with fertility and abundance; and Lugh, the god of air, symbolizes intellect and communication (McColman & Hinds, 2020). By honoring these deities, practitioners of Pagan and Wiccan traditions form a deeper connection with nature and the elemental energies that surround it.

In Pagan and Wiccan practices, rituals and ceremonies often involve the four elements to create sacred spaces, summon elemental energies, and maintain balance and harmony. For example, during a ritual, practitioners might invoke the elements by invoking the cardinal directions. Each direction corresponds to a specific element: North for Earth, East for Air, South for Fire, and West for Water (Singh et al., 2021). Additionally, altars are often decorated with symbolic representations of the elements, such as stones for Earth, incense for Air, candles for Fire, and bowls for Water. By incorporating the Elements into their practices, Pagans and Wiccans cultivate a deep connection with nature and its energies, ultimately enhancing their spiritual experiences (Lipp, 2024).

Third, the elements of Native American religion hold significant significance within their beliefs, intimately connected to the natural world, spirituality, and cultural practices. While interpretations may vary among tribes, broad themes of balance, interconnectedness, and respect for nature are central to their understanding of the elements. Native American spirituality emphasizes maintaining harmony and

balance within the natural world and in personal life (Singh et al., 2021). The elements are the fundamental forces that create and sustain life. They are often represented by the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) in Native American rituals and ceremonies. Each element is believed to possess unique qualities and teachings that, when combined, create a balanced and holistic understanding of the world. For example, Earth may symbolize stability and steadfastness, while Air represents intellect and communication (Cui et al., 2022). By recognizing and respecting the interconnectedness of the elements, Native American cultures strive to maintain harmony with the natural world and uphold their responsibility as stewards of the Earth.

It is important to note that Native American beliefs about the Four Elements can vary significantly among different tribes and nations, as each group has unique cultural and spiritual traditions. For example, the Lakota recognize the elements as Earth, Water, Wind, and Fire, each associated with a specific color, animal, and spiritual quality (Posthumus, 2022). In contrast, the Hopi emphasize the role of Earth, Water, Fire, and Wind in their creation stories and ceremonies, with the elements seen as gifts from the Creator that enabled life to emerge (Bernardini et al., 2021).

Despite these variations, the fundamental themes of balance, interconnectedness, and reverence for nature remain consistent in Native American beliefs about these elements (McCluskey, 2023). By understanding and honoring these elemental forces, Native American cultures foster a deep connection with the natural world and a profound respect for the fragile balance that sustains all life. As we continue our exploration of the four elements and their significance throughout history and across cultures, we will shift our focus to their impact on art, literature, and other cultural expressions (Leeming, 2021). By examining how these elemental forces have inspired and shaped various artistic endeavors, we will better appreciate the enduring appeal and versatility of these elements as sources of inspiration and symbolism. In the next section, I will provide an overview of the Avatar: The Last Airbender series and then interpret the four elements as central themes in the film.

Avatar: The Last Airbender is an animated television series produced for Nickelodeon by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, which aired from 2005 to 2008. The series was a huge success even beyond its original demographic (children aged 6-11) and reached 5.6 million viewers at its highest-rated broadcast. Critics also praised it, in 2005, the series won the Best Action/Adventure TV Series and Best TV Series awards at the Pulcinella Awards, Best Animated Television Production for Children at the 36th Annie Awards, and a Peabody Award in 2009 for showcasing extraordinarily complex characters and appreciating the impact of war. Thanks to its success and public love, a sequel, The Legend of Korra (2012-2014) was produced, and Netflix purchased the rights to a live-action adaptation that began filming in 2021 (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020).

The universe in which the series takes place is a fantasy world inhabited by humans, spirits, and fantastical creatures. The human population is divided into four nations: the Northern and Southern Water Tribes, the Air Nomads, the Earth Kingdom, and the Fire Nation (Mabaquiao, 2022). Each nation is associated with a natural element, and a portion of the population possesses the ability to control that element. The art of bending is defined as the innate power and ability to manipulate one of the four elements, and those who can do so are called benders. Each bending art is associated with a specific set of martial arts; waterbending is based on tai chi, airbending on baguazhang, earthbending on hung gar, and firebending on Northern Shaolin (Appello, 2022). A real martial arts master was invited during the development of the animated sequence, and the chosen style reflects the philosophy of each nation.

Every culture around the world has some form of symbolism related to the four elements (fire, water, air, and earth). It is widely recognized that these four elements sustain living things and make life on Earth possible. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to propose the theory of the four elements in 450 BC (Lawson, 2021). Based on Aristotle's findings, alchemists created four triangular shapes to symbolically represent these elements. These elements are not only found in the external world but are also believed to be part of the human body. A person's unique abilities, moods, emotions, and personality are said to be governed and regulated by the four elements within them. The key to a healthy existence is to create balance in the universe, and within ourselves (Suzuki, 2022). Different cultures tend to interpret these elements differently. For example, in Western occult theory, the elements are hierarchical, with fire and air being more spiritual, and water and earth being more material, while other modern cultures, such as Wicca, believe the elements are equal (Lipp, 2024). Let's explore the four elements, along with their symbolic

significance, characteristics, attributes, and cultural associations as represented in the animated series Avatar: The Last Airbender below.

First, fire, as a symbol of love, desire, anger, strength, assertiveness, and energy. Fire is considered the first element created on Earth. Fire is predominantly associated with the sun and is a warm and dry element. It emits light, which protects all living things from the shadows of night. Fire is transformative, and when combined with other elements, it can change and evolve. For example, when fire meets air, it becomes larger and burns brighter. At this point in the Avatar series, they are shown facing the consequences of Ba Sing Se's fall. They recover and plan an invasion with a small group of fighters, which ultimately fails. Meanwhile, Zuko decides to confront his father and finally stops trying to gain his validation. He changes for the better and earns the group's trust, becoming Aang's firebending teacher. At this point, according to James Folwer's theory of spiritual development, he is at level four, namely Reflective-Individualistic. In this stage, a person begins to realize that they are in a box and look outside of it (Fowler, 1982). That is what Zuko and Aang then do as they embark on a quest to unlock the secrets of firebending, discovering that the first to practice it were dragons (also called the Sun Warriors) (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020).

Then the day of Sozin's Comet arrived, and Ozai harnessed its power and began a bloody campaign to conquer all four nations and destroy his enemies, declaring himself the Phoenix King, while Azula was crowned the new Fire Lord. The group (now including Zuko and Toph) split up to confront the threat. Zuko and Katara went to confront and defeat Azula before her coronation, while Aang faced Ozai. During the final battle, Aang entered the Avatar State and defeated the Phoenix King, deciding not to kill him, but instead, using the Avatar's only power, energybending, which allowed him to control his life energy, and stripped him of his elemental control completely. After Ozai was defeated, Zuko became the new Fire Lord and vowed to join Aang and his group in helping rebuild the world (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020).

During Aang's transition into the Avatar State, the transformation phase is at level five in Folwer's theory of spiritual development. Why? Because in this stage, after going through deconstruction in the reflective-individualistic stage, individuals begin to reduce their reliance on rational thinking and realize that some experiences cannot be explained logically. They begin to accept complexity and see a shift toward goodness, such as Aang's decision not to kill the Phoenix King. People at this stage are more open to dialogue, even with those who hold differing views, including their enemies, and actively seek additional information and correction of their beliefs. They are able to do this without losing their faith (Fowler, 1982)

From the above events, we can see how the nature of Fire is associated with summer, hot days, and the direction of north, and is usually depicted with the colors orange, red, and yellow. It is associated with the mythical creature, the salamander. Fire is a powerful and masculine element, symbolized by a triangle or pyramid pointing upwards, toward the sky (Lipp, 2024). The element of fire is associated with the planet Mars, and its corresponding zodiac signs are Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius. Fire governs the spirit and resides in the solar plexus chakra. While fire is certainly a warm element with many benefits, too much of it can be detrimental.

Second, water, in this section it is told that Aang is a twelve-year-old airbender who discovers that he is the Avatar. The story begins 100 years before the events of the series when he first discovered his abilities, Aang learns that Fire Lord Sozin wants to conquer the four nations and is determined to kill the Avatar, because he is the only one who can stop him. Aang is afraid of the burden on his shoulders, and decides to escape with his flying bison, Appa they fall into the sea during a storm, and Aang activates his Avatar State, trapping them both in an iceberg. Aang's decision to escape with his large Bison, shows that he is still at level three, Conventional-Synthetic, At this stage, individuals believe their beliefs without critical examination. Their beliefs are based on what they have learned and what they see others hold. There is a strong sense of identity with their group. Aang's reluctance to take responsibility is evidence that in this case Aang is at this level, without critical examination of what is the basis of his decisions (Fowler, 1982).

Aang awakens one hundred years later, found by a pair of Southern Water Tribe siblings, Katara and Sokka, and learns that the Fire Nation started a war after he escaped, a war that has been going on for one hundred years, now continued by the new Fire Lord, Ozai. He also learns that the Fire Nation killed the Air Nomads in an attempt to eliminate the Avatar and allow the Fire Lord to continue his plans unhindered, and he is now the last surviving Airbender. The Fire Nation moves forward with its plan to conquer all four nations, and Aang realizes that he must accept his destiny as the Avatar and stop Ozai, setting out to master the three remaining elements: water, earth, and fire. To master the first element, he travels to the

Northern Water Tribe with Katara and Sokka to find a master. Upon arriving, he discovers that Sozin's Comet, the power source that Fire Lord Sozin used to start the Hundred Year War, will return during the summer, giving the Fire Nation enough power to win the war. Aang accepts the fact that he must master all the elements before the Comet arrives, and during his journey to the North Pole (where the Northern Tribe is located), the exiled Fire Lord, Zuko, continues to follow him and his friends to restore his honor (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020).

Third, air is the element of life itself because all living things, both plants and animals, need air to live and thrive (Rahmatiyah et al., 2024). Air is warm, moist, and energizes the mind and body. The air element can be found all around us, but its most visible manifestation is through wind or coolness. Air is associated with spring, sunrise, and the east and is depicted through the colors yellow, blue, white, and gray. Associated with mythical creatures, the Sylph, or air giant, is a powerful and masculine element, symbolized by a triangle or pyramid pointing upwards, toward the sky, with a horizontal line near the top (Flemisch, 2023). The air element is associated with the planet Jupiter, and its corresponding zodiac signs are Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius (Flemisch, 2023). Air governs the mind and resides in the heart and throat chakras. Although air is associated with breathing and life, too much of it can prove disastrous. In the Avatar series, it is also said that he was born into a tribe of Air Nomads, and in the sequel, the Avatar comes from one of the Water Tribes, a legend states that the Avatar must learn to master each form of bending starting from their element of origin in that order. Given that these elements are taken from classical mythology, each has an opposite, fire and water are opposites as are air and earth, reflected in the challenge the Avatar faces when having to master the element opposite to their element of origin, as it will be much more difficult to do so than the other two elements (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). This position indicates that Aang's character is at the second level, known in James Folwer's theory as the Myth-Literal, during this stage, information is organized into stories. These stories, along with moral rules, are understood literally and concretely, Aang must learn to understand them through the myths of the four opposing elements, but still literally (Fowler, 1982)

Fourth, Earth or Land, begins with Aang, Katara, and Sokka leaving the North Pole after he learns to master waterbending. The group begins traveling to the Earth Kingdom to find an Earthbending teacher for Aang, where they meet Toph, the daughter of two aristocrats who secretly participates in underground Earthbending tournaments and becomes his teacher. They all learn about an upcoming solar eclipse that will leave the Fire Nation defenseless and use this information to plan an invasion. However, the plan fails when they discover that the Earth Kingdom is secretly controlled by a major military force (the Dai Li) whose goal is to keep news of the war out of the kingdom and its capital to maintain control (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2020). The group struggles to reach the Earth King to deliver this news, while Zuko (who is psychologically abused), Azula (his sister), and her friends (Ty-Lee and Mai) pursue the group. Azula then organizes a coup to conquer the Earth Kingdom capital and defeat any chance of an invasion of the Fire Nation (Appello, 2022). In this part, Aang and his friends fight without fear of becoming victims, no matter how difficult it is, they continue to do so even though they are tortured like Zuko. Their sacrifice and struggle, according to James Folwer's analysis, have reached the final stage, namely Universalization. Although not many people reach this stage, they can. At this stage, individuals see all of humanity as one family and carry out great acts of self-sacrifice for the welfare of all people based on this view (Fowler, 1982).

Thus, interpreting human spirituality through the Avatar: The Last Airbender series in this position using James Folwer's theory of spiritual development, it can be seen that in the Avatar series, the elements of fire, water, air, and earth are used to describe the spiritual development of the characters. Fire, as a symbol of love, strength, and transformation, is seen in Zuko's journey who reaches the Reflective-Individualistic stage in James Fowler's theory, where he stops seeking validation from his father and chooses the path of goodness, as well as Aang who chooses not to kill Ozai, reflecting the Conjunctive Faith stage that goes beyond rational thought. Water, a symbol of life and emotion, is represented by Aang who, at first, runs away from his responsibilities, is in the Conventional-Synthetic stage, before accepting his destiny as the Avatar and adapting to the fact that he must master the water element. Air, which symbolizes freedom and intelligence, shows Aang's journey who must understand the opposing elements literally in the Mythical-Literal stage. Finally, earth, a symbol of stability and resilience, is seen in Aang and his friends' struggle to master the element of earth and fight against major military forces, reaching the stage of Universalization, where they see all of humanity as one and commit to the common good. Through these

elements, the Avatar series illustrates how individuals can grow and change spiritually through reflection, adaptation, intelligence, and resilience, demonstrating that physical strength can also deepen spiritual understanding and commitment to the common good.

CONCLUSION

The Last Airbender series presents an interesting spectacle and uses natural elements to depict the spiritual development of its characters in accordance with James Fowler's theory of spiritual development. Fire, as a symbol of love, strength, and transformation, is seen in Zuko's journey to reach the Reflective-Individualistic stage by stopping seeking validation from his father and choosing the path of goodness. Water, a symbol of life and emotion, reflects Aang's development from the Conventional-Synthetic stage, where he runs away from his responsibilities, to finally accepting his destiny as the Avatar and mastering the water element. Air, which symbolizes freedom and intelligence, depicts the Mythical-Literal stage in Aang's journey to understand the opposing elements. Earth, a symbol of stability and resilience, shows the struggle of Aang and his friends to master this element and fight against major military forces, reaching the Universalization stage where they see all of humanity as one. Through reflection, adaptation, intelligence, and resilience, the series depicts how individuals can grow and change spiritually, demonstrating that physical strength can also deepen spiritual understanding and commitment to the common good.

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