  
*Female Nature Spirits*

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| **Introduction** | |
| In Buddhism and Hinduism, yakshis are feminine Indian deities who possess the power of fertility and prosperity. This Yakshi is shown as a curvy, perfect beauty who wraps herself around a tree. They are frequently shown nude wearing anklets, bangles, and necklaces on their upper bodies. They are typically portrayed near to or clinging onto trees because of their connections to the natural world. They are closely related to the ashoka tree. One of the repeating themes in Indian art is a yakshi with her foot on the trunk and her hands grasping the branch of an ashoka which is a sacred tree worshipped by Hindus in local traditions. Although less frequently, there have been different kinds of trees with flowers or fruits with which yakshis are depicted. These figures are usually encountered as gatekeepers in ancient Buddhist and Hindu temples.  These nature spirits are mythological creatures found in Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu art. They were believed to be spirits that inhabited trees, mountains, rock mounds, rivers, and oceans. Yakshas are male figures while Yakshis are their female counterparts and are usually represented together in relation to natural elements. The female figure represented here is made from mottled red sandstone entwining herself to a tree. Its body is depicted as voluptuous with nude upper body, wearing necklaces, jewels, and anklets. The figure’s lower torso is covered with clothing and her leg wrapping around a tree.  Yakshis are associated with protective nature or as attendant figures placed on top of structures to guard them. For Buddhists, yakshis are believed to have been people who served individuals or communities during their lifetime and are reborn as benevolent spirits. Similarly, Jain texts claim yakshis are reincarnated as humans once their merit has been exhausted. | |
| **Indiana Standards Connections:**  *7.1.2 Describe, compare, and contrast the historical origins, central beliefs and spread of major religions.* | **Compelling Question(s):**   * Who are the yakshis? * What do they represent? * How are the yakshis depicted in art? * What does their representation interacting with trees symbolize in terms of their relationship between nature and humans? |
| **Lesson Objectives:**  In this lesson, students will learn about the Yakshis or female nature spirits in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, focusing on their connection to fertility, prosperity, and the natural world. Through examining their representation in art and mythology, students will understand how these figures symbolize nature, protection, and spiritual belief. Through this lesson, students will compare how similar mythological beings are portrayed across cultures and religions and they will explain the role of Yakshis in ancient Indian culture and religious practices. | |
| **Materials** | |
| Articles and resources for background information   * [Yakshi (Tree Spirit) W2W Website](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/yakshi-tree-pirit.html) * [Smarthistory- Yaksha and Yakshi sculptures by the MAP Academy](https://smarthistory.org/yaksha-yakshi/) * [Google Arts & Culture- Sandstone figure of Shalabhanjika Yakshi](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/sandstone-figure-of-shalabhanjika-yakshi/OAHTrqO6UNB_Pg?hl=en) * [Mythical Creatures Yakshi](https://mythical-creatures.com/glossary/india/yakshi/) * [Yakshi, Madan and other spirits](https://keezhkulamelangom.angelfire.com/yakshi.htm) * [Yakshi Unplugged: Interrogating Malayalee Masculinity in the Popular Culture of Kerala](https://www.pursuits.mercycollege.edu.in/pdf/articles/2020/article-3-2020.pdf)     Other museum collections with similar items:   * [IU Eskenazi Yakshi (Tree Spirit)](https://artmuseum.indiana.edu/collections-online/browse/object.php?number=79.83) * [The Met- Yakshi Holding a Crowned Child with a Visiting Parrot](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/64486?ft=yakshi&amp;offset=0&amp;rpp=40&amp;pos=3) * [Seattle Art Museum- Yakshi (female fertility spirit)](https://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/6364/yakshi-female-fertility-spirit;jsessionid=7AEE054D2B60A69FB6BE6312398F245D) * [Philadelphia Museum of Art- Yakshi (Female Nature Spirit) with Hands Together in the Honoring Posture](https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/56712)   YouTube videos:   * [What the Folk? - Beware, the Yakshi! Folktale from Kerala](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGOg7CCF6dM) * [Yakshi: The Myth Uncovered Discover the hidden legend](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEAwyguolHg) | |
| **Learning Plan** | |
| **Activities**   1. Begin by showing the students the image of the Yakshi (Tree Spirit) in the W2W [website,](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/yakshi-tree-pirit.html) and other similar items representing female deities in museum collections (some resources are provided above). Ask students to make inferences about these items: What is it made from? From what part of the world is jade found? What is depicted? What do they think this item is used for? What might the female deity represent? Does it seem heavy or light, brittle or hard? Students may observe the woman’s voluptuous body clinging to a tree and adorned with bracelets and jewelry. **Emphasize that the figure represents a tree spirit and was probably originally placed in a temple to protect it.**  2. Briefly explain that Yakshis are female nature spirits in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, associated with fertility, prosperity, and protection. They are commonly found in ancient art and temple structures.  3. Introduce the Ashoka tree and its connection to the Yakshi. Explain that in Hinduism and Buddhism, the Ashoka tree is sacred, and the Yakshi is often depicted entwined around this tree. Mention that Yakshis are seen as protectors and guardians of nature.  4. Discuss the typical depiction of a Yakshi: a curvy, voluptuous figure, often shown nude with jewelry, standing or sitting near or around trees.  5. Explain the mythology behind Yakshis and their male counterparts. They are thought to be spirits who were once human beings. They are believed to have been reborn as benevolent spirits to serve and protect others. Use the resources provided above to complement the lesson plan and discussion according to the grade level.  5. Ask students to create their own interpretation of a Yakshi. They should focus on representing the connection between the Yakshi and a tree, highlighting the natural elements such as flowers, fruits, or vines. Encourage them to show jewelry like anklets and bangles in their drawing.  6. In groups, ask students to share their interpretations of Yakshis. They will explain the symbolisms behind these nature deities such as fertility, nature, or protection. | |
| **Assessment Suggestions**  Evaluate students’ understanding of Yakshis through their participation in the discussion. Assess their ability to connect symbolism of Yakshis with religious and natural themes through their reflections. | |
| **Extensions**  Students will research a different female deity from other world cultures and prepare a short presentation on how they are represented in art and what they symbolize.  How do Yakshis compare to other female deities or spirits from different mythologies around the world, such as Greek or Roman mythology? How is Yakshis role similar or different from other mythological creatures in different cultures? | |