



"Western Ghats" by Laura Murray (2017).

NEW ANIMISM: RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES AND EXPANDING WESTERN ONTOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Animism is said to be the most fundamental form and starting point of religious belief (Stringer, 2013). This concept has been used in cultural anthropology since the late 1800s but, due to inconsistencies in research ontologies, fell out of favour as an ethnographic research tool (Bird-David, 1999). A return to, and modification of, this concept has been witnessed over the turn of the century as researchers seek to better understand how the tool may once again be utilized. In this essay I discuss how modern conceptualisations of animism may shape human/non-human interactions and relations. I provide a brief history of the concept and discuss how its limitations excluded it from cultural anthropology's tool kit for the better part of a century. Following this, I outline the contemporary conceptualizations of animism,

or new animism, and how they seek to address the term's original misdirection. Modern use of animism in South India, South America and Burkina Faso highlight the variability within the concept itself as well as the consistency of *relational epistemology*: bridging the gap between the "self" and "other." To conclude this essay, I explore the possibilities of Western (and global) integration of traditional peoples' epistemologies to reduce Cartesian dualism of humans and nature, which contribute to the exploitation and degradation of natural beings. This is seen in the emerging field of *ecopsychology*, which seeks to address issues inherent in pro-environmental communication with the general public through a recalibration of philosophical understandings.

ANIMISM: PRIMITIVE AND SAVAGE

Notions of animism in the West have existed since the 6th century BCE (Harding 2013), though Edward Tylor's work in the late 1800s is a commonly accepted origin (Bird-David, 1999; Malville, 2016; Stringer, 2013). Tylor borrowed the idea from Stahl, a 17th century alchemist (Bird-David, 1999); however, contemporary anthropologists and scholars of traditional peoples deemed it morally unacceptable (Bird-David, 1999; Malville, 2016; Stringer, 2013). Many consider Tylor a father of cultural anthropology of the "modernist" period, in which science and evolutionism were held in the highest regard. Through second-hand accounts of "primitive peoples," he defined a concept of animism. The traditional/indigenous peoples that lived under this banner believed in the existence of spirits, whom were embodied in all human and non-human entities. From this Tylor posited that the minds of animistic traditional peoples were similar to that of children who attribute living qualities to inanimate objects, concluding that their societies were cognitively underdeveloped (Bird-David, 1999). This line of thought directly stems from the evolutionistic mind frame of the modernist period which presented animism as the "root" of religion, and thus less evolved in comparison to monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, etc.), and importantly, science. Tylor entered this field of study with an interest in the spiritualist movement of the time, which he argued was a "survival and revival of savage thought" (Bird-David, 1999, S69). His work on animism was collated and presented in the 1871 book *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. Whilst Tylor touched on important concepts within cultural anthropology, his approach was condescending to traditional peoples and the subject retains a stigma to the present day (Malville, 2016).

Reignited by Hallowell's 1960's ethnography of the Ojibwa people and the intrinsic animation of objects within their language, notable anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, and Nurit Bird-David began to revive the concept of animism through the turn of the century and have opened an inquiry into animism's ideas about a world alive (Harvey, 2013). In contrast to Tylor's positivist approach to notions of "life," "nature,"

and "personhood," contemporary scholars have suggested a *relational epistemology* to develop better understandings of "local concepts" (Bird-David, 1999). Through what is now viewed as misdirected understandings, theoreticians in the modernist period assumed "primitive peoples" shared the same notions of "self" to natural objects, "primitive peoples" were deemed misguided (Bird-David, 1999). In contrast, relational epistemology seeks to understand the world via a primary focus on relatednesses (relationships between the human and non-human) and avoids the modernist dichotomies of natural/supernatural and spirit/body (Bird-David, 1999).

NEW ANIMISM: RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

"Animism is about a world full of immediate relational beings" (Naveh & Bird-David, 2013, 27). Naveh & Bird-David's (2013) chapter in Graham Harvey's *Handbook of Contemporary Animism* explores the ideas of animism, conservation, and immediacy (regular exposure to something as in one's everyday life). They state that animism is absent from the West due to the lack of immediacy in engagements with plants, animals, and other natural objects. They explore immediacy through ethnographic observation of forest dwelling Nayaka people in the Nilgiris hills in South India. The region has become a hotspot for regional and global ecological development and has been recognised as a UNESCO biosphere reserve since the 1970s. The authors state that during a 30-year gap between ethnographic observations, the Nayaka people have managed to retain their relational epistemology despite economic pressures. The Nayaka's animistic epistemology places greater significance on knowing how to behave with relations to nourish them, over the dualistic notion that things are separate from oneself. Despite achieving conservation in the region, it has not been cognitively pursued and behaviour with relations has been shown to be variable within the Nayaka. According to the authors, tribal members display mindfulness and care when harvesting or hunting for their immediate use or consumption but not when conducting similar activities for economic means. Despite these conflicting actions, animism and relational epistemology present opportunities for recognising contemporary Western society's utilitarian epistemologies

that contribute to the degradation of environmental health.

Descola's (2013) ethnography of the Achuar people in the borderlands between Ecuador and Peru also provides clear examples of relational epistemology at work. The Achuar believe that all plants and animals are relatives and possess a soul (*waken*) which classifies them as persons (*aents*). Maintaining good relations with these aents is vital to the lives of the Achuar. Disrespecting the spirits puts at risk familial and neighbourly relations, hunting success, and conjugal harmony. Distinctions between persons are drawn not via differences in appearance but through a hierarchical order of communication, which directly challenges Cartesian dualism. The Achuar place themselves at the top of the pyramid as they are able to see and communicate with each other in the same language. Exchanges with non-humans are possible via *anents* (incantations) which are not immediately obvious and appear mostly in dreams or hallucinogenic trances. Despite endowing the non-human with souls, the Achuar exclude most insects, fish, grasses, pebbles and rivers from their network of subjectivity. This highlights inconsistencies in the term "animism" between different traditional communities, yet the notions of relatedness remain.

Animism and relational epistemology need not take the preconceived form of spiritualised natural objects that first comes to mind. Stringer's (2013) ethnographic enquiry into the people of Burkina Faso delivers another contemporary example of animism, free from modernist prejudices. The animistic people of Burkina Faso treat spiritual beings as a fact of life. These spirits engage with the human population by inhabiting inanimate objects such as statues and masks, which Stringer acknowledges is not animism expressed in the most basic form of relations between the spiritual and material worlds. Rather, this is a highly sophisticated mode of religious engagement with the *non-empirical other*, or that which cannot be measured. He compares this engagement with that of women in the UK communicating with dead relatives and God. Stringer concludes that the people of Burkina Faso hold a relationship of fear and uncertainty

with their spiritual others, which contrasts with women in the UK whose relationships consist of coping mechanisms and love.

Further contrasts are in de Castro's (2004) ethnographic probing of Amerindian animist ontologies. The use of anthropomorphism among Amerindian peoples demonstrates a lack of differentiation between human and non-human life, since both stem from humanity as their original condition. They view animals as possessing human sociocultural inner aspects that have been "disguised" by external bestial forms. This is a divergence from the other ethnographies explored in this essay and further asserts the range of possibilities under the umbrella of animism. What consistently runs through these accounts of new animism is the importance of relatedness.

EXPANDING THE WESTERN MIND

Earlier I mentioned the possibilities of using relational epistemology in a Western context as a means of cultivating pro-environmental attitudes. The Western mind's loss of relational connections with nature incites suffering for both camps. Hogan (2013) suggests that we need animists to address the detrimental issues of climate change, though the irony of institutions teaching animism where they previously shunned it as "primitive" is not lost on her. Despite this, she seems optimistic in animism's ability to positively impact the whole living world, particularly non-human animals: "the future of the animals is for the new young animists to determine" (2013, 25). It is not my goal to suggest that all people should practice animism. However, what may be possible is the respectful borrowing of some core principles of animism, such as those discussed in this essay. Additionally, there are clear parallels between the non-dualism found within new animism and relational epistemology to ecopsychology, since ecopsychology questions the distinction between the body and the other (Hillman, 1995). As in animistic cultures, principles of ecopsychology are enacted from birth. Davis (2012) highlights the importance of beliefs and actions in determining the ecological footprint of a culture. If, as a child, one is directed towards a respectful relationship with the mountain, one is more likely to behave differently than the child who is not afforded the same beliefs.

Reinders (2017) believes that we share an ancient kinship of embodied being with all lifeforms and that it is the awareness of our interaction and connectedness with the earth and the entire cosmos that defines us as human. It has been the case, however, that centuries of unmitigated capitalist technological expansion have reinforced the duality between human and nature via egocentric and anthropocentric worldviews. Reinders continues that an eco-centric consciousness can marry scientific thought to a capacity to love, and rational understanding to empathy and intuition. Her notion of the body being the “topsoil” in which the eco-centric consciousness may take root and develop paints a clever metaphor that resonates with relational epistemology and the dismantling of human/non-human barriers. Through our lived body as a sensory vessel we may experience empathic relations with nature: “alive in all our senses, we may begin to listen to the ancient dialogue of body and earth” (2017, 17). Reinders’ emotive language is one example of how ecopsychology aims to address the underlying philosophical limitations of capitalist-driven societies. Just as we seek the help of psychologists to work through traumas, so we might turn to principles in ecopsychology to work through the trauma that exists between human and non-human.

CONCLUSION

From its roots as a misguided and derogatory concept to contemporary contextualisation, animism continues to provide cultural anthropology with a useful tool of ethnographic enquiry. The literature shows variation in animistic conventions throughout traditional peoples in different societies. However, a constant theme of relational epistemology persists in almost all of them. This distinction is not only important in understanding differences between traditional cultures but also for recognising limitations to the Western capitalist-driven, utilitarian ontology that has resulted in continued environmental devaluation and degradation. Acknowledging these flaws presents the potential to reconnect a sensual relation with the earth that suppresses, or even destroys, the Cartesian duality of human and non-human.

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