
Animism is a form of traditional spiritual belief that receives welcome treatment here appropriate to this journal. The observations of Victorian ethnologist travellers on the local peoples they regarded as primitive was analysed by Sir Edward (E. B.) Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871) which established the working definition of animism followed by later generations of scholars. This came from the observation that non-scientific people did not always draw sharp distinctions between human persons and other entities such as animals, trees and even rocks but imbued these with soul. The latin *anima*, ‘soul, spirit’ provided the title of what was assumed to be a primitive religion, animism. The study being reviewed recognizes apparent connections within deep history between Siberia and the Amazon, and uses contemporary social anthropology to clarify assumptions about animism.

This book on animism in two shamanic cultures explores personhood and the relations in pre-scientific human thought between humans and non-humans, in contexts where non-humans can be regarded as social persons (p.2). Animistic ways of thinking have certainly survived into popular ‘spirituality’ literature, using for example crystals and horoscopes. Personhood in this book means ‘human-like subjectivity’ (p.2), ascribing to them language, agency, living socially in ways similar to humans. I start with some general thoughts on the place of animistic ideas in the study of religion. We ascribe personhood to humans because we have words to discuss and describe our sense of individuality or self. If we want this self to be eternal, surviving death, we dignify it as a soul. Hinduism developed the doctrine of reincarnation where a soul migrates into another body through long chains of existences. Buddhism doubted that the sense of self was anything other than a personal construction, a type of delusion. Personal Construct Psychology has generalized this in ways which suggest that imposing a western hegemonic view of self and soul is entirely problematic.

The time is ripe to discuss what then might be going on in within beliefs described as animistic. Humans integrate their early life experiences around the notion of myself as opposed to others. Others can be divided into family, friends, outsiders and enemies. Nurture and enculturation therefore emphasize the concept of self and define others in relation to it. When the question is raised about what happens after death, the survival of the ‘self’ (soul or spirit) has been an ancient answer, as illustrated by prehistoric burials including the Egyptian tombs and pyramids. The community can be viewed as a group of friendly
people, selves, who defend each other from outsiders. Humans have the power of speech and thought and therefore try to make integrated sense out of their experiences. Their world was hostile: disease maimed and killed, as did natural disasters and wild animals. A variety of living and inanimate things shared the world with them, and relationships between all these were of considerable interest. A strong element in thinking was causation: whatever happens in the world is caused by someone or something. Knowing the cause may help avoiding it. The universe is considered full of causal agents. Maybe the cause can be placated? Looking at the night sky without the perspective of modern astronomy leads to quite different assumptions about what the stars signify and how they might affect us.

If humans are thought to have conscious selves, it is a small step to assume that animals share this; and if the post-death souls of people have to be pacified, so might the post-death souls of food animals, leading to hunting rituals. Trees and other plants, and even inanimate features like mountains, might be assigned souls and consequently case taken not to offend them and so expose oneself to their dangers. When disease, accident and death are felt to be caused by hostile intent, this puts the elements in place for an animistic mindset. Animism has influenced many stories and novels which anthropomorphise animals and other environmental phenomena (Tolkein’s tree creatures for example): we, immersed in a scientific mindset, may understand the conceit from childhood, whereas in a pre-scientific society this might not be so.

*Animism in Rainforest and Tundra* brings together writers on Amazonia and Siberia, noting similarities which may be suggestive of prehistorical links. Most papers make reference to perspectivism, the understanding that different persons and indeed species have different points of view - mythology might therefore represent a debate between these different perspectives. Many chapters are critically challenging to this notion well-established in anthropology (pp.13-16). The Foreword by Stephen Hugh-Jones, of Cambridge University’s Scott Polar Research Institute, from which some of the Siberian fieldwork was conducted, welcomed the book as moving anthropology forward. Piers Vitebsky, from the same institute, wrote an Afterword explaining the extreme difficulties that anthropologists of Siberia faced in the Soviet era and the theorising (especially evolutionism) demanded by their Soviet paradigm. He welcomed the book as a helpful combination of fieldwork and theorising. We turn now to comments about each paper.

Fausto, ‘Too Many Owners: Mastery and Ownership in Amazonia’ examined the relationship of master to pet, father to child by way of Levi-Strauss’s interest in the social use of kinship terms, and in particular father-in-law/son-in-law, and brother/brother-in-law. Adoption is a possible way of changing kinship
groups, matrimony is another. Decisions on kin or enemy (including non-humans, including hallucinogenic plants) are interesting indeed.

Willerslev and Ulturgasheva, ‘Revisiting the Animism versus Totemism Debate: Fabricating Persons among the Eveny and Chukchi of North-eastern Siberia’ argued that whether a relationship is animistic or totemic depends on perspective, or intertwined ‘orientations towards the spirit world’ (p.66) – the hunter or the hunted, the living world or the spirit world. They are not different phenomena; it is a matter of both...and rather than either...or.

Rival, ‘Animism and the Meanings of Life: Reflections from Amazonia’ discuss animism through the lens of the edible manioc tuber which contains prussic acid. Animism is defined, after Descola, as a thought-world which humanises animals and perhaps plants. Rival points to Gell’s early work on art attributing human significance to art objects, emphasising both intentionality and communication which was used in studies of animism. She suggests that in plants such as the manioc, there are two life forces at work – the soul of the plant; and its biological condition, its requirements for life. Relations between humans, plants and animals are subtle, not crude anthropomorphisms.

Safonova and Santha, ‘Stories about Evenki People and their Dogs: Communication through Sharing Contexts’ tells of a mystique that the Evenki people have close communication with their dogs. Their success is put down to training and shared living through puppyhood, but that other tribes find a mystique in this they have welcomed, but not understood.

Costa, ‘Making Animals into Food among the Kanamari of Western Amazonia’ explores the effects of the notion of animals as persons, since killing and eating animal persons (i.e. individuals with intentionality, agency and consciousness) is akin to cannibalism. The hunt has to be carried out with ritual precision, and the blood representing the soul, and skin representing the outer personhood discarded. How the (living) body becomes a corpse is ambiguous, and only when it is eaten without ill effects can the hunt be said to have been successful. If the body was not yet a corpse (i.e. its soul had not departed) then it might wreak vengeance.

Lavrillier, ‘Spirit-Charged Animals in Siberia’ describes people with helpful and unhelpful charisma or general excess of self opinion, which includes shamans but also ordinary people. It assumes a degree of consciousness, thought and intentionality to some animals, whose use and death need to be negotiated with them. The spirit-charge or omnir of a dead man can enter an animal to take revenge, but not vice versa. In general this view assumes that strong animals have the same sort of inner consciousness as
humans. Placating them is the purpose of ritual. Strong individuals are thought to bring good or bad fortune to others.

High, ‘Shamans, Animals and Enemies: Human and Non-human Agency in an Amazonian Cosmos of Alterity’ advises caution on using agency as an analytical device. Local people fear and oppose a range of self-opinionated and pushy people with too much ‘agency’ (including shamans and politicians). Shamans traded on the belief that they were responsible for disease and disaster, thus causing revenge blood-letting. People are very cautious about accepting this today.

Skvirskaya, ‘Expressions and Experiences of Personhood: Spatiality and Objects in the Nenets Tundra Home’ studies the tepee as a social, personal, moral and spiritual space. It has male and female space, with the matrimonial bed between. Navigating its hierarchies and taboos becomes second nature and constantly reaffirm kinship links.

Grotti and Brightman, ‘Humanity, Personhood and Transformability in Northern Amazonia’ emphasises that the tribes studied are socialised into humanity from childhood (children can become non-human if this is not done properly), and have social personhood derived from the notion of the body as tube (hence eating and commensality). The ability to transform is a “creative quality... to allow changes in perspective” (p.171). The inner should conform with the outer, so outward appearance should match inner purposes. Humans are the only species to change (dress up) their outer appearance.

Swancutt, ‘Masked Predation, Hierarchy, and the Scaling of Extractive Relations in Inner Asia and Beyond’ links predation (the exploitation of resources) with hierarchy, suggesting that explicit hierarchies mask their predatory/exploitative actions. Without this, “moral ambiguities” might hamper exploitation (p.179). Tribes which mixed shamanism with Buddhism had the notion of merit for good acts, but it was reported that boasting about virtuous acts is more likely to be noticed by the gods/spirits.

To conclude, this is an extremely interesting collection of papers which takes our understanding of animism forward considerably. Pre-scientific ideas abound in religion. The Bible’s focus on sacrifice has roots here, and what is ‘idolatry’ but nature religion giving human characteristics to divinities and even trees, the Asherah. Further study by students of religion will be very worthwhile.

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