

# Animism and ecology: Participating in the world community

Ecological disaster requires urgent thinking and other actions in adjusting human engagement with the larger-than-human community. Animism has been proposed as one form of relationship that might be productive. This article outlines distinct uses of the term 'animism' in order to point to the 'new animism' as a label for ways of relating respectfully with other species. It then considers the relations of these forms of animism with conservation and other ecological approaches. It supports a de-centring of humanity but encourages care about putting anything else in the centre.

Animism has become a popular topic in recent decades. In academia it has been the subject of significant multi- and interdisciplinary research, especially but not only of the ethnographic kind. As well as improving understanding of, and engagement with, Indigenous<sup>1</sup> lifeways and knowledges, recent discussions have challenged still dominant ideologies and practices. This research has also contributed to wider scholarly debates about ontologies and epistemologies (ways of being in or moving through and understanding the world). One significant thread running through many of these discussions concerns the question of where animism stands in relation to the distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. In this article, I argue that whilst anthropocentrism is certainly inimical to animism (and *vice versa*), ecocentrism can fail to resonate with significant aspects of animist acts and relations.

Although Linda Hogan's powerful statement that the term 'animism' does not do justice to the knowledges and lifeways of Indigenous people, it does, as she also says, "begin" to try to understand such ways of knowing, being, belonging and relating (Hogan, 2013: 18). Conversations with and among Indigenous people (including scholars, activists, artists, performers, friends and casual contacts) and their relations (human and other-

than-human) inspire and provoke my own pursuit of better understanding. An initiatory experience for this phase of my life and work occurred when an eagle flew a perfect circle over a drum group at a key moment in the first powwow at the Miawpukek (Mi'kmaq) First Nation (Conne River, Newfoundland) in 1996. In following conversations, I heard that the community received this eagle's flight as a confirmation and affirmation of the celebration and re-assertion of their Indigeneity (Harvey, 2013a: 118–19). Among other matters, it impressed me as a clear example of inter-species communication, ritualizing and gift-giving. While grateful for lessons taught by Indigenous people and by other-than-human persons, I also acknowledge the impact of similar experiences among some Pagan<sup>2</sup> animists who also wish to re-make human relations to respect multi-species communities.

Animism, then, is deeply implicated both in scholarly efforts to understand diverse modes of world-making (those of some Indigenous peoples and of some, perhaps 'ecocentric', Pagans and activists) and also in those actual activities. In both cases, a key question is what it might mean to be human in a multi-species world. At their most exciting, academic and wider animism debates are about species as relations and about relations between species. As the shockwave of the Anthropocene affects all life on Earth, questions about

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Because the term ‘animism’ continues to be controversial, the next section provides a discussion of its definition. This is followed by a brief account of the ferment around the so-called ‘new animism’. These preliminary matters dealt with, the rest of the discussion focuses on questions about the relations between animism and ecology. My main interest here is to show how animism provides an ontological alternative to more dominant ways of being in and moving through the world. In particular, animism provides significant ways of resisting and rejecting the mistake of dividing the world into ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ (or into ‘humans’ and ‘the rest’). Animism also raises important ethical questions of how to relate *justly* to all our relations (to use a Lakota ritual phrase) – questions that urgently require reflection and resolution. Both ontology and ethics are key aspects of the necessary world re-making demanded of us by the current ecological disaster.

### Defining ‘animism’

Broadly speaking, there are three competing uses of the term ‘animism’. The oldest comes from the work of Edward Tylor (occupant of the first chair in anthropology at Oxford University in the UK). Under the heading of ‘animism’, in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) he proposed that all religions are definitively characterized by “belief in spirits.” Our early human ancestors, he claimed, mistakenly interpreted their dreams and other empirical experiences as evidence of the existence of certain metaphysical entities (*e.g.* animating souls and spirits of rocks, trees, animals, tools, the dead and other putatively inert matter). All religions have continued this ‘error’ which, Tylor thought, would ultimately be replaced by proper scientific empiricism. In this interpretation, ‘animism’ is thus seen as an anthropomorphism – the projection of putative human-likeness or agency onto non-human beings or phenomena.

A second use of ‘animism’ is as an alternative label for Indigenous ‘traditional religions’, usually contrasted with monotheisms such as Christianity or Islam. Most often, this usage is similar to that of Tylor in the way it emphasizes metaphysics – contrasting beliefs about a *singular* deity with beliefs about *multiple* spirits (*e.g.* intermediary deities, ancestors, guardians or demons). This usage forces animism to fit the ‘world religions paradigm’, which skews the ways in which it is described and theorized.

In recent decades, ‘animism’ has come to mean something quite different: the understanding that the world is a *community of persons*, most of whom are not human, but all of whom are related, and all of whom deserve respect (Harvey, 2013b; 2017). In this approach, questions about what defines life (*e.g.* the possession of souls, spirits, minds, intentionality or agency) have been replaced by questions about what behaviours constitute respect when persons of different species interact. It is this ‘new’ animism that interests me, and that underpins the approach taken in the following discussion.<sup>3</sup>

### New animism in recent debates

The new approach to animism stems from an important article by the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David in 1999. Since this seminal work, further ethnographies about Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have proliferated, and made important contributions to what has been called the ‘ontological turn’. Primarily, this approach emphasizes relationality: the notion that personhood is not the possession of a certain sort of non-relational, interior property (*e.g.* being self-conscious, or having a spirit or mind), but is instead constituted by interactions between beings. That is, rather than think in terms of individuality or selfhood, animist ontologies view persons as constituted by the shifting interactions of continuously negotiable relational acts. Although some animist traditions do hold that a singular self lies at the core of these relations, many others emphasize the

multiplicity and divisibility of persons. So, for example, rather than conceptualize a single underlying ‘self’ that can take on different ‘roles’ (e.g. daughter, mother or lecturer), this can instead be seen as a multiplicity of persons, each constituted by different relational activities with others (cf. Strathern, 1988).

Animism research (and practice) has some obvious areas of synergy with other current concerns in anthropology. These include enriched engagement with the worlds and acts of shamans (and those who employ them), and with bodies and materials – sometimes addressed as questions of ‘embodiment’ and ‘materiality’ (e.g. Harvey, 2013b; Astor-Aguilera and Harvey, 2018). All of these areas are germane to the question of the contribution of animism (debates and/or practices) to understanding human relations with the wider world. However, the ghosts of other ontologies invite care in linking animism to ecocentrism.

### Animist ecology

The animist understanding that all our relations are worthy of (and may reciprocate) respect entails a rejection of anthropocentrism. Animists do not treat humans as the primary and definitive form of persons or relations. Instead, humans are seen as one kind of person among many; we are relations of other beings, and members of multi-species communities in which the rights and responsibilities of all beings require consideration. However, although it thus rejects anthropocentrism, it is important to avoid equating animism either with contemporary models of conservation, or with ecocentrism.

Research by Bird-David and Danny Naveh among the Nayaka has led them to argue that animism and conservation are not identical even if both are predicated on respecting other-than-human persons and communities (Bird-David and Naveh, 2008; 2013). Conservation rhetoric and practice are, they argue, distinct from animist engagements because the latter are *immediately* relational. Particular persons (of whatever species) are of

immediate concern and interest, and particular modes of relating are important in acting or living animistically. For example, the gifts that establish, maintain or restore relations between persons have to be locally appropriate. Such gifts might include offerings – e.g. of beer, songs, tobacco or blood – or performances – e.g. of established rituals or improvised dances. The crucial point is that animism is about *specific, context-bound* relations (meaning both relatives and relating); hence, acts that are appropriate in one place may be offensive or baffling elsewhere.

Conservation, in contrast, is typically less immediate and more global in its ambitions – being focused on the protection of species or ecosystems, *individual* animals, plants or rocks are not its chief concern. As Bird-David and Naveh say, “A concrete individual elephant, that Nayaka are concerned with, is almost transparent in [a conservationist project’s] terms”. Furthermore, while conservationists are typically concerned with “a far away future, imagined in terms of tens, hundreds, and even thousands of years ahead,” the “temporal horizons of the Nayaka model are the immediate ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’” (2013: 35–6).

This animist conception of the world as a community of individual persons contains a potent and radical challenge to modernity’s dualism of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. As Anna Tsing argues, animism contests the prevalent notion that ‘environments’ are inert or inactive – mere scenery or backdrop for agents. She demonstrates that, on the contrary (2015: 142):

Interspecies relations draw evolution back into history because they depend on the contingencies of encounter. They do not form an internally self-replicating system. Instead, interspecies encounters are always events, “things that happen,” the units of history.

This is much more profound than simply the claim that non-human animals (species or individuals) communicate, use tools, mourn, express awe and so on. Deep in the damaged regrowth forests where Tsing’s

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“mushroom at the end of the world” thrives, history takes place and makes place-as-community. Relational encounters change things and leave clear evidence of their happening and their effects. If forests thus possess the agency to *do* history, then ‘nature’ has ceased to be the antonym of ‘culture’ and we humans can no longer insist on our uniqueness as persons and agents. In this way, scholarly discussions of the ‘new’ animism help to advance the twin tasks proposed for Western science and philosophy by Val Plumwood: “The first [necessary task] is to re-situate the human in ecological terms, and the second is to re-situate the nonhuman in ethical terms” (Plumwood, 2002: 8; cf. Rose, 2005). Science, philosophy and now history become ways of approaching and re-engaging with[in] the larger-than-human community.

This all emphasizes the point that in the larger-than-human community, human beings are not privileged as definitive of persons or personhood, or of what it might mean to act relationally and historically. A radical pursuit of these animist thoughts could also usefully lead us to ‘multinaturalism’ (in contrast with both ‘nature’ and ‘multiculturalism’) as proposed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) on the basis of his study of Amazonian lifeways and worldviews. For diverse animist communities, eagles, elephants and jaguars do not act ‘naturally’ or ‘merely instinctively’ against the backdrop of ‘an environment’ – instead, they are creative participants in local cultural events and in the making of the history of that place.

Nonetheless, despite insisting that humans are neither definitive of personhood nor separate from the larger-than-human community, animism does not flatten out the differences between persons. For animism, it is of crucial significance that some persons are our close kin or ever-present family, whilst others stand in very different relations to us. Thus, we *might* more easily recognize when other humans offer us gifts, than when other-than-human relations do so; we *might* know what some other humans are saying more readily than we understand

our other-than-human relations. It is, after all, a regular theme of mythic story-telling that the time when humans understood the language of birds, animals, the wind and so on are long gone (except when some of us do powerful rituals). Indeed, the importance of differences is implicit in the very phrase “other-than-human persons” – coined by Irving Hallowell (1960) in his efforts to understand, discuss and present Anishinaabe ontologies, cosmologies and behaviours. It is the fact that Hallowell was writing for other humans that generated this phrase. A conversation among bears might include phrases equivalent to ‘bear persons’ and ‘other-than-bear persons’ – except that, if animists are correct, bears might never think that ‘person’ refers only or principally to themselves. These differences mean that recognition of, or communicating with, others cannot be taken for granted. As Vinciane Despret (2016) points out, other-than-human animals can be baffled or annoyed when human researchers try to act as if they were invisible or “just part of the scenery.” She concludes that “what gives such a remarkable and particular flavour” to the scientific projects she surveys is that in them “learning to know what is observed is subordinate to learning and, above all, to *recognizing one another*” (2016: 20; emphasis in original). Cross-species recognition is, at the very least, the beginning of inter-species communication and understanding.

Certainly, then, for animists there is no such thing as ‘nature’ (insofar as that is conceived of as a domain separate from another domain called ‘culture’); there is only a diverse community of variously interacting relations – some more intimate and more immediately present to us than others. From this animist perspective, the notion of ecocentrism does not necessarily escape being problematic. While ecocentrism – like animism – contests such notions as ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ which imagine, reinforce and enforce separations, it does not take us far enough *beyond nature* (to play with the title of Descola [2013]). This is because ecocentrism can be taken as implying that

there is a single shared and all-defining centre – albeit one that ought to replace the hubristic self-obsession of modern humans. In contrast, the beginning of animism is the celebration and negotiation of plurality, particularity, immediacy – in short, of *relations*. An animist ecology grapples with the competing and/or coalescing needs of all beings as they seek to make the world ever more habitable for themselves and their close kin.

This being so, something about the realities of these animist relations and the ecologies that mesh communities pushes me to suggest that animists seek to be respectful predators as well as good neighbours.

### Respectful predation in an era of disaster

Relationships and relations are not necessarily nice (as Terry Pratchett [1993: 169–70] once said of elves). This, after all, is why many animists employ shamans and other diplomatic ritualists to negotiate with members of other species. The issues are particularly acute because (to paraphrase what the Iglulik shaman Aua told Knud Rasmussen [1929: 55–6]) in order to eat it is necessary to consume relations (as there are no other kinds of being). The inescapable context for efforts to act respectfully is that all beings are both predators and prey in relation to others. If consumption and consumerism are at the heart (or guts) of the Anthropocene and of the anthropogenic climate disaster, what we eat – or rather *who* we eat – is of critical importance. Understanding consumption as a relationship with an ethical dimension (as well as ontological and cosmological ones) is one significant implication of animism. Whilst familiar polemics against ‘consumerism and ‘over-consumption’ seem tired and without force, perhaps the more stark terms ‘predator’ and ‘prey’ might aid efforts to shift thinking – and therefore acts – in which we relate to the larger-than-human world.

One of the ways in which animist relationships with our animate relations (especially those we eat) are making

significant contributions to efforts to confront contemporary challenges is in insisting on the de-centring of humans and on the (re-)making of a respectful community. As climate disaster and mass extinctions increase, lessons might be learnt from the Indigenous communities, scholars and writers who are producing scientific and creative narratives in which “Indigenous peoples work to empower their own protagonists to address contemporary challenges” (Whyte, 2019: 224). The animist relationships of many Indigenous traditions not only offer vital exemplars of ways to make, maintain and/or restore inter-species respect, but also embody powerful critiques of the ideologies and practices that have got us into this mess. ■

### Notes

- 1 The term ‘Indigenous’ refers here to nations, peoples and communities elsewhere labelled ‘native’ or ‘aboriginal’ in contrast with ‘colonial’ or ‘settler’ communities. It is capitalized partly because it is used strategically by many such communities as a self-description, but also to distinguish it from a more adjectival sense (in which, *e.g.*, Londoners might be indigenous to Britain).
- 2 The term ‘Pagan’ is another self-description used by contemporary groups and individuals. It claims certain affiliations and commitments, in much the same way as terms such as ‘Christian’ or ‘Humanist’.
- 3 It is vital to note that ‘new’ here refers to a theoretical approach that is contrasted with Tylor’s ‘old’ approach, rather than to the age of the diverse lifeways or practices themselves.

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