

Part Six

Origin and Modern Understanding of the word ‘Animism’

The current “common” Western ideas about animism are at best, incomplete, and at worst, are based on significant misconceptions about what various animistic cultures believe/believed and practice/practiced about their animism.

The reality is that most Westerners today believe that “belief in spirit beings” is both a necessary and a sufficient definition of animism. Especially, that spirits inhabit inanimate objects. This is not surprising, because in most dictionaries, encyclopedias, and most other sources, that is the identified usage of the term. What else are WEIRD persons supposed to think?

Based on my own personal experience, I think this means that an awful lot of WEIRD human people don’t recognize that they are animists, because they never encounter an accurate description of animism. Real animism can be learned about either through the New Animism, or a true indigenous animism. Almost any other source (and frankly, even many of these) will not bring them an accurate description of animism.

An interested WEIRD person might think they might be animistic, but then they would read the dictionary definition, or some of the classic early anthropology or ethnology or sociology or comparative religion works, or even some modern works on animism, and they won’t see the connection to how they experience the world—because the writers don’t really understand animism themselves.

They might even look to the works of Christian missionaries, who try to understand animism and folk belief just enough so they can say, “No, that’s wrong, and here’s why,” so they can convert people—and of course, they are doing it from a WEIRD language and perspective, and with a goal in mind that undermines animism, so it’s unlikely that they really understand or explain it in any sensible way at all.

Heh. Or maybe I’m the only one who actually has felt this way. Possible, but I doubt it.

Origins of our WEIRD ideas

These misconceptions about animism arose in the latter half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, as WEIRD researchers in a variety of fields (like anthropology and sociology and psychology) attempted to understand the “religious” beliefs of various cultures around the world—including of course, modern Christianity.

They looked through a “scientific” lens, through a lens that said that uneducated people and people without written language and so on were ignorant and incapable of understanding even their own beliefs, when compared to the pinnacle of creation/evolution, the English and Germans and French, who were the intellectual heirs to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

No other cultures, no other peoples could possibly know anything of value, they thought and loudly proclaimed, so they didn’t even bother to learn what those other humans knew—they just plowed them down, occupied them, subjugated them, and tried to convert them, enslave them, kill them.

First, we must deal with the meaning of the term “animism” as it is commonly understood today. The current definition found in modern dictionaries dates back to the early 1800s, but more specifically the modern usage dates to the 1870s and the ongoing effect of Tylor’s initial description of animism—and indeed, religion in general—as being “belief in spirit beings,” with those spirits being supernatural (not part of the “natural” material makeup of the universe) inhabiting either lower life forms or inanimate objects.

That is, animists, under this definition, attributed sentience to the living, and life to the inanimate.

Not exactly wrong altogether, but not at all right, either. Dating back to early Christianity, the Church Fathers had decided that, as reflected in the Old Testament, humanity’s original religion was perfect monotheism. Judaism, Islam, the ancient Greek and Romans—everyone else, in fact—had practiced degenerate religions, as humans fell from the state of grace and by degrees fell into error about the nature and number of deities and spirits. The details of any other religion didn’t matter: it was all heresy, and needed to be rooted out.

And the Enlightenment and modern era haven’t changed WEIRD thinking that much. Certainly, during the modern era, Westerners have believed that everyone else who isn’t of the WEIRD traditions, are simpletons, who simply CANNOT have had any deep or complex thoughts about, well, anything.

Except the ancient Greeks. And then the Enlightenment thinkers. So when they starting asking indigenous peoples about their beliefs—in order to

correct them and convert them to Christianity—they didn't bother to go very deep or complex.

When indigenous animists describe their own world-views, and some of the more modern anthropologists and sociologists who better understand animism, it is apparent that these animists believe the world is more complex and nuanced than simply “belief in spirit beings.”

Instead, the universe is inhabited by persons, only some of whom are in human form. Humans need to be in respectful, balanced relationships with those other-than-human persons. Animism is not, as Tylor and others argued, some primitive pre-scientific and/or pre-monotheistic effort to explain the world or to relate to divinity; it is about how to behave in the world, how to relate to the other persons in the world, and why we need to behave that way.

There is some current discussion in the literature about how and why Tylor came to use this word—his preferred term was “spiritism” or “spiritualism,” which at that time already had a very different popular meaning—but that's another story, and has virtually nothing to do with animism.

There is also discussion about how and why later thinkers in Western Anthropology and Sociology and Psychology and Religious Studies and related fields came to either follow Tylor's definition in whole or in part, or rejected it and turned to other definitions—which also suffered from trying to fit observations about indigenous peoples and their beliefs and practices into WEIRD categories.

But of course, those writing the definitions, and reading the definitions, are for the most part not animists, and except in childhood, never were animists

even in that sense. They learned the WEIRD perspective and moved on, while I learned the WEIRD perspective, but found I couldn't help but to keep questioning it, because it quite frankly is not the way I experience the world.

Of course, WEIRD people would say that your personal experience is irrelevant, that the only things that are real are what can be demonstrated empirically—that is, repeated by a disinterested observer under similar or identical conditions.

A corollary, also based in Tylor's original work, but also as extended and challenged by others between the 1880s and 1980s, is that animists therefore believe objects, at least some and perhaps all objects, are either alive in themselves (and thus are/have a spirit or soul), or at least can contain living spirits or souls.

The reality of animism is that the belief systems are far more complicated than these simplistic assertions by Tylor and others, which have since been incorporated into our dictionaries and ensconced in the various WEIRD fields of knowledge.

Remember, Tylor and the others were Westerners, in possession of a world-view of religion anchored in Christian theology, against which all other religions had to be compared (because Christian theology was the most advanced, most perfect, most complete—the true pinnacle of religion as it were, as English-speakers of the 1800s considered themselves in all ways), and all observations of other religions had to fit into the known categories of Western religious philosophy.

Thus, believing that “objects are alive” is in conflict with Western beliefs that the only living things are biological and engage in a specific set of activities (growth, respiration, etc.), and that only humans have souls, while all other living things are mindless biological automatons, animated but without the divine spark, while all other things are inanimate with no degree of life or spirit to them. They are thus objects to be used or disposed of as we humans see fit.

To Tylor and the others, “primitive” peoples engaged in a simpler, earlier, incomplete stage of religious and scientific thinking—more like modern children than modern adults—while both science and religion reached their pinnacles, their perfect, ideal forms, in the societies of Western Europe in the later 1800s and 1900s.

The reality is that indigenous peoples generally are not trying to explain the world, although there is an element of that, because the “religious” beliefs suffuse the whole of the culture. What animists are trying to do is lay out how and why they should behave in a respectful way towards the other important persons that inhabit their environment with them.

Some of those persons are human, and others are other-than-human persons. Their understanding of the world is relational, even social. Western civilization, on the other hand, is about objects and what subjects (humans) can do with them. WEIRD people ask “What?” while animists ask “Who?”

Indigenous peoples have in their languages very different categories of things from the modern WEIRD languages, at least English, which means that Tylor and the others had to shoehorn what they observed in other cultures into our Western categories, rather than trying to understand the indigenous categories for what they were.

For a Westerner to become an animist today means that she or he must unlearn the Western thought about animism, and unlearn the categories and thought processes of the WEIRD worldview in general, and come to accept some different ways of perceiving and conceiving about the world.

Spirits and spirit beings

In making sense of the common and now traditional Western definition of animism, versus the way animism really is, what is most at issue is the meaning of “spirit,” and “spirit beings,” which for Westerners generally means some separate non-material substance, perhaps supernatural in nature, which is somehow attached to matter, or may operate separately from matter.

For example, the human soul in the Western sense is a supernatural entity that exists within the body, but departs at death. So when a Westerner thinks of animism, they usually think the animist *necessarily* believes that every object houses a **separate** “soul” of some kind, a little spiritual homunculus of sorts.

To the animist, however, the “spirit” may not be a separate “thing” from the material object. In this sense, the spirit is the essence—the nature and/or character—of the material thing. The nature of that particular kind of thing (or maybe just that one individual example of that class of object, sometimes—that rock, that cougar, that deer) is that it has “spirit,” or personhood.

And usually, that means that the object—whether it be a plant, an animal, a rock, a body of water, a breath of wind, or whatever—has awareness, volition, consciousness, communicative ability, and so on, just like human persons. Of course, such persons may have differing proportions and arrangements of the

awareness, volition, and so on than do humans, but it is always seen as a differing in amounts, not in kind. But in this mode of thinking, the “spirit” is simply the nature of the object; there is nothing separate about the spirit apart from the object.

That said, we must realize that some spirits in this sense can be associated not with material things, but with spaces—the inside of a glass or bottle or a bowl or a room, for example, can be its own spirit, with its own essence. Ideas or thoughts can be spirits, as well. If extending personhood to inanimate objects was difficult, this has to be much harder for WEIRD people to wrap their heads around.

Of course, sometimes animists **really do** mean “spirit beings” in more or less the Western sense; they mean that there is a more or less separate “spirit” of some sort that may inhabit particular objects, or classes of objects, or may move freely about the environment. That is, there is a spirit component, made of some non-material essence, that has awareness, volition, and so on. But it is not the only nor even necessarily the major aspect of animism.

These spirit beings may or may not permanently inhabit a given object, or any object at all. Thus, deer might be persons that wear a different kind of skin than human persons, but are persons nonetheless, because their spirit body is just like that of humans, but they wear a different physical body. Or, spirit beings may inhabit various objects, such as talismans, for example, or other ritual objects.

All of these different beliefs about “spirit” and “spirit beings,” and probably more, fall under the general identity of animism. But not all animists use all of these, and some animists may not use any of the ones listed here, but

have other ideas about spirit. But for a WEIRD person to become an animist, he or she must learn to experience the world in these terms, not in the Western mode.

There is another aspect of Tylor's depiction of animism that requires consideration: the idea that "primitive" peoples were using animism as a "pre-scientific" way of explaining the world, because they were incapable of creating a true scientific understanding of the world.

Other WEIRD thinkers also bought into this idea, such as Piaget, who noticed that children often display animistic thinking, and conducted studies that suggested that children start out being naturally animistic, but that it goes away by adulthood, as modern human adults are more capable of having a true scientific understanding than children and primitive people are, and that our society instills this higher cognitive ability while it does not develop in primitive cultures.

Yet years of study has shown that Piaget was mistaken: even educated modern WEIRD adults display significant evidence of animistic thinking. And, recent scholarship on the perceptual and conceptual abilities of indigenous peoples does not support the idea that primitive people were or are using animism as a sort of pre-scientific form of explanation for the state of the universe around them, nor as a pre-monotheistic religious construction. They are, in fact, no different in their perceptive or cognitive abilities than "modern" adult people in "advanced" cultures.

If a modern WEIRD person is to become an animist, they need to adopt the idea that there are other-than-human persons in the world, and that we need to engage in respectful relationships with them.