

Part Seven

The beliefs and traits of animism and animists

The literature on the New Animism pulls together a great many concepts that a WEIRD individual may or may not be able to understand, to bring into their own practice of animism. In prior sections, I discussed some of the central concepts of animism, including respect, humility and relationships. Other concepts of animism that may be difficult for WEIRD people to come to understand include the 19 following concepts, some of which stand clearly alone, while others heavily overlap.

First, animism is not separable from any other aspects of day-to-day behavior or practice in an animistic society, or to an individual practitioner. It is a way of life, and all aspects of living are imbued with animistic beliefs and behaviors.

This is unlike WEIRD culture, where religion is largely an intellectual activity, and is largely separated from other aspects of life, but even if included, are rarely central to survival. Animism is almost always—in indigenous settings—about surviving and prospering in the here and now.

Second, humans are a social species—we do not ever live in isolation (well, some occasional individuals might, but to be totally isolated is to be totally dependent on the self—any illness or injury, or even a momentary lapse in attention, can rapidly result in death, which may be avoided if there are social others around to help; in addition, an isolated individual does not reproduce,

and eventually will cease living anyway), we are only full when we live in groups with whom we have a relationship.

Relationships with other humans—that is basic to being human—but because we are social, we also have relationships with the other-than-human persons who live with us in our community, our environment, and who interact with us on a regular basis.

Next, if human persons are worthy of rights, of relationship, of respect, then all other persons are also worthy of rights, relationship, and respect. It behooves us to extend those rights, engage in those relationships, and be respectful to all human and other-than-human persons.

Fourth, while people all over the Earth were and are animists, animism is *always* local. It may be possible to develop a “global” aspect to animism, an attitude/practice that one may carry with them on their travels over larger areas of the world, but the nature of animism that we are discovering now in indigenous cultures is *always* local.

Fifth, because animism is local, it is going to be specific not only to the location in space and time, but also the persons involved in that particular location. And it’s going to be specific to the history of those places and persons who have been involved in the relationships at that location over time up to the now.

Sixth, because animism is local and specific to the persons who have gone before and who are there now, the etiquette required by the various parties to the relationship will be different in different locations, and at different times.

This is true even if they are dealing with what appears to non-animists as the same thing, such as fire, the land, or the ocean.

While fire is fire, *this* fire is different than *that* fire, it is its own unique individual in time, space, composition, its setting and environment, and etc. The Ocean *here*, is not the same as the Ocean *there*, or the Ocean *then* or *now*. The things that have happened in *this* place are different than those in *that* place, and both differ because the different things happened at *different times* with different persons...human and otherwise.

Seventh, when new people come to a location, they should either learn the etiquette of the existing population, or establish their own relationships with the humans and other-than-human persons of the place. When WEIRD people came to many places around the Earth, they imposed their own ideas about relationships with others on the persons of the place, rather than learning what the local persons said and did in their existing relationships. In short, they ignored the existing persons and relationships.

Eighth, animism is concerned with *immanent* spirits, that is, human and other-than-human persons who inhabit the current environment in which the culture lives and interacts. These spirits are rarely separate from material things, and are rarely seen as being anything *additional* to the material—that is just what they are.

Ninth, while everything is/has spirit, not every thing is/has a relationship with the humans of the place. Not everything is always sacred, needs to be fully respected or cared for or honored by humans—we don't need to have a close reciprocal relationship with every person in the environment.

But animists are practical people, and so they have relationships with the other-than-human persons who are most important to survival. But we should always be aware of the others whom we don't regularly interact with, and as much as possible, always be respectful towards them. Just in case. They may need us, or us, them, sometime. And just as certainly, we have indirect relationships with many others, because they are necessary parts of the eco/social system in which we live.

Tenth, there is rarely much interest in transcendent spirits or matters—such things are often seen as individual or personal, and not something for members of the community as a whole to be aware of or participate in—although some of the ones who become chosen as shamans, healers and the like, may actually experience and discuss such matters; likewise, the elders may also be involved in this, too. Still, it is usually an individual matter.

Eleventh, communication with the others—even the “all-deity”—comes through ritual, magic, shamanism, and the practices of healers, visionaries, and other specialized roles in the culture. However, individuals can also receive and make direct communication at times—but it helps sometimes to use the specialists...

Twelfth, animism is not an intellectual activity the way “religion” is in Western culture. It is based in and the result of emotional and perceptual *experiences*. Animists rarely spend any time trying to generate coherent bodies of knowledge or unified structures of thought to explain their experiences—the experiences they have are evidence of the existence of and interaction with the other-than-human persons in the environment.

Hence, there is rarely any “theism” going on in animism. Even in well-developed historical animisms, such as Shinto, there is little evidence of theism in the Western sense. More often, the experiences become or are connected to song, story, myth, art, etc., that are shared in a culture. These may be empty stories to some in the culture, but truth to others, and metaphors to still others, and so on. And even moreso to outsiders, who are unfamiliar with nuances of symbolism within the culture.

Next, animism is unconcerned with any individual’s *beliefs*. Instead, animism focuses on practice of the proper rituals and other etiquette of actual behavior, the personal and emotional *experience*. Belief is a private matter; the actual public and social practice of rituals, etc., that reflect the accepted social behavior within the group and with other groups of persons are what is important.

Fourteenth, almost universally, animist cultures have relied on the services of a variety of human persons with specialized roles or skills to deal with different kinds of other-than-human persons and problems the culture faces with them. This includes healers, herbalists, dancers, chanters, singers, medicine men, seers, and of course, shamans.

There are often more than one of each in any given community, each with their own abilities and specialties, but all with the ability to intercede with the other-than-human persons of their environment.

Fifteenth, absolutely universally, animists are concerned about these relationships with other-than-human persons because of the immediate practical benefits of having a positive social relationship with those who can make sure we have—or conversely, if we don’t have a good relationship, make sure we *don’t*

have—food, shelter, luck in love and the lottery, children, a long life, health, and so on.

That is, such relationships have an immediate, immanent practical value to the human persons, and we expect, to the other-than-human persons as well. There is little concern about transcendence, condition in the afterlife, sin and its forgiveness, orthodoxy, and other matters that seem to occupy the “advanced” religions—that is, things that are intellectual rather than purely experience based.

Sixteenth, the purpose of these relationships is to maintain and reaffirm balance between the different groups of persons. Only when relationships are balanced is it possible to ask for help, and the participants to help each other in positive ways.

Seventeenth, animism is often closely allied with ancestor worship/veneration, in which the living must carry on a relationship of honor with their ancestors. And upon death, the individual becomes an ancestor, like all the ancestors before him or her. Some cultures provide variation in after-life outcomes based on whether or not the individual died a “good” death, but rarely does the individual’s personality or behavior in life have any impact on status after death.

Next, animism is also often closely associated with magic, healing, divination, etc.

Finally, these points taken together mean that animism is very similar to—in fact, may be—what is referred to as “Folk Religion” in areas with more developed religious traditions. The beliefs and actions of folk religion are

beliefs and actions that do not coherently fit into the other “formal” traditions of the society, such as the common beliefs in astrology, numerology, angels and angelology, and alien contact and other beliefs and practices in otherwise “Christian” cultures, such as the U.S.