

Boundary Crossing of Animism under Different Cultures

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Keywords: animism, Mia Couto, biosemiotics, anthropology, human-object interaction, boundary-crossing

Abstract: Animism has been one set of beliefs that receives increasing attention and popularity in multiple academic fields such as anthropology and philosophy. This article starts with introducing the definition of animism and techno-animism. Then, it will move to talk about the manifestations of the Shinto-Infused animism in Japanese culture. By adducing examples from the Mozambican literature, indigenous beliefs of the Kelabit and the Penan in Southeast Asia, and how children and adults treat and interact with robots and inanimate in the Western society, we will finally reach the conclusion that 1) on the one hand, there are some common interpretations and manifestations of animism shared by people in different cultures, such as tolerance of boundary-crossing and rendering inanimate objects with life forces; and 2) on the other hand, animism is not antithetical to Western conceptions of human-object relation.

1. Introduction

From creating holograms of virtual reality singers to crafting delicate figurines of popular anime characters, Japan is constantly creating and exporting inanimate objects (or images of inanimate objects) that to some extent exhibit human characteristics to every corner of the world. The cultural anthropologist Anne Allison argues that the Japanese ways of dealing with relations between humans, animals, and inanimate objects exhibited by the Japanese toy culture are distinct [1]. Except within the scope of ACG (Anime, Comics, and Games) works, the relations between humans and other kinds of beings are in fact mentioned, discussed, and examined long before in Japanese literature. The fuzzy boundary between humans and inanimate objects found in every aspect of Japanese culture seems to be in accord with the property that Casper Bruun Jensen and Anders Blok assign to Japanese narratives: routinely creating cohabitations of humans and other kinds of beings such as animals, spirits and robots [1].



Figure 1: A Japanese man talking to Gatebox, a smart virtual reality companion.

Inanimate objects such as the “talking” cylindrical device (see Figure 1) and delicate figurines of anime characters possess what anthropologists called human characteristics or behaviors that can make them seem alive. “Animism” is the term used to describe the tendency of ascribing human characteristics to inanimate objects [2]. With the development of robots, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality, the social anthropologist Kathleen Richardson proposes the idea of “techno-animism” to deal with questions like what it means to be humans or a non-human ‘animate’ machine [3]. In the Shinto-infused Japanese context, techno-animism clouds the boundaries between advanced technologies, spiritual beings, animals, and humans. This article intends to show that animism is not unique to Japanese culture. By adducing examples from the Mozambican literature, indigenous religion in Southeast Asia, and Western demonstrations of animistic views, we will finally reach the conclusion that animism neither animism nor techno-animism is antithetical to Western conception of human-robot relation, and the attempts to deliberately distinguish Japanese conceptions of human-object relation from non-Japanese ones are utterly arbitrary.

2. Thrivingness of Animism

2.1. Origin

In 1871, the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor firstly coined the term “animism” in his book *Primitive Culture*. In this book, animism includes a broad class of religious practices that intrinsically involve animation displayed by indigenous peoples. Around a hundred years later, Piaget re-defined the term “animism” as “the tendency to regard objects as living and endowed with will” during his research in cognitive development of children [2]. In an animistic view, the world is consisted of multifarious kinds of personalized entities from plants and animals to humans. In the Japanese contexts, where Shinto traditions are still prevalent in the contemporary society, culture and nature are interwoven. Animals, plants, gods, and humans are in constitutive relations with each other. Shinto traditions seem to not only undermine the differences of the animate and the inanimate but also to exhibit astounding tolerance of boundary-crossing and shape-changing, argues Timo Kaerlein [4].

2.2. Shinto-Infused animism in Japanese culture

Japanese people who are imbued with Shinto ideologies seem more likely to engage in interactions with entities other than human beings than people growing up in other cultures. One of the most

well-known traditional Japanese folk tales named *Urashima Tarou* can be understood as a human being serendipitously entering the world of deities. *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, on the other hand, which is another fabled Japanese folklore, depicts a deity who enters the world of humans. Boundary-crossing is a common if not hackneyed theme in ancient Japanese literature. Modern Japanese novelists are also willing to depict interactions of humans and non-human entities in their works. *The Human Chair* is a short story written by the world-famous mystery novelist Edokawa Ranpo in 1925. In this short story, Edokawa integrates human characteristics into the objects by creating a bizarre sense of suspense, leaving readers wonder whether there is a grotesque human living inside the exquisite Western-style armchair at the end.

Since Japan has followed a distinctly different path of modernization from other Western nations. Kaerlein argues that the Shinto techno-animism is a non-modern ontology that is unique to Japanese society [4]. While receiving profound Western influence on technology, industry, and bureaucracy during the *Meiji* restoration, Japan restored imperial rule at the same time. As a result, many centuries-old social and ideological traditions were kept. Today, walking down the streets in Higashishimbashi, one may not be surprised to find red *Tori* gate built among the forests of skyscrapers (see Figure 2), flyovers, and trains and monks who wear robes shuttling amidst the crowds of salarymen.



Figure 2: Hibiya Shrine standing among modern buildings in Higashishinbashi, Tokyo.

Jennifer Robertson argues that Shinto beliefs has also made the ways in which Japanese perceive robots distinct [5]. Shinto believes that the world is awash with *Kami*, which is a kind of natural forces that can be found even inside dolls and robots. Thus, dolls and robots are endowed with same status as humans, animals, and plants. Moreover, low birth rate and aging population are also factors that drive the Japanese society to embrace automation more readily than other countries.

3. Animism in Southeast Asia

The conception of life force and boundary-crossing between entities, however, cannot serve to be what set the Japanese Shinto-infused animism apart from other kinds of cosmologies. Similar concepts can also be found in the cosmologies of the Kelabit and Penan people, two indigenous people in Southeast Asia. In an article discussing animism in Southeast Asia, Monica Janowski mentions that to Kelabit and Penan peoples, all living beings have life forces, which are in their own linguistic expressions *lalud* and *penyuket* respectively, and such life forces are believed by these peoples to flow in the universe naturally [8]. Participating and coalescing with others in the constant flow of life and energy, every living entity is said to possess what the Kelabit people call *ada*, which can be understood as spirit in English. The material world is then regarded as the imprint of the spirit world, and any material entity is an embodiment of a spirit. For example, to the Kelabit people, the landscape is enspirited. Messages and signs from the landscape can be carried by animal messengers such as birds, snakes, and deer, etc. Just as the fuzzy boundary between humans and non-human objects in Japanese animism, the boundary between the material world and the spirit world in Kelabit conception is not clear-cut either. A mythical hero called Toked Rini managed to return to the world of the living after he had been living in the world of the dead for some time.

The differences of the conceptions about life forces between the Kelabit and Penan people lie in that the former can differentiate themselves from other living beings and can manipulate the flow of life force through the practice of rice-growing [8]. This is because on the one hand, in Southeast Asia, rice-growing is risky and requires tremendous human effort. On the other hand, Kelabit people have to establish physical and symbolic barriers between the human world and the forest in the process of rice growing.

4. Animism in Mozambican Literature

Klein discusses and analyzes how human-animal relations are conceived in the works of the Mozambican novelist Mia Couto by using approaches of biosemiotics, which are grounded in an animism-infused African life [6]. As a recently emergent field in biological sciences, biosemiotics is concerned with semiosis in the realm of biological lives. Klein argues that Couto's literal works reestablished the proximity between humans and other kinds of animals—By actively and adroitly interacting with the environment, both humans and animals are able to participate in embodied relations using a common “language” [6]. Compared with the conventional conception about nature, which considers the earth to be an “inert machine”, biosemiotics, as a contrast, conceives nature to be animate and full of purposes and meanings. According to the British semiotician Wendy Wheeler, the study of biosemiotics can be considered as attempting to retrieve a “common *biological language*” that all living beings can make sense of [6]. In Couto's fictional work *Confession of the Lioness*, living in a strictly patriarchal society the female protagonist Mariamar who suffered from the abuse of her father metamorphosed into a lioness. On the one hand, her metamorphosis into a lioness represents the critique towards patriarchy and capitalism, which turn women into the same kind of beings as animals—roaming beasts on the fringes of the society. On the other hand, it presents us with possibility to understand the “common *biological language*” that Wheeler has talked about.

According to Klein, the practices of metamorphosis are grounded in the language of embodiment, which is the central to biosemiotics [6]. Because of this, Couto's fictions are able to connect biosemiotics and the animistic ontology of the African world. Characterized by an intrinsic changeability, it is the animistic ontology that allows characters of Couto's fictions to be able to metamorphose into animals.

5. Animism in Western Society

5.1. Animistic Human-robot Interactions Performed by Children in Western Society

Since robots are gradually receiving more ubiquity in the modern society (robots are not only common in industrial fields, but their appearances are also prevalent in health cares and domestic applications such as children's toys or AI companions), the question regarding how children perceive robot became ever more consequential. There have been multiple researches showing that humans do ascribe characteristics that are unique to humans to robots. Bumby and Dautenhahn suggest that when asked to draw a picture of robots, many children tend to add human characteristics to their drawings [9]. Another research done by Melson in 2005 discovered that the majority of children in the study (89%) believed that robotic dogs can play with them [10]. Moreover, more than half of the children thought that robotic dogs can perceive happiness. In a 2011 study, Beran et al. examined whether children hold animistic views towards robots through the schemata, which are knowledge structures that consist of cognition, affect, and behaviors [2]. Results of the study show that 52.7% of the children participating in the research believe that a robot has the capability to remember them in the future. Regarding the affective aspect, the portion of people who stated that the robot in the study likes them is significantly higher than the portion who responded no for the question. There is no marker difference, however, in the number of children who responded that a robot is able to see a block and who responded no. Thus, we can conclude from the research that it is not rare for children to hold an animistic view towards robots and that among the numerous human characteristics children ascribe to robots, affective ones are more prevalent than behavioral or cognitive ones.

5.2. Animistic Ways of Thinking Performed by Adults in Western Society

One may argue that though it is natural and reasonable for children to exhibit animistic views, as people grow older and have a deeper understanding about the surroundings, people are less likely to hold an animistic view. In an article discussing animism in Western society, Mathew-Pett claims that although animism is never regarded as a set of beliefs prevailing in the mainstream, adults engage in animistic ways of thinking all the time. From talking to Siri, the virtual assistant developed by Apple Inc., and expecting it to wisecrack to feeling guilty about deserting objects that have not yet reached the end of usefulness, people seem to emotionally interact with the inanimate objects in the surroundings rather naturally and automatically. Mathew-Pett points out that the conventional division of the animate and inanimate objects, which considers the lack of agency and sentience to be what sets the latter apart from the former, oversimplifies and ignores the relational sense of them. A more nuanced definition of animism is then proposed: the world is full of persons and humans only consist part of them, and animism is concerning with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.

In the center of how the Occidentals perceive animism lies the experience of human-object relationality, argues Matthew-Pett. One may not be surprised to find out that people can relate themselves to the surroundings and that objects out there in the material world can have profound influence on people. For example, people may deliberately choose to decorate their new dorms or houses by uses of objects like posters, photographs, and flowers, etc. to make them feel that this is the space of their own. Another example given by Matthew-Pett is that a person feels attached to her shelves of media because by looking at them, she can recall her favorite stories and characters. Thus, the relationships between humans and objects make up part of her sense of memories. Her shelves not only make her who she is –a media connoisseur but also are actors which (who?) form her memories. In short, despite that animism is not the set of beliefs hold by mainstream of the

Western society, people in Western world perform animistic ways of thinking by interacting with their surroundings in a reciprocal way.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, almost all kinds of animism mentioned above include the relationship between humans and animals, but each may differ slightly from others. While the Shinto-infused animism renders animals the equal status as humans, animism described in Mozambican literature puts an emphasis on the proximity between them. Based on the proximity of animals and humans and a common *biological language*, metamorphosis from humans to animals is possible. In Southeast Asia, humans can communicate with the spirit world through animal messengers. Just like the fuzzy boundary between humans and inanimate objects, there is not a clear-cut demarcation between the material world and the spirit world in Southeast Asian cosmologies. It is true that Japan has followed a distinct path of modernization, and this may have brought about numerous weird hybrids of centuries-old traditions and modern beliefs in Japan. However, agreeing with the claim above suggests that one holds the view that animism is completely incompatible with a modern society. If one subscribes to the belief that humans are under the sway of the surroundings and that material objects help us shape our self-identity as suggested by examples from Western societies, he or she may find separating animism from modern societies is overly arbitrary.

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