

Panel: Animism in Southeast Asia

Self-conscious animism: Cosmological politics in the Southeast Asian uplands

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This paper attempts to combine Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's view of animism as an ontology of "one culture, many natures" with James Scott's understanding of upland ideologies as designed to evade state control. Descola's reconceptualizing of animism proposes a universal classification for human-"nature" ontologies, in particular on the base of human-animal relations. However, in the study of Southeast Asian uplands, a different paradigm of otherness has been dominant: the notion that identities, social structures and cosmologies have been shaped by interaction in transethnic systems. From this perspective, "animisms" appear as alternatives to more socially centralizing cosmologies like Buddhism – their function lies as much in ordering the world as in cultivating differences with lowland states. Therefore, the relationships between humans and wild animals are less important in upland Southeast Asia than those with ethnic others, which are equally associated with spirits. Lowlanders and ethnic others are sometimes associated with the spirit world, a realm of otherness characterized by cities and markets; on the other hand, the type of spirits most important in everyday life are often ancestors. How can both the new animism concept and the notion of contrasting ethnic systems shed new light on the particular animisms of upland Southeast Asians?

ABSTRACT

On Matter and Spirit: Alternative Modes of Ontology in Timor

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This paper offers a new perspective on Timorese ontological thought by considering the implications for the Tylorean category of ‘animism’ of three modes of conceptualizing the spirit and matter by the people of Timor. In introducing the term into the anthropological literature Edward Tyler represented the concept of spirit as an ontological category encapsulated in some material container such as a rock, a tree, an animal, and suchlike. While ethnographic reports confirm that this is indeed the mode by which matter and spirit are related in the thinking of very many populations throughout the world there are other ways of ontological representation. By analyzing a series of oral narratives and examining the ritual contexts of certain religious notions this paper compares the Tylorean mode with two alternative ways of ontological conceptualization finding expression among the Timorese. The defining characteristic of what might be referred to as the ‘transformational mode’ is that spirit is transformed into matter or matter is transformed into spirit. This occurs in Timor when, for example, oral narratives relate how a nature spirit manifests itself in the material form of a woman, reticulated python, or crocodile. In the ‘metaphorical mode’, by contrast, spirit is merely symbolized by matter, such as occurs in the material form of innumerable wooden statues of the Virgin Mary on ritual display throughout Timor.

Abstract for the panel 'Animism in Southeast Asia: Persistence, transformation, and renewal' at the EUROSEAS conference 2010.

Ifugao animism: rethinking religious practices in northern Luzon, the Philippines

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While previous studies of the Ifugao (e.g. Barton 1946, Conklin 1980) tend to present Ifugao religion with its vast pantheon of spirits and deities as a coherent, integrated, cosmological belief system, this paper examines Ifugao religious practices in light of recent rethinking of animism as relational epistemology and/or interagentive ontology. The paper analyses various interactions with spirits – human-spirit marriages and sacrificial healing rituals – as onto-praxises, i.e. situational engagement by actors with ontological categories (Scott 2007) and explores how these practices reveal Ifugao animism as a relational ontology. By discussing Ifugao ideas of human-spirit continuities and discontinuities the paper explores how the relationships between humans and spirits are morally charged, bodily experienced, and indicative of a relational concept of personhood. With these insights in mind, the paper further discusses how the recently introduced Pentecostalism relates to Ifugao animism. It is argued that instead of looking at these religions as two opposing belief systems, they should be seen as interacting onto-praxises, which both demonstrate the persistence and renewal of Ifugao animism as a relational ontology.

Abstract

EUROSEAS panel on Animism (2010)

Katu animism: the persistence of indigenous religion in central Vietnam

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Taking its point of departure in the recent rethinking of the concept of animism in anthropology, this paper examines the animist cosmology of the Katu people inhabiting the uplands of central Vietnam. The paper argues that this cosmology provides the conceptual basis for Katu religion – spirit beliefs and ritual practices – and an elaborate moral ecology underpinning local resource use and human-environment relations. It is also suggested that Katu animism supplies experientially satisfying answers to the profound existential dilemmas of death, disease and misfortune. In the absence of competing and proselytising religious forces (Buddhism, Christianity), this animistic moral and existential stance prevails in Katu communities to a remarkable degree in spite of dramatic changes in the Vietnamese society at large. The paper concludes by briefly relating the Katu ethnography to the author's previous work on Amerindian cosmology. The comparison suggests systematic variations of possibly general theoretical interest.

Panel: Animism in Southeast Asia

**The Reconstruction and Transformation of the Sacred Power in Angkor:
Embodied Knowledge and the Sense of Belonging**

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The paper aims to demonstrate how animism is manifest in contemporary Angkor, Cambodia. The sacred power of Angkor has been reconstructed, transformed and embodied by the local communities of Angkor. This aspect has however not received worthy recognition because overwhelming attention has been paid by scholars and visitors alike to the past and the physical dimension of heritage values in this well-known World Heritage Site.

Angkor Wat, for example, was constructed as a Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu in the 13th century, which was later transformed into a Buddhist one. The chief Vishnu figure of Angkor Wat is however considered by the local communities as the most powerful guardian spirit called *neak ta* in the region. The *neak ta* of supposedly ancestral spirits, have potency to heal illnesses or solve social problems of the local people through spirit mediums. The transmission of the sacred power has been possible because the local people have reinterpreted it in the way to solve their life crisis. The sense of belonging of local inhabitants to the Angkor site has thus been enhanced by the continuation of animistic beliefs embodied in them through physical pains and healing.

Panel: Animism in Southeast Asia
Kenneth Sillander, University of Helsinki

Human-Spirit-Animal Interaction in Ritual and Myth among the Bentian of Borneo

The Bentian are a small group of swidden cultivators who live in a thinly populated upriver area of Indonesian Borneo. Until palm oil plantations begun to be established on their lands a couple of years ago, most of them subsisted on swidden cultivation and hunting, supplemented by cash income obtained from sale of rattan cultivated in the swiddens, and the consumption of domestic animals (chicken, pigs, water buffalos) sacrificed during frequently performed curing and other rituals. The Bentian ascribe personhood not only to people but also to spirits and, in some contexts, animals. Spirits and animals share a common origin with man, and most things in the world are perceived to ultimately originate from human or superhuman predecessors according to a corpus of anthropomorphic origin myths (tempuun) that are regularly recounted in rituals. The relationship with the natural world is mediated by culturally constituted cosmological understandings postulating complex relationships of interdependence between a multitude of seen and unseen beings lacking fixed identities and boundaries. This paper will focus on some examples of interaction between people and spirits mediated by animals. Two common explanations of soul loss and illness are spirit possession by wild or domestic animals and experiences of watching animals die, or having relatives doing so, something which particularly affects small children with weak souls. Spirits also commonly cause illness because of mistaking human souls for game animals. These occurrences occasion ritual negotiation with spirits and sacrifice of domestic animals, and, in the case of spirit possession of domestic animals, violent killings of them occurring outside the official ritual program.

Why convert?: The problem of an animistic epistemology in a changing world, Matthew H. Amster (Gettysburg College)

This paper presents an ethnohistorical view of Kelabit animism and how conversion to Christianity can be viewed as motivated, in part, as a response to elements of their former beliefs that over time became highly problematic. The Kelabit are an indigenous people whose homelands are in the interior highlands of Sarawak, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. Drawing from extensive ethnohistorical information collected from Kelabit elders, this paper illustrates the specific aspects of their former beliefs as animist that helped propel their conversion to Christianity. The paper outlines the former animistic epistemology of the Kelabit, showing how it engendered a highly complex, deeply anxious, and uniquely dialogical relationship between people and their local environment. A key aspect of this dialogical relationship was a bounded sense of space and an embedding of spiritual meanings in features of local landscape. With the coming of outside contact and increased opportunity for regional trade and movement, beginning around the turn of the twentieth century and accelerating during World War Two, their pre-conversion system of belief came under a number of challenges, some linked to new experience with mobility. This paper attempts to offer an understanding of why conversion becomes inevitable in the post-contact era, focusing on various epistemological elements of Kelabit animism and the ways that this epistemology created more bounded, and hence problematic, relationships to the social and natural environment.

SEEING AND KNOWING: “CULTURAL RELATIVISM” IN CHEWONG ANIMISTIC ONTOLOGY .

Abstract for the panel “Animism in Southeast Asia: Persistence, Transformation and Renewal”

EUROSEAS CONFERENCE, 2010

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In a recent contribution to the ongoing debate on how to interpret the slippery category of animism, Descola (2006) introduced the concept “collective analogism”. Basing my presentation on ethnographic material from Chewong, a hunting, gathering and shifting cultivating group of people in the Malaysian rain forest, I shall ask to what extent collective analogism is helpful in furthering our understanding of the beliefs and practices that constitute the particular world –view called animism. In light of Chewong species- specific perception of the world around them, I shall examine in some detail what Chewong understanding of metamorphosis entails, and how this affects personhood and sociality. I shall suggest that it throws a somewhat different light on the meaning of relational ontology.

Abstract. Panel: Animism in Southeast Asia

SPIRIT BELIEFS AMONG THE WETU TELU SASAK OF LOMBOK , INDONESIA

Sven Cederroth, University of Gothenburg

This paper examines spirit beliefs in the *wetu telu* religion of the Satak in Lombok and focuses especially on *bao daya*, a trance dance in which the spirits take possession of humans. There is a belief in many kinds of spirits and among them the ancestors stand out as especially important. Ancestor spirits as well as local spirits can leave their habitat and take possession of a human being. This can be done involuntarily, because the spirit feels neglected or maltreated in some way but it can also happen because the spirit is called upon and asked to assist in various tasks, as in *bao daya* performances. The ancestors can influence daily events for the living in many different ways. They are often approached by their descendants who may ask for their advice or simply for a blessing. Death, therefore, in no way implies a total break with the society of the living. The ancestor spirits will return, for instance, on many ritual occasions to which they are specifically invited and during which they are supposed to participate in the common meals being served. But not only are the ancestors thought to influence the living. To the *wetu telu* the whole nature is animated. These supernatural powers may dwell everywhere, but certain places like springs, hills etc are thought to be especially favoured. Thus, ancestor spirits and local spirits are essentially similar, invisible and omnipresent, yet inhabiting certain specified places.

Spirits, predation, and metamorphic potentials of agency in Eastern Indonesia

An abstract for the Euroseas panel on “Animism in Southeast Asia: Persistence, transformation and renewal”

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The paper is an exercise of cosmological comparison with a focus on the motifs of predation and eating in people’s aesthetic and moral relationship to non-human beings. Valerio Valeri’s account of the Huaulu of Central Maluku who look at their relationship to the forest as a reciprocal predatory relationship has interesting parallels with de Fausto’s discussion about predation and commensality in Amazon. By Valeri’s account, the notion of “spirit” is complicated by the two oppositions – material as against immaterial, and one as against many invisible agents – which structure Huaulu metaphysical concepts. In his argument, notions about “occult powers” are a way of conceptualizing metamorphic potential, the tendency of mutually predatory agents to lose their boundaries and merge into each other. The metamorphic potential of things people encounter in the forest means that their own humanity is also reversible; hence the taboos with which people seek to protect and restore it.

The argument which draws from my own field material from the Kei Islands extends this perspective to relations between allied Christian and Muslim groups whose relationship is mediated by joint claims to farmland, owned by invisible spirits and threatened by forays by wild boars. In this context, metamorphic potential of human encounters and the autochthonous island world is evident in the ambiguous moral and epistemological value of invisible agents which control it. The paper elaborates this point with reference to people’s relationship to wild boars, hunted by Christian villagers as a service to Muslims who refrain from eating them. Such practices can be seen as part of a broader cosmological concern with invisible agents and predatory relationships. Examining this pattern of thinking may be helpful for understanding why universalizing notions of humanity and spiritual or religious domains fail to completely encompass local, “animist” cosmology, in spite of the long history of Islamic and Christian conversions and state influence in Maluku.