Graham Harvey **Animism**

Respecting the Living World

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively)[1] towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism *may* involve learning how to recognise who is a person and what is not—because it is not always obvious and not all animists agree that everything that exists is alive or personal. However, animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.

This may be a surprising opening for those who expected a discussion of religion as a 'belief in spirits', but this older use of the term animism is not the primary focus of this book. However, it is discussed in the first chapter as a short prelude to the exciting and interesting possibilities to be found in considering the worldviews and lifeways identified by a small but growing number of scholars of religions and cultures as the 'new animism'.

Broadly speaking there are two kinds of animism. Or, more accurately, the word 'animism' is used in two ways. The older usage refers to an putative concern with knowing what is alive and what makes a being alive. It alleges a 'belief in spirits' or 'non-empirical beings', and/or a confusion about life and death among some indigenous people, young children or all religious people. Sometimes it is party to the assertion of a confusion between persons and objects, or between humans and other-than-human beings. It may also be part of a theory about the origins of religions and/or the nature of religion itself. The newer usage refers to a concern with knowing how to behave appropriately towards persons, not all of whom are human. It refers to the widespread indigenous and increasingly popular 'alternative' understanding that humans share this world with a wide range of persons, only some of whom are human. While it may be important to know whether one is encountering a person or an object, the really significant question for animists of the 'new' kind is how persons are to be treated or acted towards. Discussion of these discourses, points of view, practices and possibilities aids attempts to understand worldviews and lifeways that are different in various ways from those typically inculcated and more or less taken for granted in Western

[1] Black 1977, cited in Morrison 2002: 40.

modernity. The chief purpose of this book is to consider and discuss the implications of taking seriously intimations that the term 'person' applies not only to humans and human-like beings (ancestors and some deities) but to a far wider community.

Many academics have jettisoned the term 'animism' from their critical, technical and scholarly vocabulary. They consider it irredeemably compromised by the dubious role it played in early anthropological theorising and religious polemic. I would agree with this assessment but for the fact that the term has escaped the constrictions imposed upon it by its colonial origins. 'Animism' has taken on a new life among various communities who find it useful in labelling much of what is important or interesting to them. Indeed, some people are happy to introduce themselves as animists. Furthermore, following these changes, realignments and adoptions, some academic researchers have found animism helpful as a critical term in debates of current importance. They demonstrate that the term, understood in the new way, can introduce topics of conversation that may otherwise be missed. This book, being primarily interested in the 'new animism', spends little time with, and devotes little space to, the early uses of the term. However, the time and space that it does concede to such false starts is helpful both as a backdrop and as a prelude to more useful debates. Seeing the past helps us to see what has changed, is changing or really ought to be changed. For example, the 'old animism' not only gets the facts wrong, but also carries assumptions that preserve colonialist and dualist worldviews and rhetoric that deserve to be contested. More positively, reflection on (the new) animist worldviews and practices could contribute to debates about, for example, consciousness, environment and ethics in a number of disciplines and subjects. It may even prove to be exciting in revealing (as if it were hidden) that there are a number of vital alternatives to the modernist Western culture that uses and exploits other persons. Therefore, animism is worth considering (*a*) because it exists, (*b*) because it addresses contemporary issues and debates, and (*c*) because it clarifies, in various ways, the argument that the project of modernity is ill-conceived and dangerously performed.

Systems and stories

Since it is easy to be misunderstood and even easier to unthinkingly mislead, it is important to confront the dangerous temptation to systematise. Sometimes academics put things in neatly labelled boxes. This is a destructive process because the 'things' academics deal with are often very much alive. They do not belong in boxes, nor do they always survive there. Some refuse to stay in the boxes, alone and tamed, awaiting a single discipline or methodology to describe and

explain them. Great weights of authority, theory and jargon have to be placed on the boxes to keep the living things under control. Subduing them or pinning them on boards can be a last resort for those academics who do not want all their secrets to get away. This is one way to do academic work. What follows is not intended to be another labelled box, another neat category to be applied to the lifeless objects of academic scrutiny. My intention is to take a problematic label that is open to various interpretations, some more hopeful and helpful than others, and worry about its applicability, utility, implications and reference. Labels can be helpful in the same way that names can be: they can aid recognition, establish communication, permit familiarity and enable mutual understanding. But names, even very good names, do not say everything that needs saying—they are not stories—and they can be misleading. So this book argues that despite a history of problematic use or abuse, the term animism can aid our conversations more than it has so far. This argument and book will only succeed if they generate more debate in the arena into which they enter. Real dialogues have no end but only open up further possibilities in the ever unfolding evolution of life and knowledge.

With careful vigilance and regular refinement, I argue here that the term animism can play a more active role than ever before within the Study of Religions and other ethnographic disciplines, and also that not all of its uses are valuable or accurate. The term clearly began as an expression of a nest of insulting approaches to indigenous peoples and to the earliest putatively religious humans. It was, and sometimes remains, a colonialist slur. However, it can also draw attention to significant, even central, matters in the lifeways and worldviews of particular communities. Alongside other contested critical terms[2] animism can help us know and do better.

Similarly, and to put things in a way perhaps more appropriate to animism than to academia, no single story is ever final, complete, sufficient and all-embracing. Every story can be told another way, often becoming radically different in the telling. There are always other stories that say 'no' to the one that only recently enthralled and convinced us. Evidence that seems to support an argument can always be countered by something contrary. Just as we are enjoying the waves, a particle hits us. In stories, as in life, things are not always what they seem. People are not always what they seem. At the same time, there is an everyday, taken-for-granted obviousness about animism. How could this not be the case when that which is alive is the rock you are holding or standing on, the animal you are hunting, the cloud that waters the corn you are tending or the tree you are sheltering beneath? But animisms are at the same time capable of powerful expression and deep

[2] Taylor 1998.

thoughtfulness, as befits such profound encapsulations of the way the world is. If every 'thing' we humans encounter might in fact be a living person, the implications and ramifications are immense. It is this that generates the particular etiquettes, protocols and dialogues that are at the heart of the lived realities that are animisms.

This takes us to the heart of the difference between the old and new uses of 'animism'. The old usage constructed animists as people who did not or could not distinguish correctly between objects and subjects, or between things and persons. The new animism names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons. Knowing that people, human and other-than-human, can be deceitful and devious, and that there are tricksters and anti-social persons in the world, means that it is important to look out for masks, illusions, deceptions, tricks of perception and false claims. Knowing that relationships and reality are fraught with ambiguity means that it is important to attend to stories and their endless ramifications rather than seek the definitive closure of creeds or conclusions. Knowing that some people might want to eat us means that it is wise to be cautious as well as constructive in our respectful encounters with other persons. All this may establish the need for knowledge gained from experience and practiced skill, as well as from the education provided by elders or disseminated in 'tradition'. It may also be necessary to call upon the advice and companionship of those who see through different eyes or know by different senses, shamans for example. This is to reiterate that 'respect' is a blend of cautious and constructive acting towards other persons and even towards 'things' which might turn out to be persons.[3]

The old usage of animism was entangled with Western worldviews that considered the myriad multiplicity evident everywhere (internally, externally, physically, mentally, naturally, culturally, microscopically, macroscopically) to be problematic. Two solutions have been proffered. The first has been to insist on the underlying unity of all that exists. Such a unity may be located in a single creative God, a yet-to-be-discovered grand unifying theory, idealism, materialism or mysticism. The second has been to dichotomise everything and treat all that we encounter as a confrontation of dualities such as us/them, male/female, light/dark, spiritual/physical, mind/matter, truth/error, time/eternity, life/death, persons/objects, objectivity/subjectivity, human/non-human, self/other and good/evil. The new usage of animism arises from respectful relationships with indigenous and other cultures in which boundaries are permeable and putative 'opposites' are necessarily engaged in various ways. Instead of crying 'One!' or 'Two!', animists celebrate plurality, multiplicity, the many and their

[3] Black 1977.

entwined passionate entanglements. Instead of the hero who struggles against one or other side of things in an attempt to discern the underlying truth, animist stories present tricksters who multiply possibilities in increasingly amusing ways.

All of this is to say that all dualisms are, at best, provisional and/or contingent. The cutting edge or critical point of this consideration is not merely in providing a better way of describing alterities—strange, alien or foreign cultural phenomena—but the possibility of reconsidering the validity and value of the dominant modernist culture. My approach in what follows is to provide a series of related and resonating views of different ways of considering and enacting the implications of animism. Because the phenomena to which this term properly and usefully apply are diverse and unsystematic, I aim to avoid systematising what is more adequately storied. Nonetheless, all that follows should demonstrate that the term animism is of considerable value as a critical, academic term for a style of religious and cultural relating to the world. This may be seen in particular complexes of worldviews and lifeways or as elements within larger traditions. That is, not only are there animist cultures, but there are also cultures within which it is possible to act occasionally as an animist.

All that follows is founded on two matters that deserve some brief consideration: a dialogical methodology and an understanding of what the term 'persons' might mean.

Dialogue: research as conversation

Consideration of animism is valuable not only as an attempt to understand particular cultures and sub-cultures. Thick description, rich ethnography, empiricism and phenomenology (i.e. saying what phenomena present themselves with some negotiated consideration for 'insiders' or 'adherents') are important in various ways. However, research often leads to more than an understanding of 'others'. Any ethnological engagement with thoroughly relational animists must entail reflection on the methods used to collect and consider 'data'. Happily, academic methods have evolved since the 'old animism' was postulated by an earlier generation of scholars. Being explicit about methods and practices of research is especially important to the current generation of scholars who are far less certain about 'objectivity'. Today words like dialogue, reflexivity and reactivity—which might just be academic versions of more everyday terms like conversation, respect and relationship—are integral to academic discourse. Michel Bakhtin's discussion of the 'dialogic imagination' is an obvious source for all who are inspired by these terms.[4] Contributors to Young and

[4] Bakhtin 1981.

Goulet's *Being Changed*, Spickard, Landres and McGuire's *Personal Knowledge and Beyond* and Blain, Ezzy and Harvey's *Researching Paganisms* are among the brightest examples of this positive trend.[5]

In this book the terms 'dialogue' and 'dialogical' serve as Humpty Dumpty terms: words that are paid extra because they are made to work extra hard.[6] In fact, these words are paid extra by being trusted to carry a wide range of reciprocally reinforcing meanings. As resonant synonyms of ways in which respect is enacted in relationships and conversations with other persons, 'dialogue' and 'dialogical' might well evoke some of the defining characteristics of animist lifeways, but they also challenge academics to find better ways to relate to others. For example, Irving Hallowell argued that truly objective research would respect the point of view that not only human but also other-than-human persons are members of indigenous communities.[7] If so, academics need to attend to the ways in which wisdom might be sought in conversation with all sorts of persons.

Pursuit of such dialogical conversations with particular indigenous communities will include learning about processes and protocols. For example, the occurrence of dialogue not only in speech-events but also in ceremonial and other performative enactments is important to Thomas Buckley's argument that what Yurok people do '*is* a mode of discourse, of oppositions simultaneously yearning towards wholeness', but necessarily open ended and defiant of closure.[8] Similarly, David Turner's work proffers a '*theoretical* reading which includes an Aboriginal expression of the terms of... a perspective... that runs: *anti-thesis* *thesis* *plurality*... [or] Nothingness being relationship'.[9] This might be applied both to the understanding that 'animism' has become an antithesis in most academic discourses, and to the possibility that the Cartesian inheritance underlying many claims to academic objectivity is antithetical. What theses and pluralities, existences and relationships might emerge in such considerations is, in many respects, one of the most significant questions of this book. I have argued elsewhere[10] for further consideration and enactment of a radical version of dialogue that might (in honour of my Maori hosts in Ngati Porou and Ngati Ranana) be called 'guesthood'. This entails not only recognition but celebration of academic presence among, and full participation with, our hosts (properly understood as those who might refuse us access and guesthood). Furthermore, it entails conversation

[5] Young and Goulet 1994; Spickard, Landres and McGuire 2002; Blain, Ezzy and Harvey 2004. Also see Cox 1998, Stover 2001 and Tweed 2002.

[6] Carroll 1962: 274–5.

[7] Hallowell 1960: 143–4.

[8] Buckley 2000: 40 and 50. Italics in original.

[9] Turner 1999: xxii. Italics in original.

[10] Harvey 2003b.

with and learning from knowledgeable hosts, and some explicit form of reciprocation that benefits those hosts.

At the same time, with heavy reliance on Robert Warrior,[11] it is important to note that this book does not attempt to 'give voice to the voiceless'—which would be risible fantasy. Rather it reflects on the implications of various conversations about living as persons which fumble towards possibilities as yet insufficiently considered by academics. Animisms are theories, discourses and practices of relationship, of living well, of realising more fully what it means to be a person, and a human person, in the company of other persons, not all of whom are human but all of whom are worthy of respect.

Recognising persons

Much of the argument of this book hinges on the question of what a person is. Words are always defined by their use in particular contexts and their meanings vary as particular segments of their associations are selected and stressed. Since this discussion is interested in the discourse, practice and implications of animism among diverse cultures and communities, 'persons' is another Humpty Dumpty word, carrying a heavy load of meanings, associations, possibilities and potentiality. At the heart of the matter is the opposition between 'persons' and 'objects'. Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken *with*. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken *about*. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings. They demonstrate intentionality and agency with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom. That some persons look like objects is of little more value to an understanding of animism than the notion that some acts, characteristics, qualia and so on may appear human-like to some observers. Neither material form nor spiritual or mental faculties are definitive (except in the 'old animism' where they are *the* problem). People become animists by learning how to recognise persons and, far more important, how to engage with them. The ubiquity of terms like respect and reciprocity in animist discourse demonstrates that the key identifier of a person is someone who responds to or initiates approaches to other persons.

In the philosophical language of many religious cultures 'person' is applicable not only to humans but to various significant other-than-human beings (e.g. deities and angels). Animists recognise a much wider range of persons. There is nothing in these discourses that should be understood as implying (let alone asserting) that humans are the primary exemplars of personhood. Hallowell's term 'other-than-human

[11] Warrior 1995: 104–15.

person'[12] celebrates two facts but does not confuse them: First, it arises from animist engagement with a world that is full of persons, only some of whom are human; Secondly, it arises from an animist acknowledgment that humans' most intimate relationships are had with other humans. Perhaps rock persons might speak of 'other-than-rock persons' while tree persons might speak of 'other-than-tree persons'. Such phrases, if unwieldy, are not intended to privilege any class of person but draw attention to degrees of relationality.

It may be necessary to note, forcefully, that in the following discussion the terms 'person' and 'other-than-human person' are *not* intended to replace words like 'spirit' or 'deity'. They are not references to any putative 'greater than human' or 'supernatural' beings unless this is specified in some other way. Animists *may* acknowledge the existence and even presence of deities or discarnate persons (if that is what 'spirits' means), but their personhood is a more general fact. Particular groups of animists speak of living within diverse communities of persons of many species or 'nations'. It is possible, but rare, to recognise power, prestige or wisdom only among particular species (e.g. deities, rocks or trees). While some species may have abilities beyond that of their neighbours, most often particular groups within every species are considered to hold and/or disseminate power or wisdom. The most common example of such persons must be elders: long lived persons of whatever variety.

All this being so, animists live a theory of personhood and selfhood that radically challenges the dominant point of view which is that of modernity. If intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire are not *human* characteristics that might be mistakenly projected on to 'non-humans', but are shared by humans with all other kinds of persons, then animisms promise to contribute significantly to a variety of debates that will be of interest to a host of heirs, prisoners, customers, clients and scholars of Western worldviews. For example, they might posit a different relationship between mind and matter, consciousness and physicality, culture and nature than that enshrined in Cartesian dualism. As Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing write,

> to reunite the body, the sensual, acting, feeling, emotive aspects of self, with the thinking, language-knowing self creates havoc with most modernist versions of culture. As should only be expected, debates today on the implications of a more phenomenological approach to culture for the future development of anthropology have a certain edge, a passion and often a political as well as academic challenge to them.[13]

[12] Hallowell 1960.
[13] Rapport and Overing 2000: 97. Also see Watson and Williams 2003.

This seems true not only of culture, but also of knowledge, person, nature, performance and other terms found in academic critical vocabularies. Equally it seems applicable not only to anthropology but to other ethnological and phenomenological disciplines, as well as to philosophers and scientists interested in consciousness, embodiment and other issues. Placing humans within a community of persons rather than at its peak challenges claims to human uniqueness (whether expressed in religious, 'creationist', or scientific, 'evolutionist', discourse).

8

SPIRITS, POWERS, CREATORS AND SOULS

Spirits and souls are central to Tylor's definition of animism. The chief problem with these words is that they suggest a single kind of being or thing. Too often they are used as if everyone knows what they mean and agrees that they refer to the same kind of person. Only if 'soul' or 'spirit' were used in the same way that 'animal' is used (i.e. as a diversity that demands further labels such as mammal or marsupial, aardvark or anaconda, human or hippocampus, domesticated or wild), could the term be at all helpful. That is, just as 'animal' refers to a diversity of beings, so a wide variety of other names are necessary if 'spirit' or 'soul' are to do justice to the diversity to which they refer. It might be that many cultures understand that in addition to material embodiment each person has, or is, something that enlivens, individuates and socialises them. It might be that many cultures understand that in addition to the classes of mammals, fish, birds and so on, the world is also inhabited by a variety of more elusive, more-or-less welcome or unwelcome, persons who may in some cases have no material form or, conversely, be able to shift easily and swiftly between various apparent physical manifestations. But the diversity labelled by these names is likely to include vastly different local ecologies, communities and persons/beings. Not only are African elephants different from Indian elephants, but there are no surviving indigenous elephants on other continents. Just so, the rock dwelling 'little people' known to the Mi'kmaq bands of America's eastern seaboard may be very different to those known in the British Isles.

In fact the clustering of animals is itself only one cultural construct and need not be determinative for all people. Although it seems natural to class living beings as animals, fish, birds and so on, this privileging of particular physical or behavioural features is no more than an aspect of the evolution of Western habits of seeing the world. By way of contrast, while those Chewong who speak Malay might appreciate what Malays mean by their term for animals, *binantang*, they see no need to adopt the concept into their own language. Instead they continue to 'think in terms of a series of species-grounded conscious and unconscious beings each with a different shape and adhering to their own particular social and—in the case of conscious beings—moral codes'.[1] The word Chewong use for conscious persons is *ruwai* which, Signe Howell says,

[1] Howell 1996: 131.

...is usually translated as 'soul'. I find this both too narrow and too imprecise to denote the meanings that the Chewong attribute to the word. Personage is the closest I can come to it in English.[2]

Perhaps 'person' is more straightforward. At any rate, thinking with the Chewong challenges assumptions often carried by 'soul' and 'spirit'.

The following section introduces some of the other-than-human persons who are often considered mythological or folkloric by Western secularists. Whether this marginalisation or negation of the reality of such persons is really empirical is questionable from the point of view of many animists. Two classes of 'spirit' require attention in sections of their own: a brief reprise of some significant facts about ancestors and a more detailed discussion of creators may permit further clarity about the distinctiveness and comparability of animism among other ways of being human. Having noted the diversity clustered under the heading 'spirits', the chapter returns to the question of whether some animists might, after all, engage with sources of power (conceived of as something more like electrical than social force). The chapter ends with a discussion of the utility of the word 'souls' with reference to the diversity of putative aspects of personhood.

Faeries and other spirits

Particular animists might engage, or attempt to avoid, a diversity of other-than-human persons whose existence is doubted by modern rationalists and marginalised as either mythological or folkloric by many. A complete list would probably be encyclopaedic and almost certainly misleading. Those British Pagans whose experience suggests that ancestral and traditional stories convey truth about such elusive persons talk about a community almost as diverse as that labelled 'animals'. While some may use 'faerie folk' as a general label (somewhat like the word 'spirit'), they typically distinguish between the Sidhe, elves, dwarves, boggarts, trolls, elementals, leprechauns, fenodyre, faeries themselves and various others. The habitats and habits, sociality or enmity of these persons varies enormously. It is important to know who you meet. Viveiros de Castro takes most of seven pages just to list the main categories of spirits known to the Araweté.[3] These include celestial, underworld, terrestrial and aquatic beings, who act towards humans and other persons in ways that vary from the hostility of consumption to the sociality of sharing songs. Some aid the growth of crops and release prey animals for hunters, others aggress against pregnant women, children and anyone else. Some devour the dead, others resuscitate them; some cause illness,

[2] Howell 1996: 143 n. 2.

[3] Viveiros de Castro 1992: 76–83.

others heal. Similar diversities are clear everywhere once 'spirits' or even 'persons' is expounded upon in more detail.

It is not only that animists, like other religionists, 'believe' in a diversity of beings that are, or seem, alien to the experience of others. There are also various ways and contexts in which such persons are encountered. Furthermore there are diverse forms of discourse, and contexts for discoursing, about such persons. It is not at all true that all are equally inhabitants of the same kinds of myths so that one could exchange the names and alter some of the more salient habits but otherwise tell the same tale. If hedgehogs do not fulfil the same function in their habitat and wider community as herons might, and if they do not act or respond equivalently, then it is at least unlikely that elves and boggarts will be or act the same. Nor is it obvious that they should appear in the same narratives. In fact, even the above list of other-than-humans known to Pagans omits to mention the fact that those named come from quite different kinds of Paganism: some are recognisable from Celtic literatures, others from Norse sources and others from more recent Manx and Northumbrian popular tradition. Similarly, Viveiros de Castro's list collates persons named only by particular shamans with those known to all shamans and some known to all Araweté.

Encounters with such persons are thus fairly specific. Elementals may be invoked (greeted and invited to participate) in most Pagan ceremonies. They are associated with the four cardinal directions and winds. Their presence may be invited by the touching of the ground (earth), wafting of incense smoke or bubbles (air), lighting of a candle (fire), and pouring of water (water). Or they may make themselves known in more dramatic and idiosyncratic ways, e.g. a sudden breeze that extinguishes a candle or fans a fire. The presence of elves may be known by the occurrence of trickery or deviousness, or the onset of illness. Some Pagans, whose understanding is formed by more recent and more romantic notions of who the elves are and what they might do, might invite the company of elves. Perhaps they are fortunate and other-than-elves accept their invitation and provide protection, or perhaps people just do not recognise the resulting harm as the work of elves. Like those Araweté who annoy or merely attract the attention of various Amazonian 'spirits', they might benefit from the attentions of shamans.

Meanwhile various 'spirits' may be encountered in dramatic performances. Those who dance as the Green Man, Kachinas or the Orishas *are* those they represent. Human performers become the vehicle in/as which these other-than-human persons make themselves present. Sometimes this happens through possession—whether or not it is welcomed, invited or induced. Humans make themselves available, 'spirits' take opportunities.

Other beings are available for conversation with and/or consultation by those prepared for it. Barry Patterson's guide to the 'art of conversation with the *genius loci*' makes available wisdom born of experiential encounters with various forest, mountain and sacred-site persons.[4] Other persons are encountered in the act of giving and receiving gifts. In Newfoundland, after a brief and somewhat strained conversation about multi-cultural understandings about 'rock people', my conversation partner walked briskly to the edge of a promontory that faced across a bend in the river to a rock outcrop and spoke (quite privately) to those who might have been offended had our conversation continued without explicitly including them. His offering of tobacco and kinnikinnick seemed to satisfy him and the rock people. Thus he returned to beside the sacred fire, making another gift, and continued our conversation. But now he was using a circumlocution 'little people' that I recognised from Pagan discourse. While some would mistake this for a description (of the kind that led to Victorian and Edwardian fantasies about the diminutive size of faeries), it is better understood as a traditionally polite avoidance of naming. It either avoids inviting the presence of the un-welcome or it avoids distracting those who would rather not be bothered by our conversations. I cannot be certain that the particular circumlocution 'little people' was learnt by Newfoundland Mi'kmaq from the linguistic and cultural habits of Irish immigrants, but I am certain that this matters very little. The phrase resonates well with unmistakable elements of wider Algonkian culture. Among the more dramatic avoidance mechanisms among traditional Ojibwe, for example, is the requirement that certain stories should only be told when there is ice on the lakes. Other-than-human persons may be powerful, but they may not be friendly, helpful or welcome.[5]

The most important point about these beings is that they do not necessarily attract a lot of attention in, and only rarely become central to, the everyday life and pursuits of animists. Their existence may well be taken for granted and unremarkable—literally, not remarked upon—and their presence, at least in particular places at particular times is casually expected. Gifts may certainly be made and even required. Some of these are specific to the kind of persons encountered: Viveiros de Castro's list of 'spirits' includes notes about the kind of food or drink which they desire or require. But this showing of respect by conventional means may be no more than one would expect in similar encounters between human persons. Or, in the case of animists, in the encounter between a human and a significant tree or animal person. Extraordinary encounters and experiences may be considered to validate intuitions, expectations and understandings about the nature of the world, but they are not sought after as the *primary* focus of

[4] Patterson 1998.

[5] Cf. Pratchett 1993: 169–70.

animism. Indeed encounters with some such persons require the labour of shamans and are generally unwelcome. Even more generally, however, animism—which embeds the living of life within a richly diverse community of life—certainly privileges some relationships as being more important than others. These privileged relationships are usually those of everyday life supported by the occasional extraordinary encounters with more powerful persons who enhance the ability to continue the everyday round.[6] This may be clarified by a consideration of ancestors and the attention paid to them by animists—especially since, unlike the 'little people', it is usually important to name ancestors.

Ancestors

Among the persons of some importance to many people are ancestors. The least interesting and least generative fact about ancestors is that they have died. Not all those who die become ancestors. Even in cultures that expect people who die to continue living in some sense, it is not always thought that everyone becomes an ancestor. Death may be democratic in that one out of one people dies, but what happens after death may continue the social diversities established in pre-mortem life. A fool who dies may not become greatly revered after death: may not be included among the ancestors. Within slave owning societies, a slave who dies may gain no extra power or wisdom merely by dying. An alleged witch or malefactor who dies may still be feared or hated after death. Much of this is made evident in the giving of gifts and other expressions of respect: no-one asks dead slaves to give gifts or to protect the community that enslaved them. This is not to say that the liberated descendents of deceased slaves may not greatly revere those who, although victimised, gifted survivance and life to their descendants. More important, in those cultures in which they are significant, the term 'ancestors' is most often used to refer to specific, named individuals and not merely to some amorphous and vague conglomeration of all who have died. Merely genealogical interest is not enough, it can be vitally important to know and use the names of ancestors in addressing them. To be an ancestor is to continue relating.

None of this is to say that dead persons are understood and treated in the same way everywhere. Ancestors *may* be venerated as powerful persons to whom gifts ought to be given and from whom requests can be asked. Maori oratory, for example, makes it clear that ancestors are important members of the human community, participating in ceremonies in which locals and visitors engage. The presence of ancestors in such encounters is explicitly recognised in various forms—visible and invisible—e.g. as meeting houses and as presences among

[6] See Blain 2000.

those who walk on to *marae*. In Indonesia the Aruese are sometimes gifted with sea cucumbers and other produce from their 'ancestors' yard' (the sea surrounding their islands), but sometimes—e.g. when they have acted like annoyingly noisy children—they are sent away by 'enormous waves and strong winds (which are the ancestors' grandchildren)'.[7] It is intriguing to consider what kind of kinship this might imply between the waves, winds and islanders, but certainly these ancestors sometimes become impatient with their descendents. Similarly at the festival that marks the beginning of winter, Samhain, Pagans invite their dead to be present. Although they address the dead respectfully Pagans often play with their culture's wider stereotypical fear of the dead. Since the festival coincides with Halloween a number of possibilities for such carnivalesque performances are available, but Pagans frequently say 'why should I fear the dead when my own are among them?' Here the dead are not only respected but potential sources of knowledge and power. However, even where the dead are respected they might not be informative, or their relationships with the living may be circumscribed. On meeting her (dead) grandfather and great-grandfather while 'Dreaming' Mabel McKay asked,

'Well, what am I supposed to do?'
The old man laughed. 'Nothing. I can't tell you what to do. That's your spirit's job. I just want to offer you a gift...'[8]

While these examples variously illustrate the continuity of intimate relationships with their ancestors, in Amazonia dead humans are separated from the living. Viveiros de Castro explains the sociological discontinuity between the living and the dead as arising from the difference

...made by the body and precisely not by the spirit; death is a bodily catastrophe which prevails over the common 'animation' of the living and the dead... To be precise, being definitively separated from their bodies, the dead are not human. As spirits defined by their disjunction from a human body, the dead are logically attracted to the bodies of animals...[9]

Dead humans become spirits who become animals. Among the Wari', they give themselves to hunters as white-lipped peccaries, are identified by shamans, and feed their family with their new bodies, and then return as spirits to incarnate as yet another peccary.[10]

An even greater contrast is provided by the Ju/'hoansi San in the Kalahari, among whom the dead were regularly made unwelcome. They were not alone: the creator too was disliked because '[a]t death', the creator, ↑Gao N!a, transformed humans

[7] Osseweijer 2000: 68.
[8] Sarris 1994: 80–1.
[9] Viveiros de Castro 1998: 482.
[10] Conklin 2001: 206–7. See chapter 10.

...into the *//gauwasi*, the spiteful deceased whom he used to capriciously spread dissent, disease and death among humans by having them shoot tiny, invisible arrows into the bodies of humans when they were spying on them. As also did //Gauwa [either a lower God or another, trickster, manifestation of the creator].[11]

At least until their forced settlement and alterations to their culture, the Ju/'hoansi regularly held healing ceremonies that were necessary because of the unpleasantness of deities and ancestors towards humans.

Ancestors may be thought to exist not only in their own 'spirit' or 'supernatural' domain, and as discrete individuals, but may be celebrated as intimately present in their descendents among current and succeeding generations. George Tinker quotes the 'old saying attributed to Seattle: "There is no death; only a change of worlds" '. But he continues,

More important, in terms of our day-to-day existence in Indian communities throughout North America, we understand that our ancestors continue to live in very real ways. This happens in two important ways. First of all, they continue to live in a spirit world where we hope to join them at the end of our life here. But just as important, these ancestors continue to live in us, both in our memories and in our physical lives as we continue to eat the produce of the earth to which they have returned in one way or another.[12]

Ancestors might also be consumed in other modes of existence, e.g. as self sacrificing prey animals who return (over and over again) to feed their descendents with their own ever-renewable flesh.[13]

Ancestors are present in their people and in other forms of their own self-expression. They are far from un-touchable, supernatural or metaphysical. Typically they are known, named, addressed and heeded. If ancestors are spirits, 'spirits' include people who are often quite eloquent in expressing themselves as agents implicated in the continuing evolution of the community of life. If ancestors are spirits, then the term 'spirits' needs to be understood in ways that disconnect it from associations with disembodied or non-material realities. Ancestors, and other spirits, are very much part of the world of ordinary human and other-than-human personal interests. They *may* be seen less often than their descendents, but they are not necessarily immaterial. Whether as peccaries or givers of gifts, carved houses or venerated bones, healers or protectors, feared bringers of sickness and watchers of propriety, ancestors define 'spirit' not as 'spiritual' disincarnation, but as transformed agency and activity.

[11] Platvoet 2000: 127.
[12] Tinker 1998: 152.
[13] See chapter 10.