Animism and Personal Religion in Southeast Asia

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During the last decade of the twentieth century the term animism was unexpectedly reintroduced within new overlapping theoretical models by authors working in various parts of the world (South America, India, the Circumpolar region). These models revitalized the concept of ‘animism’, originally developed by Edward Burnet Tylor (1871) in novel directions without any of the negative and evolutionary connotations originally attached to it. In the ‘New Animism’ model, animism is understood to be a relational ontology in which the environment is teeming with diverse agents, socially interacting with each other (Bird-David 1999, 2006, Ingold 2000 chapter 7, 2006, Hornborg 2006:27, Descola 2013). These agents or subjects share what Descola (2006) calls an ‘interiority’, which in other academic discourses is sometimes called soul/spirit. A further concept developed by Viveiros de Castro is ‘perspectivism’ (De Castro 1999, 2004, 2012). In this related model of animist-ontology, different species have their own perspective or nature. Through this perspective the species sees itself in the way humans see themselves, and see humans in the way humans see animals (De Castro 1998). The New Animism is also seen by some (Ingold 2006, Hornborg 2006) to provide a new mode of relational thinking about the
environment. This line of thought is reflected in Tim Ingold’s short theoretical postscript in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, where he suggests that the ‘ism’ in animism is suggestive of rigidity and that it would be better to use the term ‘animic’, which provides a sense of openness within a world that is in process (305).

The new animism (or animic) models have rarely been applied to the Southeast Asian region which has, however, always provided case examples of animism (although see Tsintjilonis 2004). The focus of the two books under review is on human-spirit inter-relations and ritual practices that actualize those relations, and they both provide ethnographic data that allow us to explore the new animism models. Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger’s edited book *Animism in Southeast Asia* is an attempt by a number of anthropologists at exploring the new animism models in relation to the Southeast Asian region’s diverse spirit-beliefs and practices. It focuses on a number of themes, particularly on sacrifice and offerings, as well as landscapes and perspectival inversions. This study is very important for those working on spirit-related topics. Much of the ethnographic data and themes presented in this volume should be familiar to anthropologists working on the region but it is precisely because of this that the book, which offers novel perspectives on these themes, will prove useful.

Kees Buijs’ *Personal Religion and Magic in Mamasa* is a detailed ethnography mainly focusing on different forms of sacrifices and offerings, which the Mamasa Toraja give to the celestial and spirit beings as well as other ritual practices carried out for personal protection and well-being. Buijs’ account emerges from an anthropological tradition familiar to those who were trained by Reimar Schefold at Leiden University (during the 1990s and the first decade of the millennium). Although Buijs’ ethnographic descriptions have general similarities with some of those presented in Århem and Sprenger’s book, he ignores the recent debates on animism, which the latter book addresses. Buijs’ main theoretical point is to show that the religious and magical thought of the Toraja is rational within the context of the culture that practices it, and in his conclusion he makes a comparison of Toraja thought and practice with the rationality of Science.

In Århem’s first of three contributions to *Animism in Southeast Asia*, entitled ‘Southeast Asian Animism in Context’, he points out that the new animism model was developed out of ethnographic material drawn from egalitarian hunting societies. However, in Southeast Asia there is an animist social continuum ranging from egalitarian societies, ranked societies, and hierarchical societies. In the more ranked and hierarchical societies, the relationship between ‘interiorities’ is conceived in more vertical terms. Århem calls this ‘vertical animism’ all beings are integrated by a principle of asymmetric inter-subjectivity