

ANIMATISM

Authored by
mohammad looti

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ANIMATISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Anthropology of Religion, Religious Studies, Sociology

1. Core Definition and Distinction

Animatism is a philosophical and anthropological concept proposing that the natural world, encompassing both living organisms and inanimate objects, is pervaded by an impersonal, supernatural force or power. This concept serves to categorize belief systems focused on efficacy and power residing within the environment. Unlike Animism, which posits the presence of individualized spiritual beings or souls within objects, animatism describes a diffused, non-personalized energy or life-force that can inhabit or affect things, people, or events. This force is often conceived of as neutral in moral terms, becoming beneficial or dangerous depending on how it is handled or accumulated. The primary function of this concept is to explain unusual efficacy, success, power, or luck observed in the environment or among individuals, providing a foundational explanation for early religious thought and practice.

The core essence of animatism lies in the belief in **mana**--a term often borrowed from Melanesian cultures, which encapsulates this potent, non-material power, though the concept itself is widespread globally. This power is not necessarily conscious, sentient, or focused on specific goals; rather, it is a raw, supernatural efficacy that adheres to certain objects or individuals, making them sacred, powerful, or taboo. For instance, a particularly effective weapon or a remarkably successful chief might be said to possess a great deal of this force. The anthropological utility of animatism stems from its ability to categorize and understand belief systems that focus on power dynamics and the ritual manipulation of this force, rather than direct communication with personalized deities or spirits.

Anthropologists utilize the concept of animatism to distinguish between various types of religious experience. While animism sees the world populated by beings similar to human souls or spirits--personalized entities that require supplication or worship--animatism sees the world charged with an impersonal current that requires careful management and ritual control. This distinction was crucial for early evolutionary models of religion, which often sought to place animatism as a potentially earlier, more rudimentary stage of religious thought, preceding the intellectualization necessary for individualized spirit worship (Animism) and, ultimately, monotheism.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Animatism** was formally introduced into anthropological discourse by the British anthropologist Robert Ranulph Marett (1866-1943) in his 1900 presidential address to the Folklore Society, later published as *Pre-Animistic Religion*. Marett proposed animatism as a category of

religious belief that he argued predated Edward Burnett Tylor's well-established theory of Animism. Tylor had argued that the origin of religion lay in humanity's attempt to rationally explain phenomena like dreams, trances, and death, leading to the logical concept of the soul (*anima*). Marett, however, felt that Tylor's intellectualist approach missed the affective, emotional, and practical roots of religious impulse.

Marett suggested that the earliest forms of religious expression were not intellectual explanations but emotional responses--specifically, a feeling of "awe" or "wonder" (the *numinous*) provoked by powerful, unusual, or striking aspects of nature, whether they were storm clouds, massive rocks, or charismatic leaders. This emotional reaction was subsequently translated into the belief that a diffused, impersonal force permeated these objects. Marett argued that humans would first react emotionally to the presence of an impersonal power before developing the complex intellectual apparatus required to conceive of individualized spirits. Therefore, animatism represented a "pre-animistic" stage, rooted in immediate experience and emotion, focusing on the dynamic nature of power itself.

The concept gained significant traction during the early 20th century as part of the broader intellectual search for the "origin" of religion. It provided a powerful alternative to Tylor's stringent focus on intellectual origins, appealing to scholars who emphasized the role of ritual, emotion, and social context over pure cognition. Marett's theory was heavily influenced by ethnological accounts of Oceanic and Native American cultures, particularly the widespread concept of **mana**, which provided the archetypal example of this impersonal, supernatural efficacy that could be acquired, lost, or transferred, rather than begged or prayed for from a conscious being.

3. Key Characteristics and Conceptual Components

The defining characteristic of animatism is the belief in a generalized, ubiquitous supernatural force rather than localized, personalized entities. This force possesses several recognizable components that distinguish it from other forms of religious belief, particularly those involving personalized gods or ancestral spirits. Firstly, the force is typically **impersonal and non-moral**. It operates like a cosmic battery charge; it is simply power or efficacy. It is not inherently good or evil, holy or profane, but acquires moral valence only through its application by human actors or the context in which it manifests. The focus is on effectiveness and potency, independent of personality or will.

Secondly, animatistic power is characteristically **transmissible and fluctuating**. It can be accumulated through ritual action, inheritance, or contact with powerful objects or persons, and it can be lost through inappropriate behavior, ritual failure, or defeat. A person's success in hunting, warfare, or diplomacy is often interpreted as direct evidence of their high level of this force. The accumulation and maintenance of this transmissible power explains the importance of social and religious taboos (**tapu**), as restrictions are necessary to protect the individual or object possessing

the high concentration of the force from being diminished or from inflicting unintended harm on others.

Thirdly, the power is often viewed as **quantifiable and evidential**, though not scientifically. While it cannot be seen or weighed in a modern sense, its presence is readily apparent in its effects--the speed of a canoe, the fertility of a field, or the potency of a shaman's healing ability. Religious specialists in animatistic systems are essentially technicians or managers of this power, focusing on practical, ritual practices designed to attract, harness, contain, or redirect the force, often through specific incantations, dances, or sacrifices aimed at increasing efficacy rather than appeasing a conscious, judging being.

4. The Paradigm of Mana and Tapu

The most famous example and anthropological foundation for the concept of animatism comes from the Polynesian and Melanesian concepts of **Mana** and **Tapu**. Mana is understood as the active, effective element--the pervasive supernatural power--while Tapu (taboo) is the negative, restrictive element necessary to manage Mana. This dualistic relationship illustrates the central practical concerns of animatism in action, where the supernatural is primarily a matter of management and regulation.

Mana is understood as the underlying cause of all outstanding achievement or extraordinary phenomena. If a chief is unusually successful in battle or possesses extraordinary political charisma, it is because he has great Mana, perhaps inherited or acquired through successful ritual. If a piece of land yields an exceptional harvest, the land is infused with Mana. The pursuit of Mana, therefore, drives much ritual behavior, as individuals seek to increase their own stores of this power, often through secrecy, specific rites, or the possession of consecrated objects. This concept is fundamentally utilitarian, providing a dynamic explanation for success and failure in everyday life based on the distribution of invisible power.

Conversely, Tapu acts as a necessary protective mechanism, signifying that an object or person is highly charged with Mana and is therefore dangerous to interact with casually. To violate a taboo is to risk immediate spiritual or physical contamination, depletion, or destruction by the overwhelming power. A king, for example, might be subject to strict taboos regarding who can touch him or what words he can hear, not necessarily because he is a personalized deity, but because his concentration of Mana is so high that ordinary contact would be catastrophic. The interplay between Mana (power) and Tapu (restriction) demonstrates a complex, early form of religious regulation centered entirely around the systematic management of impersonal forces.

5. Applications in Comparative Religion

While the term originated to describe Oceanic religions, the animatistic principle has been applied

broadly in comparative religion and anthropology to explain similar concepts across diverse cultures worldwide. In various Native American traditions, terms such as **Orenda** (Iroquois) or **Wakan** (Sioux) describe a similar kind of pervasive, non-personalized supernatural energy or mystery that infuses the natural world. Orenda, for example, refers to the magical power inherent in objects or persons, which can be manipulated or invoked for success in activities like hunting or warfare, mirroring the functional definition of Mana.

Furthermore, elements of animatistic thought can be observed even within major world religions typically classified as Animistic or Theistic. For example, the pervasive presence of **Baraka** in certain Islamic mystical traditions, representing a sacred blessing or charismatic power that flows from holy persons, texts, or places, often operates more like an impersonal, transferable force than a specific spirit's personalized will. Similarly, early Taoist concepts of **Qi** (life force) or philosophical concepts of fate or cosmic energy in classical traditions sometimes echo the structural dynamics of animatism, emphasizing unseen forces that determine outcomes independent of individualized spiritual intervention.

The broad application of animatism across cultural boundaries served an important function for early anthropologists: it provided a universal, seemingly simple category to house those religious phenomena that did not fit neatly into the established intellectualist models of spirit worship (Animism) or formalized deity worship (Theism). By focusing on the tangible concept of efficacy and power, it allowed scholars to look beyond explicit theology and examine the practical, ritualistic management of supernatural influence in everyday life.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its early influence, the concept of animatism, particularly as articulated by Marett, faced significant academic critique, leading to its diminished role in modern anthropological theory. The primary criticism centers on its foundation in **evolutionary reductionism**. By proposing animatism as a mandatory "pre-animistic" stage, Marett attempted to organize diverse cultural beliefs onto a single, linear progression (e.g., Emotion > Animatism > Animism > Theism). This unilinear approach has been largely rejected by contemporary cultural anthropologists who recognize the complexity, syncretism, and non-linear development of religious systems, noting that many societies jump stages or combine elements deemed chronologically separate.

A second major methodological critique relates to the **imposition of foreign, generalized categories**. Critics argue that Marett and others extracted specific indigenous terms like *mana*, divorced them from their complex socio-cultural context, and then universalized them as evidence of a primitive, global stage of religion. Ethnographic studies often reveal that cultures simultaneously hold belief in personalized spirits (animism) and belief in impersonal forces (animatism), suggesting that they are complementary aspects of religious thought used for different

social or environmental explanations, rather than sequential stages. The attempt to rigidly separate these two categories often misrepresents the holistic reality of indigenous cosmologies and belief practices.

Furthermore, critics also point out the difficulty of empirically defining the scope of animatism. Concepts like *mana* are inherently vague and elastic, used by practitioners to explain everything from good weather to political authority. Attempting to isolate this generalized concept as the singular "root" of religion risks reducing complex ritual and social structures simply to the desire to acquire an abstract, invisible power, thereby overlooking the moral, political, and social functions that these beliefs serve within the community. Modern anthropology tends to favor functionalist or interpretive approaches that focus on how these beliefs operate within their specific cultural frameworks, rather than seeking simplistic universal origins.

7. Further Reading

[Robert R. Marett \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Animism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Animatism \(Britannica\)](#)