ANIMATED ENVIRONMENT
"Animism" and the Environment Revisited

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1. Preamble

Some of my earliest memories of religious behaviour involve my grandmother whom I seemed to have followed around in loving docility for much of my early formative years ... and a large spherical stone, which we would both meticulously and unfailingly wash and apply red ash and turmeric paste to every Friday.[1] This 'stone,' was placed next to other sculpted images of the more popular and recognizable Hindu Goddesses in full anthropomorphic form, all of whom were housed in a small shrine temple space in our garden. Although very much the typical child with an overly interrogative mind that sought to analyse and sometimes annoyingly dissect many aspects of life that seemed opaque to a ten year old ... I never questioned my grandmother as to why we had this ritual 'bathing' and 'anointing' of a stone. It was rather experienced on emotional and cognitive levels, as being very natural, and quite the normal thing to do. I seemed to 'know' instinctively that the stone was in some way 'animated' with 'something,' and that knowing sufficed for me.

2. Introduction

This paper is an examination of the notion of animism and environmental relationality, and probes the plausibility of the resonance of 'animism' and the so called 'animistic practices' within a contemporary environmental consciousness. The revival of both theoretical and ethnographic work on animism by scholars such as Bird-David et al[2] and Descola[3] and the

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[1]'Fridays' are considered especially auspicious in the worship of the Feminine Goddess in much of the polyvocal Hindu tradition.

[2]Bird-David, N. and D. Naveh, "Relational Epistemology, Immediacy, and Conservation: Or, What Do the Nayaka Try to Conserve?" *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 2, 1, 2008, 55-73.

[3]Philippe Descola, *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia:* Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1994.

development of perspectivism[4] by Viveiros de Castro, which is an approach to indigenous Amerindian cosmological notions,[5] reveal substantive departure from the orthodox structuralist vocabularies, and understandings that sought to polarize nature and culture into neat binaries. Terence Turner states that 'animism' and 'perspectivism' represent two responses from the structuralist tradition, to what he sees as a theoretical crisis of structuralism[6] that is outdated in terms of recent ethnographies, or recent analyses of 'old' ethnographies. For me then, this intellectual milieu creates the space for a critical re-engagement with the notion of animism and what it may offer to contemporary environmental perspectives that seek to collapse and make more permeable, the living and non-living divide between us and the (inanimate environment).

While this is in large part, an analytical and theoretical discussion on animism and environment, it holds audience with ethnographic illustrations from the fieldwork of anthropologist Nurit Bird-David's work[7] with the South Indian community of the forest dwelling hunter-gatherer Nayaka, and their relationship to their environment. It also includes the shared stories of a small sample of South African grandmothers whose narratives also speak about a particular way of relating to the environment. Finally, the paper proposes 'perspectival edges' or the blurring of the edges where two perspectives or insights, in this case the perspective of animism and that of relational self, 'meet.' These would be spaces where insights and practices can be carried across from animism and feed into contemporary notions of *relating* to the environment.

It was perhaps a provocative personal starting point that my own grandmother and the stone exist alongside each other in my particular landscape of 'memory of religion and environment', epitomized in the ritualized stone. For while the grandmother represents the intergenerational transfer of religious knowledge and religious behaviour,

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[4]Perspectivism as a philosophical position asserts that that there can be no 'perspective free' or 'interpretation free', objective reality.

[5]The Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro developed Amazonian Perspectivism.

[6]Terence Turner, 'Perspectivism in the Crisis of Late Structuralism: A Critical Engagement,"http://www.newstudiesonshamanism.com/wpcontent/uploads/2011/01/PERSPECTIVISMANIMISM.doc. Accessed online 5 May 2011.

[7]Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology*, 40, S1, special issue on "Culture – A Second Chance?" 1999, 67-91.

from her through to me, the stone represents my earliest engagement with both religion and environment, and on a ritual and cognitive level, religious behaviour that has come to be termed as being 'animistic.'

It was one of my earliest reflective experiences with the environment being seen and experienced as 'being alive.' It was additionally an experience different from the Piaget-type psychological animism or enlivened environment experiences that very young children, all necessarily transit through. This however, was an introspective experience of the stone being much more than a physical stone, and a palpable experience of it being inhabited by some kind of 'life' and of there being a permeable boundary between me and the 'stone'. And although I had not the vocabulary at the time, the remembered sense towards the stone was one of religious communion rather than worship.

It was a stone yes… but it was also much more than just a stone, and very different from other such stones lying around. Critics with a more unilineal comprehension of a monotheistic God (blind to the richness of polyvocal theisms) or scholars with a modernistic 'way of knowing' (blind to the fluid nature of constructivist realities), may well refer to this as being *infantile* in terms of *both* religious and epistemological sophistication. Far from being either though, these early recollections are also an early recollection of a rich understanding of the environment as something that was alive with a power and of being and feeling *related* to this power. It was many years later, in the lectures in 'Comparative Religion,' or what was then termed as 'Science of Religion' that I was formally (re)introduced to the phenomena. It was now labelled within the lexicon of early anthropological work in religion, as animism in the schema of 'primitive' or the more politically correct terminology of, 'pre-industrial' religions and religious behaviour. Drawing from the work of the perceived early benchmark thinkers in anthropology, especially Edward Burnet Tylor, it was taught as man's (sic) childlike grasp of understanding the universe, and as being religiously and epistemologically primitive. This however, was far removed from my own understanding.

3. Animism: Not So Unsophisticated

Nurit Bird-David's fieldwork with the hunter-gatherer *Nayaka* 'tribe' provides the rich ethnographic material for her rather trenchant critique in the Journal *Current Anthropology,* of the notion of animism being labelled as both a 'simple religion' and as a 'failed epistemology.' The *kattu* or forest dwelling Nayaka who opportunistically practise both nomadism and

sedentism in South India, are part of the Dravidian 'stock' of people. As a descendant of South Indian Dravidian extraction myself, I would trace some distant (yet *not* unilineal) lineage back to the Dravidian group. Bird-David's re-understanding and discussion of animism as relational epistemology, and my own contemporary lived experience and memories of aspects of animistic thought and behaviour, prompt my engagement with Bird-David's exceptional discussion.

The accusation (in much of early anthropological work) of *any* religion being *primitive*, and of animism (even in *recent* anthropological and sociological writings) being but a *primitive* form of religious understanding and articulation infuriates me on so many levels. The word 'primitive' is one that featured in much of early anthropological writings and the work of colonial missionaries on which much of the early 'armchair'[8] anthropology was based and is not considered appropriate in these contexts. As a scholar with roots in Comparative Religion, this kind of scaffold-type cataloguing of people's realities, smacks to me, of cultural imperialism. As someone who sees herself as something of a feminist, this kind of labelling screams of a Foucauldian taxonomic 'disciplining' of the religious realities of marginalized groups. And as an academic who is intellectually sustained within contemporary anthropology, that kind of classification is scorned as hegemonic control. To me it is not so much a matter of identifying a semantic or labelling alternative, as a simple matter of strongly disregarding pejorative and heavy connotative labels such as *'primitive'*.

This essay then is an opportunity to critically engage with some of the points that Bird-David raises in her paper. It is also an opportunity to visit and ethnographically engage with certain animistic practices in the South African context. Ultimately, it is a modest contribution at revisiting some of the ideas in animism and what it may offer to contemporary ways of relating to the environment in a more relational way. Nurit Bird-David herself journeys us through a retrospective anthropological discussion and intellectual genealogy of 'animism' in her essay. She discusses 'animism' from the time of its inception as a *concept* into the vocabulary of the early anthropologist Edward Burnet Tylor, in his 1871 work *Primitive Culture,* to the work of the sociologist Emile Durkheim, the later structuralist-anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (with his related work on totemism) and Evans-Pritchard (with his work in Azande magic). She asserts that the

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[8]'Armchair' anthropology is of course a reference to the so-called ethnographic writings of the early anthropologists who had spent no actual time in the field.

labelling of animism as a *religiously primitive* way of refracting and understanding the environment, was largely due to seeing 'animism,' both conceptually and behaviourally, through so called modernist lens. She points out that Tylor, "[O]ffered a situated perspective, limited by the time's ethnography and theory, and [as such] it should be studied in its context."[9]

I am in agreement with her thesis that animism presents the seeds of the possibility of conceptualizing and articulating a particular, relational way of looking at, and *being with* the environment. I am, of course, cognizant that there are heterogeneous animistic beliefs that are clearly demonstrated by the rich diversity of old and more recent ethnographic data, such as the fieldwork of Morten Pederson.[10] Bird-David's discussion is itself an application of the theory of animism within the ethnographic reality and understandings of *what exists* for Nayaka people in the context of particular villages in South India.[11] This paper attempts to probe further the possibility of a conversation between animism and contemporary relationality to the world. But what exactly is animism?

3. On Animism

Animistic beliefs, which are pan Asian and also part of the early religious understanding of many early North and South American communities, is embedded in the tapestry of the highly polysemic cultural and intellectual religious milieu of India, and in turn the Hindu diasporic communities, having reached by now the far reaches of Africa. In contemporary India, animistic beliefs sit comfortably alongside more seductive sounding, intellectually and religiously, notions of pantheism and monotheism. In etymological terms the word traces back to the Latin word *animismus* (as expounded by the German scholar Georg E. Stahl), and entered English currency in the work of the anthropologist, Edward Burnet Tylor.

In a volume of *Folklore* dated 1892(!), Stuart-Glennie describes 'animism' as an animation of nature by "souls."[12] The much (much!) more

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[9]Bird-David, "*Animism*' Revisited," 70.

[10]Morten A. Pedersen, "Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, 3 (2000), 411-427, 411.

[11]Martin D. Stringer, "Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of Our Discipline," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5, 4, 1999, 541-555, 553.

[12]J. S. Stuart-Glennie, "Queries as to Dr. Tylor's Views on Animism," *Folklore*, 3, 3, 1892, 289-307, 290.

recent paper by Stewart Guthrie[13] in *Current Anthropology* in the year 2000, is written a year after Bird-David's paper in 1999 and is entitled "On Animism." This paper, which is in part a response to Nurit Bird-David, accuses her of conflating understandings of the concept of animism and her unilineal presentation of Western (especially anthropological) discussions of animism.

Guthries's reading of animism, which he notes as being in current currency, is that of attributing "spirits to natural phenomena such as stones and trees."[14] Guthrie does admit (crucially one adds) that this is a form of religion, while Morten Pederson refers to animism, alongside totemism as analytic categories to be as part of the registry of "indigenous ontologies,"[15] within the repertoire of religious understandings. Pederson explains ontology in simple philosophic sense "as theories or understandings about what exists."[16] It is not the focus of this essay to venture into the contested terrain of what *religion* is, even within anthropological frameworks, because much like the notion of 'culture' there are a plethora of functionalist and structural, interpretative and symbolic, and constructivist and operational understandings of religion. Martin Springer in his essay "Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of our Discipline" states that "What is important for Tylor is that people think in terms of entities that are beyond empirical study (for which Tylor uses the shorthand of 'Spiritual Beings') and subsequently modify their behaviour in such a way, as to take these non empirical entities into account."[17] The infancy that Springer is referring here is of course to that of the disciplinary infancy of anthropology which formed the early repository of all our formulations about animism within the body of 'theories on religion.'

4. On Relationality

Both relationality or said differently, both *relativism* and *relationalism* are informed by postmodernism, while notions of relationalism are seen as also being synchronous with the landscape of religious beliefs and articulation. Relationality itself can be distinguished as 'strong' and 'weak.' 'Strong' or ontological relationality speaks to a mutually

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[13]Stewart Guthrie, "On Animism," *Current Anthropology* 41, 1 (2000), 106-107.
[14]Guthrie, "On Animism," 106.
[15]Pedersen, "Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies," 411.
[16]Pedersen, "Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies," 413.
[17]Stringer, "Rethinking Animism," 552.

constitutive relation. Identity is thus simultaneously individual, as a unique nexus of relations, and communal, because according to this perspective, 'things' have a shared being.[18]

Bauwens tells us that relational frameworks yield a "shared being," unique and mutually constituted nexus of situational and interpersonal contexts. Relational frameworks imply that we are, most vitally, already in community of beings, and must live this ontological relationality and social space as a 'space of relations.'[19] I have written elsewhere that this perspective, which speaks to a sense of interconnected-ness of everything, also puts the emphasis on *relationships* as being constitutive of social reality.[20] It was the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown who reminded us that "The human being as a person is a complex of social relationships."[21]

All of this sounds wonderfully enticing in the context of communality of 'people.' Discussions of relationality however, are complicated, or made all the more complex when we are referring relatedness to inanimate 'things,' like stones and mountains, 'things' that one does not usually think as being endowed with a "life or will," a "soul"[22] or "spirit."[23]

5. 'Animism' Revisited: *Relating to* the Environment

As pointed out, the impetus for engaging with the Bird-David's work is her examination of animism in the context of what such an understanding of the environment may bring to an epistemology of relationality. Especially exciting is the idea of bringing a so called 'old' understanding of the environment into contemporary ecological perception. According to Stringer, Bird-David views "animism not so much as a religion as an approach to the world."[24] Personally, for me, whether she views animism

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[18]Slife, Brent D. "Modern and Postmodern Value," Values in Christian Families: Do They Come from Unrecognized Idols? *Brigham Young University Studies*, 38, 2, 2002, 117 - 147. www.brentdslife.com//FamilyvaluesandRelationality. pdf. Online Accessed 25/10/2010.

[19]Michel Bauwens, "Introduction on Individuality, Relationality, and Collectivity: Primacy of Relationality" (2006) at p2pfoundation.net/Introduction_on_ Individuality, Relationality,_and_Collectivity. Online Accessed 25/10/2010.

[20]See Naidu Maheshvari, "Relationality as an Ethical Resource," in *Journal of Dharma* 35, 4 (2010), 355-368.

[21]A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses*, New York: Free Press, 1952, 21.

[22]E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, London: John Murray, 1871, 21.

[23]E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: University Press, 1965, 25.

[24]Stringer, "Rethinking Animism," 553.

in the context of her ethnographic field community, as *either* a religion *or* an approach to the world, is something of a moot point and is not in itself a concern. For within the context of the multivariant texture and multiple traditions that go by the generic label of *Hinduism*, the Hindu religion is very much, a way of life *and* an approach to the world. In a short comment-type paper, Guthrie et al.[25] claim that anthropomorphism or the interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics is commonplace in everyday mundane life, and universal in religion. It is especially evident in the Hindu traditions. According to Stringer,

> [T]he animistic approach, as represented by the people Bird-David studied, is based on the need to establish relationships beyond the human realm. Bird-David actually provides a very sophisticated and interesting discussion of the way in which relatedness is understood. She shows how this concept of relatedness easily can, and in some sense must, be seen to expand beyond the human realm to the natural and physical world.[26]

Thus, what is of importance here is that the concept of animism (contested as it may be and as heterogeneously understood within ethnographic examples) offers us a way of relating to the environment and to 'things' within the environment as if they were endowed with something animate.

6. Bird-David's Fieldwork with the Nayaka

The excerpt below is an example of Bird-David's ethnographic account of fieldwork with the egalitarian hunter-gatherer community of the Nayaka. While the Nayaka ethnography presents animistic beliefs in 'spirit beings' or *devaru*, ascribed to things such as stones as well as animals, the following is specific reference to the *devaru* seen in the form of stones.

> For example, one Nayaka woman, Devi (age 40), pointed to a particular stone standing next to several other similar stones on a small mud platform when suddenly "this *devaru* came towards her."
> Another man, Atti-Mathen (age 70), pointed to a stone standing next to the aforementioned one and said that his sister-in law had been sitting under a tree, resting during a foray, when suddenly "this *devaru* jumped onto her lap." The two women had brought the stone *devaru* back to their places "to live" with them. The particular

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[25]Stewart Guthrie, Joseph Agassi, et al., "A Cognitive Theory of Religion [and Comments and Reply]," *Current Anthropology*, 21. 2, 1980, 181-203, 181.

[26]Stringer, "Rethinking Animism," 553.

stones were *devaru* as they "came towards" and "jumped on" Nayaka. The many other stones in the area were not *devaru* but simply stones.[27]

This short excerpt gives us some insight as to how these stones are perceived by the Nayaka. Their behaviour towards these particular stones shows the recognition of a 'something,' a 'being' with a personality residing in the stone, and the stone is literally invited into their home space, and as Bird-David describes it, where the Nayaka accept the stone-*devaru* into fellowship. As Bird-David explains, to the Nayaka, the *devaru* are not 'spirits' nor are they 'supernatural beings.' David Bowen[28] points out that in Bird-David's "alternative approach," which is a reference to her particular exegete, the practical experience of the Nayaka, gives rise to animistic assumptions because, the understanding is that cognitive skills have developed in large part as aids to social interaction. This makes sense within the framework of Bird-David's discussion, where in reference to the *devaru*-stones, she tells us that regular engagement with these entities, results in a growing knowledge of their tendencies and quirks, and prompts the Nayaka into accepting them into fellowship. That entity, even if it is the wind or a tree, or in this case, a 'stone,' appears to reveal a sense of self through what becomes, for the human participant, at any rate, an ongoing conversation.[29]

'Animism' speaks of the recognition of a 'soul,' (or a 'personality' or 'relatedness') to that which empirically does not have one.[30] Bird-David tells us that relational epistemologies are performative, in the sense that their significance hinges on what they *do* rather than on what they represent. This means that they help position us in situations of relatedness, rather than merely represent a sense of relatedness or interconnectivity. In the vocabulary of the poststructuralist Judith Butler,[31] performativity could be understood as a kind of re-iterative act that helps to engender a 'static' understanding, in this case of the 'soul.' However, while to the social scientist this may be a kind of imputing and

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[27]Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited," 74.

[28]David Bowen, "When Stones Come to Life," http://findarticles.com /p/articles/mi_m1200/is_23_155/ai_55017618/pg_2/, online accessed 28/05/2011.

[29]Bowen, "When Stones come to Life," online accessed 28/05/2011.

[30]Stringer, "Rethinking Animism," 555.

[31]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (*Subversive Bodily Acts, IV Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions*), New York: Routledge, 1990, 179.

performativity in creating fictive realities, my understanding is that within the frame of emic understandings, the soul is understood as (already) residing in the object, and is not fictively imputed, but rather recognised and grasped as a 'reality' by the people. In other words the existential boundary between empirical *some*-things, and empirical *no*-things, is rendered permeable.

7. 'Animistic' Behaviour Revisited: Some Examples from South Africa

Presented below are some parts of the narratives of twelve South Indian (Dravidian) Tamil-speaking Hindu grandmothers[32] living in South Africa. These elderly participants, all over the age of seventy five, were approached, having been identified through family and friends. They were grandmothers, an early generation of practicing Hindus, who although part of the wider South African Neo-Hindu monotheistic or single-god tradition, also carried with them their 'older'[33] religious repertoire of beliefs and behaviours, aspects of 'village' Hinduism. Indeed, while engaged in doing Masters field-work in villages near the South Indian city of Madurai, I was privileged enough to visit many rural homes outside Madurai where more often than not, a simple 'anointed stone,' appeared to occupy the central shrine space.

These beliefs and indigenous practices would have been in turn, passed down to the grandmothers from their own mothers and fathers who would have arrived in South Africa as part of the groups of indentured Hindu Indians. These religious practices would have looked to an outsider, as mere worship of plants, trees and stones. They are however, rich examples of what we would refer to as animism within the context of this essay.

I had the fortunate opportunity to visit with these elderly participants and enter their sacred shrine spaces, and in some instances observe their ritualized 'bathing' of their 'sacred stones.' For all twelve elders had in their local South African home-shrines, some stone-like object. They would bathe and ritually anoint that stone, much in the vein of what I had

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[32]The choice of female participants is not to suggest that male elders or grandfathers would not share these so called animistic practices. It just that the sampling is a throwback to my own memoried ritual times with my grandmother. Also more often than not, it is the female elder that is in charge of the sacred space at home.

[33]By 'older' I am referring here to aspects of what has been labeled as indigenous, or the "Little Tradition,' the non-*Sanskritic*, non-*brahmanic* parts of the polysemic Hindu religion. Animism is considered an integral part of village or indigenous Hindu belief and practice.

done with my own grandmother a few decades ago. This anointed 'stone' would be placed alongside the more popular figures of sculpted Hindu Gods. Unlike the generation of younger practicing Hindus, their children and grandchildren, who were more often than not, so called modern Hindus, and monotheistic in their approach, these elders carried and practiced a richly textured Hinduism that combined elements of both indigenous beliefs and Neo-Hindu beliefs about the world. This was the rationale behind approaching this particular small purposive sample of participants of *ammas* or mothers. Although some of the grandmothers also offered 'worship' (or what appears as worship to the outsider) to plants and trees, the aspect I focused on here was the ritualized activity with a 'stone.'

The elders/mothers spoke to me in part English and part Tamil, slipping seamlessly from one language to another. Fortunately I was comfortably conversant in Tamil, having grown up hearing both my mother and grandmother speaking the language to me. The narratives also attempt to capture answers to questions posed as to 'what' the stone was to them' and how they 'felt' in ritually preparing the 'stone.' Below are some excerpted and shortened parts of longer narratives from five of the twelve grandmothers interviewed. The names used here, with their permission, are shortened versions of much longer typically South Indian names.

Valli-amma:

> Every Friday I get up early and bathe and get ready to make my outside temple clean. I make the floor clean and sweep. I dust the *murtis* [sculpted images]…wash the *Amman*, [referring to the stone] and put the ashes and *kungum* [vermillion]. I like doing this…No there is no difference… it is not a stone you see… it is the Mother inside [to my questions about the stone]. It's a nice feeling… I feel close to *Amman* [Mother Goddess] and I fell close to everything, all people and also plants and trees… to everything…

Pushpa-ma:

> This stone has been in my family a long, long time. I don't treat it like a stone you see. It got the god's spirit inside. I feel close and at one with that spirit when I close my eyes in front of it.
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> Dear child [to my probing] I don't know how to explain … I don't know the full meaning … but it is our religion … it is what my mother taught me and what her mother taught her…

Devi-amma: (Devi-amma was one of the elders who was much more comfortable with English and who seemed to have a more advanced level of secondary schooling).

This is the way I understand it. I worship my *ishta devata* Shiva [referring to the favoured aspect of her monotheistic God in the form of Shiva]...but I also offer worship at my Tulsi tree and my *kallu* [stone]... to me it is not a mere stone. It is also a house for the presence of God...that is how I understand it... but I know that to my mother... this was a stone that housed not a God but a spirit... she believed in many spirits ... not evil spirits but spirits like spirit energies...It's not so old fashioned if you think about it...after all our religion does teach us that there is life in all things, living and non living. I don't think my mother was backward ... After all every time you put the TV, you are always hearing about how we should respect the things in our environment... just like we respect people...seeing 'something' in that stone reminds us to respect the things in our environment ... you know our forefathers were very wise ... and although I feel silly to tell my daughter ... I can tell you ... sometimes when I am very quiet ... I can feel oneness with the sacred stone...

Sargouna-amma:

I don't know why you want to know all this ... but it is good for me to talk about prayer and things ... oh you want to know about that one [pointing to the stone].That's Mother's child [referring to the Mother Goddess]... it's not just a stone ... just like us the other things in the world are also her children. I offer prayers to my Tulsi tree and my *kallu* [stone]... it reminds me that we are all God's children ...

Munniamma:

It's like this you see ... we know God is everywhere ... well God is in the stone too ... isn't that right? I'm not worshiping all the stones outside my house ... those stones have God's energy in them too ... but this one is special because I put it aside and I show that I recognize inside it ... God's power and soul ... My daughter does not think of it like this ... she lets me keep my sacred stone ... but she does not understand ... and my grandchildren ... I think they think what I do does not make sense ... they say it is not for them ... [this is a reference to the later generationed diasporic Hindus who had moved towards Neo-Hinduism and quite often congregational worship or *satsang*]... but it makes sense to me and my husband, just

like it made sense to my parents and their parents before that. The world has changed too much ... we need things that remind us to take care of all the living and not living things around us ...

8. Animism Stories and Narrative Analysis

These stories shed vital light on the practice of what we would term as elements of animistic behaviour. Narrative analysis, however, quite importantly, does not consider narratives as stories that convey a set of facts about the world, and is not primarily interested in whether stories are 'true.' Rather narrative analysis views narratives, as interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their worlds, to themselves and to others. This kind of analysis sees narratives or stories as linking the past to the present.[34] This form of qualitative scrutiny is also particularly apposite given that much of what we as researchers receive in interview accounts, are likely to be 'storied,' in other words received in narrative form. Also with this technique, in most instances the researcher says very little, acting primarily as an attentive listener, which was especially suited to this sample group.

Using narrative analysis, we see that particular themes or scripts emerge in the stories that these elderly *ammas* 'tell.' Perhaps it is also prudent to point out that in this analysis, I am not so much concerned with a Geertzian approach, in other words looking for what it (ritualized activity towards a stone) *means* for the elders, in as much as what it *does* for them. This is because in listening to their narratives, it is easy to discern that there is immense dissimilarity in how they understand the meaning of the stone and the meaning of what they are doing. Part of this difference can be inferred to the fact that, although they were all south Indian and Tamil-speaking, they would trace lineage back to different south Indian groups in India. And in the new space, that of diasporic home space of South Africa, they were living among different generations of Hindu family members with a diffused understanding and practice of contemporary Hinduism/s. There is thus, quite understandably perhaps, for them something of a diverse understanding of *what* the stone was.

There is however, great similarity in the common performative aspect at play here. The grandmothers 'know,' on some level, what the stone *does* for them i.e. connecting them to something beyond. They 'know' that the stone, in housing (according to their different exegete) a 'power,' or 'soul,' in turn connects them to something empirically beyond

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[34]Tim May, ed., *Qualitative Research in Action*, London: Sage Books, 2002.

their grasp. The re-iterative action of weekly bathing and anointing keeps this link perpetually refreshed so to speak. Watching some of the ammas in this reiterative action was quite a special treat as it was clearly discernable in their facial expression and bodily demeanour, the importance of this act and the happiness they derived from it. Many spoke of the how they felt while engaged in this act, referring to feeling a connection with the things in nature that were not necessarily human. It seemed to me that their experience of the 'power' in the stone acted as a conduit that they used to remind them of their connection or related-ness to the environment.

It is to be noted that these stones are not anything like the stone *devaru* from the ethnographic context of Bird-David, and represent the heteroglossic reality of different expressions of animistic understandings and practices. Bird-David points out in her reply to critics, that presenting Nayaka animistic practices as a particular cultural and indigenous 'way of knowing' or epistemology, is not to 'blur the difference between religious and scientific knowledge' but rather to possibly re-assign some of these indigenous practices from a pigeon-holed understanding of being a form of primitive religion, and perhaps placing it alongside some contemporary understandings of environmental sensitivity and consciousness. This is precisely the case with the examples from our small sample of grandmother participants. It is not to declare that they had a 'knowing' that was superior to scientific knowing, but rather to bring their experiences of the 'life' in the inanimate stone into some form of contemporary discussion. Narratives often have a point which frequently takes the form of a moral message. This could be the embedded message in Devi-amma and Munniama's stories about 'respecting' the 'things' in the environment.

Bird-David tells us that for the Nayaka, keeping the conversation on-going is imperative, or the *devaru* will complain. This is perhaps a reminder that there needs to be an on-going and continued fellowship between 'person' and (aspects of) the 'environment.' Clearly the grandmothers in my sample are 'keeping the conversation on-going' by their weekly ritualized practice. They were in a sense experiencing relations to 'things' as if they were ecological relations to people. From what they shared, they were on some level in communion with non-human things, in this instances their sacred *kallu* or stones. Narrative theory argues that the social world is itself 'storied' and that narrative is a key means through which people produce an identity. These elderly grandmothers already had a narrative of self and religion, which included elements of veneration, respect and ritual towards an inanimate object (the

stone). Tim Ingold suggests that human sociability was engendered by cognitive skills that were *ecologically* biased.[35] According to him, this would provide an even stronger case for the essential validity of animism.

The stories that the grandmothers shared varied, and show up discontinuities in that some seemed to be describing 'strong' relationality, and others somewhat 'weaker' relationality. However, narrative analysis clearly reveals the underlying spine of continuity in that they all spoke *'relationally'* about the environment, almost as if they experienced themselves in some kind of fellowship with the environment. This pointed back to what Nurit-David had termed as a relational epistemology that engendered both a knowing and feeling of fellowship. All of the *ammas* ignored what many take for granted, an axiomatic boundary between human and non-human. Therein lay, for me, the fragments of an indigenous discourse that collapsed the structural and seemingly impermeable boundary between person and non-person, or said differently, nature and culture. And none of the grandmothers for a moment doubted their beliefs and practices as being erroneous (even if they recognised that their family might). Instead the animistic beliefs and practices reminds them that as a person, they are in a 'composite relationship,' similar to the Nayaka and their understanding of their place in the world. It also echoes, in some ways, the work on 'perspectivism' by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. He reminds us that Amerindian thought "is a specific type of worldview that forces us to take as a starting point, an extended notion of the human: a notion that comprises a series of beings, including various types of animals, spirits and materials."[36] This extended notion of the human makes much sense to me. Redman et.al also point out that it is no longer defensible to study ecological and social systems in alienation from one another as humans are an integral part of virtually all ecosystems.[37] This kind of thinking seeks to decolonize thought from a structuralist and separatist stronghold.

All the *ammas* ascribed their own relational way of understanding the environment *to their religion*. Their religion in turn was a composite of

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[35]Tim Ingold, *Key Debates in Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996.

[36]Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 3 (1998), 469-488.

[37]Charles L. Redman, J. Morgan Grove, Lauren H. Kuby, "Integrating Social Science into the Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) Network: Social Dimensions of Ecological Change and Ecological Dimensions of Social Change," *Ecosystems* 7, 2 (2004), 161-171.

early indigenous animistic beliefs and practices as well as later Hindu ritual and philosophical beliefs. There is much in *brahmanic* Hinduism that points philosophically to the non duality of the world, or Advaita tenets. However, these teachings while known to the grandmothers had less of a performative aspect for them. By this I mean that they were philosophical tenets that the grandmothers 'knew,' but did not see as being experientially played out for them. Rather it was to the indigenous animistic beliefs that they turned to when they spoke about being connected to the environment. One adds that while the Advaita philosophy of Sankara and his followers expounded an epistemologically sophisticated system, it was a system of *a-dvaita*, or not-two. Relationality, necessarily presupposes a 'two,' or subject-object, albeit in a permeable relationship or fellowship.

Although it may sound somewhat clichéd, it is very possible that that the so called 'indigenous peoples' or pre-industrial societies were uniquely positioned in their close and long-standing environmental relationships[38] and able to retain more immediate engagement with the natural environment. This statement is of course, in itself not new. What I am developing and opening up for further discussion here, is the point that animism, and animistic beliefs and practices, can move us into new directions in which we can begin to perceive and relate to the environment.

Conrad Kottak points out that the move from what was termed old ecology, with its parochial approach to the environment has been replaced by a new ecology that is open to entering into dialogue with alternate operational models of understanding the world, and relationship to things in the world. Kottak states rather tellingly, that "older ecologies have been remiss in their narrowness and partial and temporal horizons," while "the new ecological anthropology is located at the intersection of global, national, regional, and local systems, studying the outcome of the interaction of multiple levels and multiple factors."[39]

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[38]Conrad P. Kottak, "The New Ecological Anthropology," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 101, 1 (1999), 23-35, 23. Nancy J. Turner, Marianne Boelscher Ignace, Ronald Ignace, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Wisdom of Aboriginal Peoples," *British Columbia Ecological Applications* 10, 5 (2000), 1275-1287.

[39]Kottak, "The New Ecological Anthropology," 23.

9. Conclusion

The work of Turner et al. on cultural 'edges' is inspiring. These edges or cultural transitional zones are the spaces where converging cultures interact and are rich in diverse cultural traits, showing cultural features of each of the contributing peoples.[40] Following this cue, I would like to propose 'perspectival edges.' This would be the edge or contact point where two perspectives, in this case the perspective of animism and the perspective of a post-Cartesian, more *relational* self, 'meet.' These would be the places and spaces where insights and practices can be carried across from animism into contemporary notions of a 'self' that is experienced as being related to the environment.

In Nurit-Bird's ethnographic work with the animism-practicing Nayaka, the *devaru* (stones) are objectifications of a composite relationship. The Nayaka composite personhood or self is constitutive of sharing relationships reproduced by the Nayaka *with* aspects of their environment. In my narrative analysis with the stories shared by the grandmothers, it was also clear that they had on some level, objectified their relationship with the environment, or that which was beyond the empirical realm, through their reiterated ritual acts with their sacred stones. And similar to the Nayaka, they were also behaving relationally to the environment, and understood themselves as being in relational frameworks. Relational frameworks imply a community of beings in a social space as a 'space of relations.' While this is an unconscious and natural part of the religio-cultural make-up of the Nayaka, and even in some ways, that of our South African grandmothers, it is suggested that this religious thinking and behaving can be consciously carried into a more environmentally aware thinking and behaving. A more eco sensitive self is aware of a social space that is shared by the seemingly non human parts of the environment as being animated or enlivened. The social space referred to here is in turn enhanced at the 'perspectival edge.' It is suggested that it is this experience of relationality and of 'social relations' that is able to create the psychological and spiritual 'environment' able to engender more conscious and sensitive 'relational' behaviour from us, towards the physical environment.

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[40]Nancy J. Turner, Iain J. Davidson-Hunt, Michael O'Flaherty, "Living on the Edge: Ecological and Cultural Edges as Sources of Diversity for Social-Ecological Resilience," *Human Ecology*, 31. 3, 2003, 439-461.