[The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)](https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije)

Volume 1
Number 1 *Narratives on Coronavirus: The Overwhelming Power of the Inifinitesimally Small*

Article 6

10-15-2020

Indigenous Animistic Belief Systems and Integrated Science: Perspective on Humans' Relationship with Nature and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Cesario Garcia

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije

Part of the Cognitive Psychology Commons, Community Psychology Commons, Counseling Psychology Commons, Environmental Studies Commons, Health Psychology Commons, Human Ecology Commons, Other Anthropology Commons, Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, and the Place and Environment Commons

Recommended Citation

Garcia, Cesario (2020) "Indigenous Animistic Belief Systems and Integrated Science: Perspective on Humans' Relationship with Nature and the Coronavirus Pandemic," *The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije/vol1/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE) by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Indigenous Animistic Belief Systems and Integrated Science: Perspective on Humans' Relationship with Nature and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Cesario Garcia*

Garcia-Animism

*cesario.garcia11@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores some perspectives of indigenous animistic belief systems from researchers who have made observations while studying amongst North American tribes. Specifically, it will address indigenous interactions with the natural world and, in particular, their belief that humans are a part of nature. Next, other perspectives, not rooted in Indigenous belief systems, will be discussed that demonstrate how other cultures and individuals across the globe also view humans as a part of nature, including concepts found in Morita Therapy (Morita, 1928), Arne Naess' (1987) theory of the 'ecological self', and nations around the world that are implementing policies that address ecological crises. Furthermore, the paper will address how a *conditional love* relationship with nature might lead to humans focusing on the 'good' aspects of nature while wanting to eradicate the 'bad,' such as COVID-19, through necessary, but also short-term solutions. Finally, long-term solutions based in ecological sciences will be discussed that promote a responsible interconnected relationship with nature in order to prevent, or at least mitigate, the impacts of future epidemics and pandemics.

Keywords: Indigenous, Animism, Nature, Morita Therapy, Coronavirus, COVID-19

Garcia-Animism

Introduction

Sir Edward Burnett developed the concept of animism in his 1871 work *Primitive Culture* (Bird-David, 1999). Animism is now a common concept in the field of anthropology as defined by Richard Eldridge (1996):

> Animism is the belief that human beings have souls, or, by extension, the belief that animals, plants or even rocks have souls; that is, that they are subjects of feeling or consciousness, or display intelligence, in ways that ensouled human beings do. This extended view is sometimes called animatism or panpsychisms.

E.B. Tylor (1871), Emile Durkheim (1914), Claude Levi-Strauss (1962), and Stewart Guthrie (1993), amongst other anthropologists, studied these indigenous belief systems, including animism, in order to understand their epistemology and how they were transmitted across generations (Bird-David, 70-71). While these studies are useful in order to gain a better understanding of cultures that hold animistic beliefs, the main goal in this monograph is to further discuss the belief system itself as a way to offer a continuing perspective of where humans believe they are situated in the realm of nature. Specifically, this work will provide examples of observations made by researchers who have studied North American tribes.

Indigenous communities across the continent are culturally diverse, it should be noted, and each has their own set of religious and spiritual ideologies, cultural practices, and cosmologies. Thus, in this work, we avoid giving the impression that there is a singular and universal (identical) indigenous belief system across all tribes. Rather, to reiterate, the goal is to explore animistic belief systems, specifically as these apply to indigenous communities' interactions with the natural world. None of the major world religions are animistic in this focused and overt way or sense (Park, 2015).

Garcia-Animism

Animism is not just a concept but an entire way of life. Irving Hallowell (1976), a mid-twentieth century ethnographer who completed field research amongst the Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) Tribe (see also Harvey, 2017), observed that:

> Everyday life is so structured culturally that, in their interactions with the larger-than-human world, Anishinaabe individuals act as if they were dealing with 'persons' who both understand what is being said to them and have volitional capacities as well. 'Persons' are willfully responsive and communicative (pp. 357-90).

Likewise, Kidwell, Noley and Tinker (2001) state in their book *A Native American Theology* that "Instead, the whole life way of each Native people is infused with a spirituality that cannot be properly understood outside of the cultural and environmental contexts within which they live (12)." These are examples of what Nurit Bird-David (1999) described as a relational interaction with nature. In other words, indigenous communities do not view themselves as separate from nature, rather they are interconnected. Mohawk writer Beth Brant stated (1990): "We do not worship nature. We are part of it (p. 119)."

Parallels Between Indigenous Belief Systems and Psychological Concepts

Anthropologists have been the main researchers behind an understanding of animism; however, anthropology and psychology are often integral sciences. As our main example of this integration, Shoma Morita (1928), created a mental health treatment/approach called *Morita Therapy*, an Eastern holistic approach to treating mental health problems (LeVine, 2018). This approach is *ecocentric* in that it does not view consciousness as residing in the human psyche nor does it aim to place the self at the center of experience. In Morita Therapy, the term *peripheral consciousness* refers to consciousness as something that runs through the entire cosmos (LeVine, 2018). In her book *Classic Morita Therapy*, Peg LeVine (2018) makes the distinction between nature, such as human nature, and Nature, with an uppercase 'N' to represent Morita's notion of a life force; what Morita describes as consciousness. According to Morita, consciousness permeates the cosmos, irrespective of human experience/existence (xxv-xxvi). Thus, there is a similarity between the philosophical underpinnings of Morita Therapy and indigenous beliefs that humans are in fact a part of nature.

To reiterate, some indigenous belief systems, along with Morita Therapy concepts, posit the notion that humans *are* nature rather than separate from *it*. However, adopting indigenous belief systems and attempting to integrate them into Western culture presents some challenges. For one, belief systems are deeply connected to these cultures' religious and spiritual ideologies in seamless ways. For instance, John Loftin (*Religion and Hopi Life in the Twentieth Century*, 1994) describes that the Hopi tribe plants crops by hand with the knowledge that this reduces wind erosion. Equally, he observed that they "feel that a steel plow unnecessarily and cruelly tears the skin of the earth mother (p. 9)." Notwithstanding the fact that many people have not been raised, or been taught these traditional indigenous beliefs, these belief systems can still provide opportunities for reflection on how people interact with and affect the environment without having to appropriate indigenous traditions and ideologies (Aftandilian, 2011).

Garcia Animism

To digress with a purpose, it is widely accepted that humans are having a direct impact on the ecologies of our planet. With respect to climate change, humans are directly responsible for global increases of temperatures due to our collective output of CO2 in the atmosphere (Cavicchioli et al., 2019). Research by Cavicchioli et al. (2019: 569) suggests that human activities and their effect on climate and ecologies have already caused unprecedented animal and plant extinctions, loss in biodiversity, and have also continued to endanger animal and plant life on Earth. These multiple crises have led to individuals and governments moving towards more energy efficient technology that aims at being less dependent on fossil fuels to warm/cool homes or to run vehicles and other machinery. Equally, many are coming to the realization that forests and jungles are invaluable to our wellbeing. The positive effect of these insights can be observed in community organizations devoted to environmental cleanup efforts, such as picking up garbage both on land and in the water, along with wildlife restoration projects. These are but a few examples of how nations already recognize humans' impact on other ecosystems and nature as a whole.

Finally, in his popular book, Richard Louv (2008) coined the term *nature-deficit disorder* and it described as follows: "the human cause of alienation from nature, among them being: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional sickness (p.

36).” Even though there is no clinically, formal disorder such named, it is nevertheless a useful heuristic. Additionally, in his book *Biophilia* (1984), E. O. Wilson presents a *biophilic* (life-loving) hypothesis and suggests that humans are born with a biological drive to interact with the natural world and to support their healthy development.

Integrating Psychological and Ecological Sciences to Address the COVID-19 Crisis

The indigenous conceptualization that regards humans as being a part of nature might also provide us with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There is no question that some scientists wish to understand the origins of Coronavirus while others research means to slow or stop the pandemic. However, as fear of COVID-19 increases, our mindset has been to enter with it into battle. A different take from at least one psychologist, in Dr. Morita’s philosophy, and part of his therapeutic approach, humans live in tension between ‘natural desire for life’ and ‘natural fear of death.’ Suffering diminishes once a person can find a balance between the two. Philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1958) theorized that if we can live in harmony within these tensions, then we can live a more ethical life.

The fuller human ecological argument might be that humans need to also prevent and mitigate future pandemics through safer ecological practices. On a global scale, nations appear to be living largely within the ‘natural fear of death’ spectrum, leading to a focus on short-term solutions. This is understandable. To be clear, a treatment must be developed for COVID-19. However, too much attention on researching short-term solutions may distract us from making ethical decisions that could benefit generations to come.

Garcia-Animism

It is likely that irresponsible practices when engaging with nature and a lack of resources for people in need may be in part to blame for the transmission of COVID-19 from animals to humans and will likely continue to cause future outbreaks unless we take preventative and restorative measures.

Psychological Perspectives of Humans’ Place in Nature

Unconditional and conditional love are concepts often referred to when discussing interpersonal relationships. Humanist theorists utilize the term *unconditional positive regard*, a term coined by psychologist Carl Rogers (1957). Barlow and Durand (2012) defined it as “the complete and almost unqualified acceptance of most of the client’s feelings and actions” (p. 20). The main goal of utilizing the technique of unconditional positive regard in a psychotherapeutic sense is to enhance the psychological self. However, this focus may unintentionally ignore the natural world in which the person lives (Wang, 2016). From an inclusive ecopsychological perspective, one can utilize the concepts of unconditional and conditional love to speak of a problematic dynamic that can occur between people and the natural world. Specifically, only expressing unconditional love for parts of nature that hold beauty, such as mountains, oceans, beaches and forests, leaves out most of nature. On the other hand, it seems as though many would have conditional love for the aspects of nature that are not ‘useful,’ a premature judgement, to the self. To reiterate, the word ‘love’ centralizes the person within the experience and demonstrates people's tendency to label external and internal factors as either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ This is often a self-centered determination. Moving away from this egocentric view, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, in his article S*elf-realization: An ecological approach to being in the world* (1987), wrote of an

'ecological self' which in part describes humans as having the ability to move beyond merely the ego-self, toward a realization and insight that also benefit other people and the natural world. Furthermore, Naess held the position that all species are a part of one whole-world-system. Understandably, many individuals have deemed COVID-19 as 'bad' (it is), focusing on social distancing and eradication which ultimately benefits the self and others. One wonders whether approaching this crisis from an 'ecological self' perspective would benefit not just those who are here presently, but generations to come.

In summary, it seems as though when people consider 'nature,' they focus on objects and places of beauty, on its aesthetics, while neglecting to consider how devastating events such as the current COVID-19 pandemic are in fact also a part of nature. [1]

Fortunately, there are steps that nations as well as individuals can take to promote safer practices within the natural world and decrease the chances of future pandemics. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common in people and many different species of animals, including camels, cattle, cats, and bats. Rarely do animal coronaviruses infect people and then spread, yet, this was likely the case with COVID-19 [National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases, 2020]. Other viruses such as the zoonotic influenza (Bird Flu), pandemic human influenza (H1N1), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), have proven or suspected domestic animal involvement in transmission (UN Environment Program, 2020). The current Coronavirus pandemic may have been caused by human intrusion into wilder regions.

Garcia-Animism

The next section provides some additional examples of how nations can begin to create and implement policies that put humans in a much more responsible and interconnected relationship with nature.

Proposed Long-Term Strategies for Preventing Future Epidemics and Pandemics

Found in the UN Environment Programme's scientific assessment *Preventing the Next Pandemic* (2020), the FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment (2020) reports that deforestation continues globally at a rate of 10 million hectares per year, which is approximately 38,610 square miles. Because of a rapidly increasing human population, humans are making more intrusions into natural habitats and that has brought humans and domestic animals into closer contact with wild animals, with increased risk of animal-to-human disease transmission (p. 29). Another finding from the same report is that over the last 60 years, wild meat production from both illegal and legal production of farms has been steadily increasing (UN Environment Programme, 2020, pp. 29-33). There are several reasons and hypotheses as to why this steady increase is occurring. For one, the demand for meat is increasing hand-in-hand with a growing global population. Also, there is greater proximity (e.g., trade, tourism) between rural and urban populations, bringing people of lesser means closer to the affluent, which leads to an increase in informal markets that sell meat and live game that do not follow safety and health guidelines. In some regions, there is, specifically, a growing demand for wild meat where its consumption can signify a status of

[1] Viruses may have been an integral component of evolving lifeforms on this planet and are found in most habitats (Rohwer et al., 2009).

wealth and power. These market transactions are quite different from hunting wild game for sustenance.

While exploring all possible solutions to solving such complex issues on a global level is beyond the scope of this paper, it is apparent that some of the root causes of the Coronavirus pandemic, as well as other disease transmissions from animals to humans, lie in human practices involving the destruction of natural habitats and unmet needs amongst vulnerable populations. The UN's assessment of what can be done to help mitigate some of these inequalities include: investment in communities' assets to combat future outbreaks and addressing underlying systemic problems that are causing recurring animal-to-human epidemics and pandemics. More importantly, some policy pressure must be applied to hold state and local governments and individuals accountable and responsible for the health and wellbeing of the planet. Likewise, governments must include in these policies not only short-term strategies for managing epidemics and pandemics, but must also create policy that mitigates the chances of future animal-to-human disease transmission (UN Environment Programme, 2020).

Conclusion

This work has presented a few examples of how individuals and governments can promote a responsible and interconnected relationship with nature. It seems too obvious to state that our sense of disconnection from nature and a lack of genuine form of "relations" has led to the destruction of natural systems at an unprecedented pace. This general and pervasive sense of disconnection may be in part to blame for diseases being transmitted from animals to humans leading to past epidemics, including the Coronavirus pandemic.

Garcia Animism

It was argued that indigenous animistic belief systems may provide, to some, a different perspective of unity where humans are considered, once again, part of nature. While these beliefs are often deeply connected to indigenous cultures' religious and spiritual ideologies, other individuals and nations also recognize humans as part of nature. Morita's theories and therapy, Arne Naess's theory on the ecological self, and similar *relational* ideas and practices found across the world, all address issues related to ecological crises.

To summarize, a problematic dynamic presents itself when humans express conditional love, exclusively, towards nature and focus instead on those aspects that are 'good' and beneficial to them, while at the same time, negate or rid themselves of the 'bad' parts. An extension of this idea regarding COVID-19 is that nations may be focusing on necessary yet short-term solutions that do not take into consideration the nature-relational needs of generations to come. Indeed, let's appreciate all the beauty that nature has to offer--the mountains, forests, and rivers, but with the deeper understanding that being part of nature includes the realization that we are also hosts for nature.

References and Bibliography

Aftandilian, D. (2001). What other Americans can and cannot learn from Native American environmental ethics. *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 15(3), 219-246. Atlas Online Library, doi:10.1163/156853511x5886635.

Barlow, D. H., Durand, V. M., & Hoffman, S. G. (2017). Abnormal psychology: An integrative approach (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Bird-David, N. (1999). Animism revisited. *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, Supplement pp. s67-s79. Atlas Online Library, doi:10.1086/200061.

Brant, B. (1990). *Recovery and Transformation: The Blue Heron*, in Rose Brewer and Lisa Albrecht, *Bridges of Power*. New Society Publishing, 118-21.

Cavicchioli, R., Ripple, W.J., Timmis, K.N., Azam, F., Bakken, L.R., Baylis, M., Behrenfeld, M.J., Boetius, A., Boyd, P.W., Classen, A.T., Crowther, T.W., Danovaro, R., Foreman, C.M., Huisman, J., Hutchins, D.A., Jansson, J.K., Karl, D.M., & Webster, N.S. (2019). Scientists' warning to humanity: Microorganism and climate change. *Microbiology*,17, 569-586. https://doi.org/10.1038/ s41579-019-0222-5

Durkheim E. (2005). The dualism of human nature and its social conditions. *DurkheimianStudies*,11, 35-45. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/23866721 (Original work published in 1914).

Garcia-Animism

Eldridge R. (1996). Is animism alive and well? In: Phillips D.Z. (eds) *Can religion be explained away?* Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24858-2_1.

Environment Programme [*sic*], UN. (2020). Preventing the next pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission. *UNEP- UN Environment Programme*, 2020, www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/preventing-future-zoonotic-disease-Outbreaks-protecting-environment-animals-and.

Guthrie, S. E. (1995). Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion. Oxford University Press

Hallowell, I. A. (1976). Ojibwa ontology, behavior, and worldview. *Contributions to Anthropology*, 76, 357-90.

Harvey, G. (2017). If not all stones are alive: Radical relationality in animism studies. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 11(4), 481-497. Atlas Online Library, doi:10.1558/jsrnc.31066.

Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD) Home. (2020). Retrieved, from https://www.cdc.gov/ncird/index.html

Kidwell, C. S., Noley, H., & Tinker, G. E. (2001). *A Native American theology*. Orbis Books.

LeVine, P. (2018). *Classic Morita Therapy*. Routledge.

Levi-Strauss, C. (2016). *Totemism*. Beacon Press. (Original work published 1963).

Loftin, J. (1994). *Religion and Hopi life in the Twentieth Century*. Indiana University Press.

Louv, R. (2008). *The last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Algonquin Books.

Morita, S. (1998). *Morita Therapy and the true nature of anxiety-based disorders (Shinkeishitsu)*. (LeVine, Peg, Trans.) State University of New York Press. (Original work published in 1928).

Naess, A. (1987). Self-Realization: An ecological approach to being in the world. *The Trumpeter*, 4(3), 1-46. Retrieved from http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/623/992.

Nishida, K. (1958). *Intelligibility and the philosophy of nothingness*. (R. Schinzinger, Trans.) Tokyo: Maruzen.

Park, G.K., (2018). Animism. In origin, belief, & place of worship, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica, inc. Retrieved from https://www.britannica.com/topic/animism.

Tylor, E. B. (2010). *Primitive culture*. Cambridge University Press (Original work published 1871).

Rogers, C. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centered framework. In (ed.) S. Koch, *Psychology: A study of science. Vol. 3: Formulations of the person and the social context*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Rohwer, F., Prangishvili, D., & Lindell, D. (2009). Roles of viruses in the environment. *Environment Biology*, 11(11), 2771-2774. doi:10.1111/j.1462-2920.2009.02101.x.

Wang, C. (2016). Towards self-realisation: Exploring the ecological self for education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48(12), 1256-1265. doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2016.1158090.

Wilson, E.O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press.

Art credit: J. Conesa-Sevilla, “Bird” (Giant gourd, stones, seashells, and *Raffia* Grass)

Garcia Animism