

# Animism, Perception, and Earthly Craft of the Magician

David Abram



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Although the term “animism” was originally coined in the nineteenth century to designate the mistaken projection of humanlike attributes — such as *life, mind, intelligence* — to nonhuman and ostensibly inanimate phenomena, it is clear that this first meaning was itself rooted in a misapprehension, by Western scholars, of the perceptual experience of indigenous, oral peoples. Twentieth-century research into the phenomenology of perception revealed that humans never directly experience *any* phenomenon as definitively inert or inanimate. Perception itself is an inherently relational, participatory event; we say that things “call our gaze” or “capture our attention,” and as we lend our focus to those things we find ourselves affected and transformed by the encounter — the way the blue sky, when we open our gaze to it, reverberates through our sensing organism, altering our mood and even the rhythm of our beating heart. When we are walking in the forest, a particular tree may engage our awareness, and if we reach to feel the texture of its bark we may find that our fingers are soon being tutored by that tree. If the bark is rough and deeply furrowed our fingers will begin to slow down their movements in order to explore those ridges and valleys, while if the trunk is smooth, like a madrone, even the palm of our hand will be drawn to press against and caress that smooth surface. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his classic work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, suggests that the primordial event of perception is always experienced as a reciprocal encounter between the perceiver and the perceived, a open dialectic wherein my sensing body continually responds and adjusts itself to the things it senses, and wherein the perceived phenomenon responds in turn, disclosing its nuances to me only as I allow myself to be affected by its unique style, its particular dynamism or active agency.

Merleau-Ponty’s careful analyses of perception revealed, contrary to our common ways of speaking, that the perceiving self is not a disembodied mind but rather a bodily subject entirely immersed in the world it perceives. His later work underscored the reciprocity of perceptual experience by pointing out the obvious (yet easily overlooked) fact that the eyes, the visual organs by which we gaze out at and explore the visible field, are themselves entirely a part of that field; they have their own colors, like the color of the sky or the grass. Similarly, the hands with which we touch things are entirely a part of the tactile field that they explore — since, of course, the hand has its own textures, its own smooth or rough surfaces. Hence, when we are touching another being, feeling the texture of a tree-trunk, or caressing a boulder with our fingers, we may also, quite spontaneously, feel

our hand being touched *by* that tree, or our fingers felt *by* that stone. Similarly, when we step outside in the morning and gaze across the valley at a forested hillside, if we attend mindfully to the vision we will sense our own visibility, will feel ourselves *exposed to* those trees, perhaps even feel ourselves *seen by* that forested hillside. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is nothing other than this reciprocity, this mutual reverberation and blending in which the surrounding terrain is experienced by me only to the extent that I feel myself caught up within and *experienced by* those surroundings.

Such a description neatly echoes the discourse of many indigenous peoples, such as the Koyukon people of central Alaska, who claim that they live “in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes.” (Nelson, p. 14). Oral, indigenous peoples from around the world — whether hunters or rudimentary horticulturalists — commonly assert that the land itself is alive and aware, that the local animals, the plants, and the earthly elements around them have their own sensitivity and sentience. They claim that the earthly world we experience also *experiences us*. And hence that we must be respectful toward that world, lest we offend the very ground that supports us, the winds and waters that nourish us.

If the phenomenological study of perception is correct, however, then these claims need not be attributed to a “projection” of human awareness onto an ostensibly inanimate and objective world; they are simply a way of speaking more in accord with our most direct and spontaneous experience of the perceptual cosmos. Far from being a distortion of our actual encounter with the material world around us, the animistic discourse of so many indigenous, place-based peoples is likely the most practical and parsimonious manner of giving voice to the earthly world *as* that world discloses itself to humankind in the absence of intervening technologies.

When the natural world is perceived not from the spectator-like position of a detached or disembodied intellect, but rather from an embodied position situated entirely *within* that world, one encounters no aspect of that world that is definitively inert or inanimate. “Animism” remains a useful term for this highly embodied, and *embedded*, mode of perception. In this sense, “animism” may be said to name a primordial mode of perception that admits of no clear distinction between that which is animate and that which is inanimate. Rather, every phenomenon that draws our attention is perceived, or felt, to be at least potentially animate. Each perceived thing has its own rhythm and style, its own interior animation. Everything moves — although, clearly, some things move much *slower* than other things, like the mountains, or the ground underfoot.

A short, haiku-like poem by Gary Snyder neatly illustrates this style of awareness:

As the crickets’ soft, autumn hum  
is to us  
so are we to the trees  
as are they  
to the rocks and the hills.

Each entity in this poem has its own dynamism, its own rhythm— and yet each rhythm is vastly different, in the pace of its pulse, from the others. Nevertheless each entity is also listening, mindful of the other rhythms around it.

To such an embodied, and embedded, perspective, the enveloping world is encountered not as a conglomeration of determinate objects, but as a community of subjects — as a relational field of animate, active agencies in which we humans, too, are participant.

Such an understanding of the animistic style of perception common to indigenous, oral cultures is necessary for comprehending the vital role played by *shamans*, the indigenous magic practitioners endemic to such place-based cultures. For if awareness is not the exclusive attribute of humankind — if, indeed, every aspect of the perceivable world is felt to be at least potentially alive, awake and aware — then there is an obvious need, in any human community, for individuals who are particularly adept at communicating with these other shapes of sensitivity and sentience. The shamans are precisely those persons who are especially sensitive and susceptible to the expressive calls, gestures and signs of the wider, more-than-human field of beings, and who are able to reply in kind. The shaman is an intermediary, a mediator between the human community and the *more-than-human community* in which the human group is embedded. This wider community consists not only of the humans, and the other animal intelligences that inhabit or migrate through the local terrain, but also the many plant powers that are rooted in the local soils — the grasses, and herbs (with their nourishing and medicinal characteristics, their poisonous and mind-altering influences), the trees with their unique personalities, and even the multiform intelligence of whole forests; it consists as well of the active agency and expressive power of particular landforms (like rivers, mountains, caves, cliffs), and of all the other elemental forces (the winds and weather-patterns, the radiant sun and the cycling moon, storm clouds and seasonal patterns) that influence, and effectively constitute, the living landscape.

The magic skills of the shaman are rooted in his or her ability to shift out of his common state of awareness in order to contact, and learn from, these other powers in the surrounding earth. Only by regularly shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the shaman hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of her senses is she able to make contact and communicate with the other shapes of sentience and sensitivity with which human existence is entwined. And so it is this, we might say, that defines a shaman; the ability to readily slip out of the collective perceptual boundaries that define his or her culture — boundaries held in place by social customs, taboos, and especially the common language — in order to directly engage, and negotiate with, the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local earth.

As a result of the his or her heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations of the wider community of beings, the shaman tends to dwell at the very periphery of the human settlement, at the very outskirts of the village or the camp. The indigenous magician's acute sensitivities often render him unable to dwell, or even linger, in the midst of the human hubbub; only at the edge of the community is he able to attend to the exigencies of the human world while living in steady contact with the wider, and wilder, field of earthly powers. The shaman is thus an edge dweller, one who tends the subtle boundary between the human collective and the

wild, ecological field of intelligence, ensuring that that boundary stays a porous membrane across which nourishment flows in both directions — ensuring that the human community never takes more from the living land than it returns to the land, not just materially, but with prayers, with propitiations, with spontaneous and eloquent praises. To some extent, every adult in the human community is engaged in the process of listening and attuning to the other presences that surround and influence daily life. Yet the shaman is the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and more-than-human worlds, the primary strategist and negotiator in any dealings with these earthly powers. By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies, and “journeys,” the shaman ensures that the relation between the human and more-than-human realms remains balanced and reciprocal; that the living membrane between these realms never hardens into a static barrier shutting out the many-voiced land from the deliberations of the human collective.

Further, it is only as a result of continually monitoring and maintaining the dynamic equilibrium between the human and the more-than-human worlds that the shaman typically derives his or her ability to heal various illnesses arising within the human community. Disease is commonly conceived, in such animistic cultures, as a kind of disruption or imbalance within a particular person, and yet the source of this disequilibrium is assumed to lie not in the individual person but in the larger field of relationships within which that person is entwined. A susceptible person, that is, may become the bearer of a *dis-ease* that belongs not to her but to the village as a whole. Yet the ultimate source of such community disequilibrium will commonly be found in an imbalance between the human community and the larger system of which it is a part. Hence the illnesses that beset particular individuals can be healed, or released, only if the healer is simultaneously tending, and “healing” the relative balance or imbalance between the human collective and the wider community of beings. The shaman’s primary allegiance, then, is not to the human community, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded — it is from this that his or her power to alleviate human illness derives — and this sets the local shaman apart from most other persons.

The term “shamanism” is regularly used, today, to denote the belief-system, or worldview, of such cultures wherein the shaman’s craft is practiced. Yet this term is something of a misnomer. For it implies that the person of the shaman stands at the very center of the belief-system and of the culture itself; it suggests that the shaman is revered or perhaps even worshiped by the members of such a culture. Yet nothing could be farther from the case.

We have seen that the shaman is quintessentially an edge-dweller, a marginal figure, one who straddles the boundary between the culture and the rest of animate nature. It is not the *shaman* who is central to the beliefs of that culture, but rather the *animate natural world* in all its visible and invisible aspects — the expressive power and active agency of the sensuous and sensate surroundings. And thus the worldview of such a culture is not, properly speaking, “shamanistic,” but rather “animistic.” It is first and foremost in *animistic* cultures — cultures for whom any aspect of the perceivable world may be felt to have its own active agency, its own interior animation — it is in such cultures that the craft of the magician first emerges, and it is in such a context that the shaman (the indigenous magician) finds his or her primary role and function, as intermediary between the human and more-than-human worlds.

Finally, a few words should perhaps be said, here, about the role of the magician in modern, technological societies. After all, the modern conjuror's feats with rabbits, doves, or tigers harken back to the indigenous shaman's magical rapport with other species. Indeed, virtually all contemporary forms of magic may be shown to derive, in various ways, from the animistic mode of experience common to all of our indigenous, hunting and foraging ancestors — to the experience, that is, of living within a world that is itself alive. Moreover, it is likely that this participatory mode of sensory experience has never really been extinguished — that it has only been buried beneath the more detached and objectifying styles of perception made possible by a variety of technologies upon which most moderns have come to depend, from the alphabet to the printing press, from the camera to the computer. In the course of our early education, most of us learn to transfer the participatory proclivity of our senses away from the more-than-human natural surroundings toward our own human symbols, entering into an animistic fascination with our own humanly-generated signs and, increasingly, with our own technologies. And as we grow into adulthood, our instinctive yearning for relationship with an encompassing sphere of life and intelligence is commonly channeled beyond the perceptual world entirely, into an abstract relation with a divine source assumed to reside entirely outside of earthly nature, beyond all bodily or sensory ken.

Yet even a contemporary sleight-of-hand magician still makes use of our latent impulse to participate, animistically, with the objects that we perceive. Magicians — whether contemporary sleight-of-hand conjurors or indigenous, tribal shamans — have in common the fact that they work with the participatory power of perception. (Perception is the magician's medium, as pigments are the medium for a painter.) Both the modern sleight-of-hand magician and the indigenous shaman are adept at breaking, or disrupting, the accepted perceptual habits of their culture. The indigenous shaman practices this in order to enter into relation and rapport with other, earthly forms of life and sentience. The modern magician enacts these disruptions merely in order to startle, and thereby entertain, his audience. Yet if contemporary conjurors were more aware of the ancient, indigenous sources of their craft (if they realized, for instance, that indigenous shamans from many native cultures already used sleight-of-hand techniques in their propitiatory and curative rituals), then even these modern magicians, too, might begin to realize a more vital, ecological function within contemporary culture.

For in an era when nature is primarily spoken of in abstract terms, as an objective and largely determinate set of mechanisms — at a time when eloquent behaviour of other animals is said to be entirely “programmed in their genes,” and when the surrounding sensuous landscape is referred to merely as a stock of “resources” for human use — it is clear that our direct, sensory engagement with the earth around us has become woefully impoverished. The accelerating ecological destruction wrought by contemporary humankind seems to stem not from any inherent meanness in our species but from a kind of perceptual obliviousness, an inability to actually *notice* anything outside the sphere of our human designs, a profound blindness and deafness to the more-than-human earth. In such an era, perhaps the most vital task of the sleight-of-hand magician is precisely to startle the senses from their slumber, to shake our eyes and our ears free from the static, habitual ways of seeing and hearing into which those senses have fallen under the deadening influence of abstract and overly-objectified ways of speaking and thinking.

Yet perhaps such magic is also, now, the province of all the arts — the province of music, of painting, of poetry. Perhaps it falls to all our artists, today, to wield their pigments and their words in such a way as to loosen the perceptual habits that currently keep us oblivious to our actual surroundings. In any case, the craft of magic is as necessary in the modern world as it was for our indigenous ancestors. For it is only by waking the senses from their contemporary swoon, freeing our eyes and our ears and our skin to actively participate, once again, in the breathing cosmos of wind and rain and stone, of spider-weave and crow-swoop and also, yes, the humming song of the streetlamp pouring its pale light over the leaf-strewn pavement, that we may have a chance of renewing our vital reciprocity with the animate, many-voiced earth.