

Pre-Historical Animism: Applied to the Systemised Self – Part 19,
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Abstract

Animism is often presented as the primordial belief that every animal, plant, stone, river, and storm contains a spirit. That picture joins a real modern history of anthropological theory to a stronger claim about human prehistory than surviving evidence can establish. E. B. Tylor's nineteenth century account cast animism as religion's universal starting point; later scholarship has instead explored situated relationships in which other than human beings may be encountered as persons. Neither view licenses a single, unchanged spirituality shared by all ancient peoples. This essay distinguishes archaeological inference from historical ethnography and living Indigenous traditions, and compares animism carefully with Tengri traditions, Daoist texts, Vedic sources, and Shinto. Mara, a fictional municipal arborist (for the purposes of analogy in this essay), uses a street tree platform that detects hazards and schedules remediation, but whose risk score can eclipse relations not represented in its data. Animist scholarship raises a question for the Systemised Self: what changes when a model turns an encountered being into a manageable object, and when the worker comes to know herself through its categories? Digital tools can support attention and reciprocal obligations; they can also narrow responsibility when their classifications become unanswerable. This is a philosophical comparison, not proof that trees or artificial intelligence possess humanlike consciousness, nor evidence that a universal prehistoric animism existed.

Keywords: *animism, prehistory, relational personhood, Indigenous traditions, ecology, Systemised Self, Hollow Absolute, Algorithmic Alienation Index*

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A – LIMITATIONS

‘Animism’ is a contested comparative term, not the name of one ancient, centralized religion. This essay does not infer universal prehistoric belief from burial, figurines, or rock art; nor does it treat contemporary Indigenous traditions as unchanged survivals. For certainty, this essay is speculative and commentative, and not a proof of concept. The fictional arborist for analogy in this essay, Mara, illustrates a possible feedback mechanism, not research evidence. Animist accounts of relational personhood are not reducible to a claim that every entity has a humanlike mind. Comparison with Tengri, Daoist, Vedic, and Shinto materials marks differences, not proof of a single origin or direct influence. Algorithmic Alienation has published theoretical and partial qualitative grounding; the proposed AAI and the Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) remain unvalidated and hypothetical. Digital trace and feed studies cited here establish bounded findings, not effects on forests or proof of alienation. Calhoun’s Universe 25 mouse study is not evidence about human or ecological collapse. Neither using a tool nor delegating routine decisions is, by itself, alienating.

1. Introduction

Mara, fictional character for analogy in this essay, is an arborist for a fictional city. A tree management platform combines inspection notes, weather, branch failures, and maintenance records to flag street trees for care. During a stormy season, the system helps her direct a small crew to damaged limbs before they fall. It also makes inspections consistent and keeps track of trees that staff might otherwise miss. In one neighborhood, however, an old tree is marked ‘low priority’: few past complaints have been filed, and its canopy scores below the platform’s preferred thresholds. Residents describe a different history, a shaded route, a gathering place, a nest site, and a tree they have tended through dry summers. They are not presented as

animists; their relations neither prove a hidden spirit nor establish a shared belief. But the ranking has already determined which account is easiest for the city to hear.

The title's 'pre-historical animism' names a question, not a settled answer. Archaeologists may infer that people engaged with animals, places, ancestors, or the dead from material traces. They cannot read a Palaeolithic person's theology directly from a burial or a painted animal. Nor can anthropologists turn living Indigenous practices into fossils of a universal human childhood.

E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) famously treated animism, the attribution of souls or spirits, as a minimal definition of religion and a universal starting point. Its etymology reaches the Latin *anima*, 'breath', 'life', or 'soul'. But a word's origin does not validate a global prehistory, and Tylor's evolutionary account belongs to a nineteenth century anthropology later challenged for ranking peoples on a single developmental ladder (Bird-David, 1999; Insoll, 2011).

Later scholarship has often shifted the question from 'Which things contain a soul?' to 'Who or what becomes a person through particular relations?'. That shift is not a new universal definition. It is a way to examine social practices in context. The distinction matters for Mara. A database may record trunk diameter accurately while missing the responsibilities and attachments that make the tree matter to those who live with it. The system's limits concern not only what it knows about the tree, but whose relation to the tree can shape a decision.

2. Animism's Intellectual Outline

Animism has at least two important intellectual histories. In Tylor's theory, it names the belief that spirits and souls explain dreams, death, and the world's animation; as a basic form of 'religion', it supposedly preceded more complex systems (Tylor, 1871). Modern anthropology

no longer accepts his universal evolutionary sequence as established history (Bird-David, 1999; Insoll, 2011). Yet his question, how do people conceive the relations between living beings, spirits, and the dead - did not disappear.

In a different line of work, anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell described Ojibwa understandings in which some beings conventionally regarded as ‘other than human’ could be encountered as persons. Nurit Bird-David, drawing on Nayaka ethnography in South India, later argued that ‘animism’ could be considered as relational epistemology: knowledge arises through practical, social relations with an environment understood as responsive (Hallowell, 1960; Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006). Graham Harvey’s (2005) scholarship likewise emphasizes relationships with ‘the more than human’ world. These accounts are ethnographic and interpretive, not transparent windows onto every Indigenous cosmology, let alone all prehistoric people.

Approach	Central question	What it can illuminate	Limit
Tylor’s nineteenth-century theory	How did concepts of soul and spirit explain life, dreams, and death?	A major history of anthropology’s category	Universal sequence and ‘primitive’ ranking are not established
Relational approaches	How do people meet, know, and become accountable to other than human persons?	Situated practices of attention, reciprocity, and sociality	No single model applies across communities
Archaeological inference	What practices might material traces preserve?	Burial, art, deposition, and place-making as evidence for inquiry	Objects rarely determine one belief or theology
The SS comparison	What is lost when a model stands in for a relation?	Institutional effects of classification and feedback	Analogy does not establish that an entity is conscious

In some traditions and field accounts, relations with animals or plants include restraint, exchange, ritual, or requests; in others, relations take different forms (Bird-David, 1999; Harvey, 2005). A hunter’s response to an animal taken, or a healer’s approach to a plant collected, might involve acknowledgement and care; neither example prescribes a ritual for

everyone. Even the claim that words possess souls must be established in a particular tradition, not made into an inventory of what all prehistoric people believed. Reciprocity describes situated obligations, not a standardized ceremony or an ancient algorithm for environmental balance.

‘Person’ also need not mean ‘a human mind inside another body’. The term can mark a relationship, a social status, or a being that demands attention and response within a community’s own account. It does not, by itself, settle questions in modern philosophy of consciousness, grant a legal status, or make two parties equally powerful. Our essays fictional character Mara, can owe a tree practical care without deciding whether the tree experiences the world as a person does.

3. Animism’s Key Theoretical Contributions

Animist scholarship does not supply a single ecological doctrine. Its most useful contributions are a set of distinctions.

Relation is not mere projection. Tylor’s model can sound as if people place invisible humanlike souls inside passive objects. Hallowell and Bird-David instead direct attention to relations that take shape through practice. Their work challenges the assumption that the human observer stands outside an inert environment. It does not show that every feature of nature must be conscious in the same way people are.

Reciprocity is an obligation, not an accounting symmetry. A relationship may require restraint, care, or recognition without turning the other being into an equal contracting party. Nor is reciprocity always a transaction that can be balanced by an offering. Mara’s city may be responsible for maintaining a tree because residents depend on its shade and habitat; measuring a number of ‘services’ can inform that decision but cannot determine the full obligation.

Attention precedes classification, but does not replace it. Tree risk models can identify patterns human observers miss. Relational attention can reveal something a dataset does not register: who uses a path, where a tree's roots have altered a sidewalk, or which residents have repeatedly requested care. One mode of knowing need not abolish the other. The question is whether measurement remains open to correction by embodied observation and local knowledge.

Different traditions are not interchangeable. The Old Turkic Orkhon inscriptions associate Tengri with Heaven and rulership in a historically specific setting, including relations among Heaven, Earth, and political community; they do not prove an unchanged, pan-steppe prehistoric animism (Golden, 1992; Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-b). Daoist accounts of Dao as a way are not a doctrine that every rock or river contains a spirit (Laozi, 2003). Early Vedic hymns address devas and ritual relations, but 'Hinduism' covers later, internally diverse traditions; the undeciphered Indus script cannot establish a direct Harappan theology (Jamison & Brereton, 2014; Olivelle, 2009; Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-a). Shinto kami are also not adequately reduced to generic nature spirits: practices and institutions developed through layered histories and encounters with Buddhism, state formation, and local traditions (Reader & Tanabe, 1998; Breen & Teeuwen, 2010). Comparative ontological schemes can help ask what differs among these worlds, but cannot collapse them into one prehistoric source (Descola, 2013).

4. A Genealogy of Preceding Theory Informing Animism

The history of 'animism' is not identical with the history of the human practices to which scholars apply it. Tylor coined a durable anthropological category in Victorian Britain, but the people he described did not call their own worlds 'animism' as one unified religion. Later

anthropologists, philosophers, and Indigenous thinkers have contested the category's assumptions and uses.

Prehistory presents a different evidentiary problem. Graves, animal images, unusual deposits, and repeated attention to particular landscapes can support hypotheses about ritual, memory, and human–nonhuman relations. They do not reveal, on their own, whether a community believed a species had a soul, whether a painted animal was worshipped, or whether one ritual applied across a region. Archaeology of ritual and religion therefore makes arguments from material contexts and alternative explanations, not direct testimony about ancient minds (Insoll, 2011).

Historical texts offer firmer but still situated records. The Orkhon monuments provide early medieval Turkic evidence, not prehistoric continuity. Vedic texts, Daoist classics, and Shinto records belong to different genres and social worlds; their apparent similarities do not establish a common ancestry. For the Indus Valley, undeciphered script means the evidence cannot bear a confident assignment of later Vedic or Hindu concepts. Continuity is a claim to investigate through dated sources and plausible pathways, not an assumption created by resemblance.

Contemporary Indigenous traditions are living and changing. Treating them as 'survivals' from an earlier stage of everyone else's history repeats the hierarchy animism's older evolutionary model implied. Historical comparison should respect the authority of communities to describe their own practice and the conditions under which knowledge may be shared.

5. The Systemised Self: Context and Definition

The Systemised Self (SS) is a proposed terminal condition of advanced Algorithmic Alienation: algorithmic mediation becomes structurally consequential to identity, preference, and agency, and dependence may be experienced as authentic self determination. It is not

ordinary technology use, a profile, or a diagnosis. In the proposed feedback loop, activity generates traces; classifications steer visibility and opportunity; subsequent activity then supplies more traces (Galu & Kairos, 2026a).

Our character Mara's platform might accurately flag an unstable limb. The concern is not that measurement is intrinsically hostile to relationship. It arises if an incomplete risk score becomes the sole account of what the tree is and what the city should do. There is also a second loop: Mara's own work is evaluated by closure rates and accepted risk flags. She may begin to understand good arboriculture as quickly resolving the platform's queue, even where the work she values involves listening, inspecting, and returning to a site.

The analogy is limited. A tree's being represented by data is not proof that the tree is a conscious subject. A large language model's conversational appearance and phenomenon likewise does not prove sentience, independent agency, or reciprocal accountability. Even when a user experiences a system as responsive, responsibility for its operation and consequences rests with people and institutions that design, deploy, and govern it.

6. The Hollow Absolute: Context and Definition

The Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) is a project specific Hegelian sociotechnical construct: a system appears comprehensive while mutual recognition and collective agency weaken. It is not an animist term or proof that modern administration has replaced an older spiritual world.

For our character Mara, the platform's map can look like a complete picture of the urban forest precisely because what it omits is difficult to count. The Hollow Absolute names the societal, institutional and political risk that a representation becomes self sufficient in institutional practice: the spreadsheet is accepted as reality, while residents' attachments and staff judgment

become anecdotal exceptions. This is not because an algorithm has a will of its own; it is because organizations give its outputs authority.

The project's related constructs, Neurocratic Determinism (Galu & Kairos, 2026b), Hollow Demos, and Aligarchy: describe proposed forms of preference shaping governance, reduction of citizens to predicted data, and infrastructural elite control. They are theoretical lenses, not established empirical findings. An animist comparison can ask which relations administrative categories erase; it cannot establish those constructs by analogy alone.

7. Contemporary Empirical Context

Digital traces can support inferences about selected traits. Kosinski et al. (2013) showed that Facebook Likes could predict certain attributes in their sample; this does not reveal a person's complete identity or relationships. The Federal Trade Commission's 2024 report documents extensive collection and use of data by major social-media and video-streaming services. In a U.S. election experiment, feed ranking affected exposure and platform use, although short-term effects on several attitudinal measures were limited (Guess et al., 2023). A meta-analysis found that self-reported digital use often differs from logged activity (Parry et al., 2021).

Evidence	Supports	Does not establish
Digital-trace prediction (Kosinski et al., 2013)	Selected attributes can be inferred from behaviour	Complete knowledge or settled identity
FTC review (2024)	Extensive corporate data practices	Uniform effects across users and services
Feed experiment (Guess et al., 2023)	Ranking can change exposure and activity	Inevitable, lasting transformation of self
Usage-report meta-analysis (Parry et al., 2021)	Logged and recalled activity can diverge	That either reveals relational meaning

These findings do not study urban forestry, prove that an arborist's work is alienated, or validate the SS. They motivate questions about how an institution's classifications affect the visibility of certain actions and voices. The specific feedback mechanism in Mara's example remains a hypothesis to test, not an effect inferred from studies of social-media feeds.

8. Formula and Boundary Conditions – Algorithmic Alienation Index

(AAI)

Algorithmic Alienation (AA) has published theoretical grounding and partial qualitative research (Kanbay et al., 2026; Arkan et al., 2026). Arkan and colleagues' focus groups provide exploratory evidence, not validation of a scale. The proposed Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI) operationalizes selected dimensions; its items, weights, thresholds, and scoring model remain unvalidated (Galu & Kairos, 2026c). The SS is a further hypothesis, not a synonym for AA or the index.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{AAI_base} &= 0.30(\text{DAu}) + 0.25(\text{IAm}) + 0.25(\text{EDm}) + 0.20(\text{EDc}) \\ \text{AAI_adjusted} &= \text{AAI_base} \times (1 - \text{RA}) \end{aligned}$$

- DAu is Diminished Autonomy
- IAm, Identity Ambiguity
- EDm, Eroded Decision-Making
- EDc, Emotional Disconnection
- RA, Algorithmic Resistance

Each is provisionally scaled from 0 to 1. The proposed candidate boundary is adjusted $\text{AAI} \geq .95$ and $\text{RA} \leq .05$. It is exceptionally restrictive: a base score of 1.00 with $\text{RA} = .05$ only just

reaches .95. These are theory derived hypotheses, not validated parameters or a diagnosis. Report the base score, adjusted score, and dimensions separately; a resistance multiplier could conceal pressure by lowering a summary score.

Dimension	Question for Mara (fictional essay analogy)	Boundary
Dau	Can she make care priorities beyond queue rankings?	Agency also depends on workplace authority
Iam	Does she experience the platform's target as her own standard?	Identity is more than preference authorship
Edm	Can she consider inspections and community reports?	Speed is not proof of poor judgment
Edc	Does the work feel connected to trees and residents?	Feeling alone cannot validate the construct
RA	Can she challenge, correct, or bypass outputs?	Low resistance may reflect job constraints

A candidate SS classification would require both subjective evidence and independent behavioural evidence of dependence, including response when personalization is disrupted. Self-report remains indispensable: 'phenomenological inversion' cannot be used to discredit a participant who says a tool helps. Compare weights, test reliability and measurement invariance, and examine disability accommodation, professional delegation, and lack of alternatives as rival explanations. Revise or abandon the proposal if results fail to support it.

9. Animism, Calhoun, and the Digital Behavioural Sink

Calhoun's 'Death Squared' describes disruptions in a population of mice living in a crowded, provisioned enclosure (Calhoun, 1973). At most, it prompts a narrow question about whether material supply by itself ensures a viable social environment. It is not evidence for a universal human need for animism, nor can it predict human communities, forests, or platforms.

The tempting story, that humans once lived in a reciprocal, enchanted world and now face digital alienation, turns both prehistory and contemporary animist societies into convenient symbols. The archaeological record cannot establish that golden age, and Calhoun cannot show that abstraction destroys human sociality. Our character Mara's platform may help prevent injuries and sustain a tree inventory; the issue is whether the tool's use leaves room for responsible, revisable care. Neither 'more data' nor 'more spirit' is a substitute for asking who has authority and what a practice requires.

10. Direct Synthesis: Animism and the Systemised Self

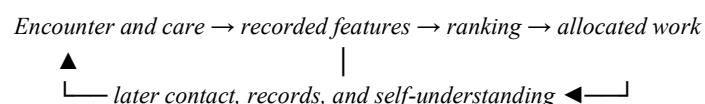
The most productive contrast is not 'animism versus technology', it is between a relation that obliges response and a classification that can circulate without response. Animist scholarship asks how a being becomes significant through situated relations; a risk model takes features of that being, converts them into variables, and makes a decision administratively portable. That abstraction may be useful. But portability can detach a score from the field conditions, people, and obligations that gave its data meaning.

Consider Mara's mature street tree. The platform notices a branch failure pattern and sends a crew before a storm. This is attentive infrastructure: sensor readings, images, and records extend human noticing. In another decision, an incomplete complaint history makes the same tree 'low priority'. Residents' accounts of heat, shade, nesting, and care are not proof of a particular metaphysics. They are relevant evidence about the city's responsibilities and the actual uses of a shared environment. If the system cannot ingest such observations, or if staff lack power to act on them, the score's narrowness becomes institutional, not simply technical. Three substitutions follow.

First, contact becomes proxy, direct inspection is replaced by a risk indicator. A proxy can be a good alert, but it is not the tree or the whole history of contact with it. The ethical task is to ask what the proxy helps notice and what it prevents decision makers from noticing.

Second, reciprocity becomes optimization. A model can optimize survival rates, canopy, maintenance cost, or injury prevention. None independently answers who bears the cost of removal, who receives shade, or what ongoing obligations the city has accepted. The animist lens does not offer one universal answer about which beings have rights; it makes the grounds of care a live question rather than an invisible default.

Third, professional identity becomes legibility. Mara's inspection activity is logged; 'resolved tickets' become her performance. A record initially designed to coordinate teams can shape what counts as competent arboriculture. Repeatedly completing what is easiest to score may make her own wider practice, listening, observation, and long-term care, less available. This is the hypothesized recursive path from action to data, from data to allocation, and from allocation back to the worker's next action. It could also run in a beneficial direction if the tool frees time for fieldwork and communities can correct the queue.



Feedback is possible, not inevitable; test its effects in context.

This is where SS has a distinct role. It names a hypothesized condition in which systems do not only sort tasks but increasingly mediate the subject's own preferences and agency; dependence may feel like freedom. Animism does not diagnose that state. It illuminates what such mediation can flatten: the self is not merely a chooser responding to prompts, but a participant in relationships that predate the interface and exceed its log. If Mara learns to equate care with whatever the model recognizes, her professional self may be shaped by the system's boundary

even when she values its assistance. Whether that occurs, and whether she feels estranged, requires empirical inquiry.

Nor should a responsive interface be mistaken for a mutual relationship. A chatbot that names Mara or remembers past decisions can invite a sense of encounter. It does not follow that the model is sentient, that the corporation is reciprocally accountable, or that her user experience and its training data form an equal exchange. Recognition can be psychologically consequential even when reciprocity is structurally absent. The burden of explaining and governing that asymmetry belongs to people and institutions.

An answerable system would preserve monitoring while separating evidence from judgment: show uncertainty and data gaps; permit field notes and community reports; record why a crew overrides a score; audit which neighborhoods receive attention; and give affected residents real avenues to change priorities. This is not the design of an ‘animist algorithm’. It is a practical test of whether measurement supports relationships rather than claiming to replace them.

11. Main Critics and Key Critiques of Animism

The category inherits a colonial history. Tylor’s ‘primitive’ stages positioned living communities lower on an evolutionary ladder toward a supposedly more rational modernity. Reusing the term requires making that history visible and not treating animist peoples as evidence of humanity’s past.

Relational accounts can romanticize. Reciprocity does not eliminate conflict, extraction, hierarchy, or harm. A community can have complex relationships with a being and still disagree about what is permitted. ‘Traditional ecological wisdom’ is not a guarantee of sustainability or consensus.

Archaeological interpretation is underdetermined. A figurine, burial, or animal image may support several explanations; without direct testimony, it cannot establish a universal spirit ontology. Claims about Palaeolithic belief should be presented as hypotheses tied to specific contexts.

Personhood is not a scientific consciousness test. Treating a tree, animal, river, or machine as a ‘person’ in a particular relational or legal account does not settle whether it has subjective experience. Conversely, uncertainty about its experience does not automatically settle every question of human duty or ecological protection.

Comparison can flatten living differences. Calling Tengri, Dao, Vedic devas, kami, and Indigenous relational practices all ‘animism’ risks erasing their distinct histories. Similarities may invite comparison; they do not prove common origin.

12. Discussion and Future Work

Research on tree management systems should examine both benefits and exclusions. Follow alerts, inspections, removals, and work orders over time. Compare system scores with independent arborist assessment and community submitted evidence, while checking who can correct a record and whether corrections change decisions. Interview workers about how performance metrics affect their professional judgment; ask residents what data matter to them rather than assuming ‘community relation’ has one meaning.

Co-design must not convert Indigenous knowledge into a new dataset without consent, governance, attribution, and the right to withhold. Study accessibility and delegation as well: an automated inspection log may make work safer or more manageable for some staff. Such assistance is not evidence of alienation. Nor should researchers infer a tree’s or animal’s inner experience from a human’s sense of relation.

Validate the AAI independently, preregister hypotheses, test dimensional structure and invariance across groups, report each dimension and both scores, and define evidence that would count against SS. Longitudinal research should distinguish institutional constraint from chosen delegation and subjective estrangement from behavioural dependence. The central outcome is not a timeless index of human ‘connectedness’, but whether people can contest categories that materially shape their work and environment.

13. Conclusion

No surviving evidence licenses the simple story that all prehistoric people shared one animist religion, and no contemporary Indigenous community should be cast as its unchanged remnant. Yet relational animist scholarship offers an interesting question for digital governance: what obligations disappear when beings, places, workers, and histories are translated into standardized entries?

Our fictional character Mara’s platform can warn her of a dangerous branch; it cannot decide by itself what a city owes the living place its data describes. When a score informs but remains answerable to inspection, memory, and public judgment, it can support care. When it becomes the only reality an institution rewards, and reshapes a worker’s sense of what care is, it risks narrowing both relation and self.

14. Glossary of Technical Terms

Animism: A modern comparative category with differing histories; in some contemporary approaches, a situated mode of relating to other than human persons, not a universal doctrine that everything houses a humanlike soul.

Algorithmic Alienation (AA): A published theoretical construct concerning estrangement associated with sustained algorithmic mediation, with partial qualitative grounding.

Algorithmic Alienation Index (AAI): A proposed, unvalidated operationalization of selected AA dimensions and resistance.

Anima: Latin for breath, life, or soul; the root from which the modern term animism is derived.

Hollow Absolute (the): Construct for apparent systemic completeness alongside weakened mutual recognition and collective agency.

Other-than-human person: A relational category used in some ethnographic accounts; not necessarily a claim of humanlike consciousness or legal personhood.

Reciprocity: Situated expectations and practices of response or obligation within relations; not one universal exchange ritual.

Systemised Self, the (SS): Hypothesized terminal condition of advanced algorithmic alienation, not a diagnosis.

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