

## *Animism Belief that Worships the Tree in Malaysia*

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### **Abstract**

Worshipping trees in Malaysia is not a wonder at strange sights in Malaysia. Malaysians believe in animism. The objective of this research project is to present some preliminary thoughts of tree animism and analyse the animism practices and beliefs in Malaysia so that a better understanding of animism can be established as the vast research by Animists little is known about the perspective of Animists in Malaysia. The field investigation was conducted to explore three popular trees. This study discovers some of the Malaysian Animists' perspective. In this animism belief, they see them as powerful symbols of growth, decay, and resurrection. The first field observation conducted on a Chinese temple, the tree has been worship by the society since 1977 as a spiritual belief that the tree inherent the spirit of a local god. It has a major influence on the society especially surroundings area of based on its supremacy and mythology incident. The believer worships the tree for prosperous in wealth as proven from the donation made by the believer in enhancing the temple. The second was conducted on a Thai temple, the tree named Bodhi tree. By practicing meditation near the Bodhi tree, believer able to calm down their mind and obtained an answer to solve their life's problem. The third was the "Vilva" tree located at a Hindus temple, it is believed connected to the god of "Sri Nagaraja" in Hinduism and solves their relationship problems. For future study, researcher may work on the belief of rock animism.

Keywords: Animism, Malaysia, Multi-cultural.

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## Introduction

Animism forms the basis for new religious movements in all parts of the world. In reality, animism is a culture and a religion. Culture, religion, and relationships are always together in the tribal world (Sitton, 1998). David Sitton studied on the spiritual warfare in a tribal context, where Darryl Wilkinson argued that the new animism is only particularly “indigenous” in its promotion of non-western ontologies (Wilkinson, 2017). On the other hand, Maheshvari examined the notion of animism and environmental rationality and investigated the credibility of the resonance of “animism practices” within a contemporary environmental awareness (Naidu, 2011). The researcher considers animism a growing concern in Malaysia, however there is paucity of research and information on animism in Malaysia as this belief is based on idle talk and stories that cannot be verified (Webmaster, 2014) and some forms of animistic belief is not recognized by the Malaysian government as a religion (Man, 2019). In Man’s study, Filipinos made offerings to certain trees that were thought to be the occupancy of a benevolent holy being, or even certain ancestral spirits, the widespread concept of animism in the Philippines was addressed and documented. As published in the Malaysia Culture and Lifestyle, the concept of animism ascends among the Malays to pass through various concepts and terms derived collectively from Buddhism and Hinduism (Malayculture, 2012). Therefore, this paper intended to outline some of the Malaysian Animists’ perspective through field observation in a small scale qualitative research in Klang Valley specifically on trees worshipped by Malaysian Animists. The data from the field observation is based on the three widely held belief in Malaysia - “Sufism, Buddhism, and Hinduism”.

## Literature Review

**Animism.** Animism is the belief that there is no separation between the spiritual and physical (or material) world. Souls or spirits exist not only in humans, but also in geographic features such as mountains and rivers, or other entities of the natural environment including thunder, wind, shadows, animals, plants, and rocks (Harvey, 2006). Animism is practiced based on religious belief across culture. It is not only defined as an attribution of a living soul such as words, names, and metaphors representation but also the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe.

In the anthropology of religion, animism belief is practiced as a term for the religion of indigenous tribal peoples towards the development or infiltration of civilization and organized religion. Nowadays, the belief of animism is not only applied by indigenous tribal people on prehistory era but it influences the modern society that believing in ‘spiritual’ or ‘supernatural’ perspective. Some examples of the animism belief can be found in forms of Shinto, Serer, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Pantheism, Paganism, and Neopaganism. Animism happens in the society because they believe the existing of spiritual power, which enable them to fulfil their wishes and demands, especially for wealth.

**The concept of Animism.** In South America, the Circumpolar region and India, Animism was reintroduced during the last decade of the twentieth century (Nathan Porath, 2017). These models strengthened the concept of “animism” developed by Edward Burnet Tylor (1871). In the “New Animism” model, animism is understood

as a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence, which generally interacting with each other (Bird-David, 2006). Sometimes, these agents are called “soul/ spirit” (Descola, 2006).

The animist-ontology believes that every species has their own nature or perspective: the species sees itself in the way humans see themselves and vice versa (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), this line of thought is supported by Tim Ingold (Ingold, 2000).

The new animism (or animic) models (Ingold, 2000) have hardly been applied to the Southeast Asian region. Kaj Arhem and Guido Sprenger have published two books providing ethnographic data that lets us discover the new animism models. These books focus particularly on offerings and sacrifice, as well as perspectival inversions and landscapes. This study is essential for scholars working on spirit-related topics. It also shed light on another question: the missing gaps of the tree animism particularly in Malaysia, a new approach to offer an answer by the researcher.

**Animism practices and beliefs in Malaysia.** Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism all play a part in the day to day life of Malaysians. Malaysians, similar to Thailand’s Animist practices and beliefs, 95 percent of the population of Buddhist of Thais who have animist beliefs. Although their religion is Buddhism or Hinduism, they actually devoted more of their time to Animist beliefs than they do practicing Buddhism or Hinduism (C, 2018).

In Malaysia you can find examples of Animism in nature, the most outstanding feature of Animism in Malaysia is the spirit trees situated outside temples, car parks, or just about anywhere people live, work or gather. When a tree is not merely a tree, daily offerings of joss sticks, food and drink are often placed at the base of the tree. By observing the growth and death of trees, the elasticity of their branches, the sensitivity, annual decay and revival of their foliage, human being see them as powerful symbols of growth, decay, and resurrection. Malaysians are not worshipping the tree but the spirit resides within the tree based on the history or mythos passed from generation to generation. Based on the symbolic representation of ‘World Tree’ (see Figure 1), animism rationally exist in tree as the branches reaching up into the sky, and roots deep into the earth, animist believes that this can be seen to dwell in three worlds – a connection between heaven, the earth, and the underworld, uniting above and below (Mountfort, 2003).

The research conducted able to give a better theoretical understanding of the society about the animism belief in Malaysia. On the other hand, the research findings reserve the belief of animism in Malaysia towards the development or infiltration of civilization and organized religion.



Figure 1: Symbolic Representation of “World Tree”.  
Source: gospelsentinels.com

## Research Methodology

Field observation was performed in this small scale qualitative research project (Rossman, 2003) while conducting field research, field notes including photographs were kept as a record. The three samplings were based on the popularity in the capital city of Malaysia, the Klang Valley; which is a Sufism temple located at Ipoh Road Chinese temple, a Buddhist temple located at Wat Chetawan and Hinduism temple; Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple located at Batu Cave, Kuala Lumpur. Each of the selected temples has the similarity of believing in animism that worships the tree.

The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with three sampling relevant persons; they are the helper, community member and or temple guardian. The interviews were to explore the animism of these three designated samplings according to the fields (see Table 1).

Researcher pre-arranged the interview by making an appointment to meet up at their temple at a convenient time. Total time per interview was 35 minutes, 48 minutes, and 32 minutes respectively for the Ipoh Road Chinese Temple, Wat Chetawan and Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple. The researcher had visited the temples and permission was given to snap photographs as reference and evident.

In addition, the researcher engaged in-depth interview method to investigate the animism in an in-depth way and to discover how the respondent thinks and belief in it. Interview conducted towards the relevant people who work there as a helper and or community member has conducted at all designated samplings accordingly to the field (see Table 1)

Table 1: The Summary of Interviewee Information

No	Research fields	Interviewees	Background	Years Servings
1.	Ipoh Road Chinese Temple	Ms. W	Temple committee member	12
2.	Wat Chetawan	Mr. WS	Temple guardian	10
3.	Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple	Mr. S	Temple guardian	12

## Results and Discussion

### Field Observation 1: Ipoh Road Chinese Temple

**Sufism.** Located in Ipoh Road, Kuala Lumpur. It is popular among Chinese society in Klang Valley. Its famous mythology incident has been spread verbally throughout the society in believing the temple. The location of the temple is located at the high traffic junction between Ipoh road and Tun Razak road, under the flyover bridge towards Putra World Trade Center (PWTC) in Kuala Lumpur (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Overview of Ipoh Road Chinese Temple.

As based on the interview conducted on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2015, the tree has been worship by the society since around 1977 as a spiritual belief that the tree inherent the spirit of the “Datuk Keramat”. This Chinese temple worships Datuk Keramat - a statue serves as a guardian of the temple. It is a fusion of pre-islamic spirit belief called Sufi Saint worship (Sufism) and Chinese folk religion.

The myth of the temple awaken the society around the area was the temple have indestructible power from being demolished by governing council body as during the build-up project of the flyover. The incident was the governing council’s tractor not functioning all of the sudden and the contractor fell sick whenever they tried to demolish the temple. Several sub-contractors have been hired for the demolish project but gone fail every time. The popular myth incidents happened in relation to the god of the guardian of the temple whereas belief the spirit inherent in a tree near the

temple. There is a belief of animism exist in the tree. A lot of Chinese and Indian society around Ipoh Road worships the tree to make their wishes.

‘Datuk Keramat’ at this Chinese Temple gives a major influence to the society especially surroundings area of Ipoh Road based on its supremacy and mythology incident. Worshippers usually pray to ‘Datuk Keramat’ for protection, good health, good luck, and sometimes seek divine help to overcome their problems. As from time to time, the shrine and supremacy of ‘Datuk Keramat’ helped and fulfilled most of the society wishes and demand especially for wealth. As appreciation towards ‘Datuk Keramat’, the society has built a tiled cement hut as a comfortable shelter under the tree for “Datuk Keramat” (See Figure 3 to 5).



Figure 3: Ipoh Road Chinese Temple.



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“Datuk Keramat” built the trust to the animism. Moreover, the temple venue with indestructible power from being demolished the governance council gains additional trust towards the society.

Figure 5: Statue

**Field Observation 2: Wat Chetawan**

**Buddhism.** There is a worship tree which belief in animism in Wat Chetawan (see Figure 6), a Thai Buddhist temple located in Gasing Road, Selangor. The interview was conducted on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2015. Interview explained that the worship tree at Wat Chetawan is a Bodhi tree which is sat behind the temple building. Figure 7 shows the view of the worship tree as the Bodhi Tree. The Bodhi tree of Wat Chetawan is believed to have supernatural power to overcome the devotees or believer mind when they practice meditation on the surrounded platform. Somehow, the Bodhi tree will calm down them in belief that will give protection and life problem solution.



Figure 6: “Wat Chetawan”.



Figure 7: The worship Bodhi tree at Wat Chetawan.

As the research on the history of Buddhism, the Bodhi tree was symbolic of "awakeness" long before Prince Siddhartha Gautama entered the opening of enlightenment beneath its leaves in 528 B.C. Indeed, the name Bodhi or (also known as bo) means "awakening." Even the scientific world recognizes the spiritual associations with this tree as its botanical name, *ficus religiosa*, means "religious fig." The Bodhi tree is sacred in India and venerated in Bodhgaya where it is said the descendant of the original tree where the Buddha experienced spiritual awakening still grows.

Even before the Buddha's spiritual expansion sparked the revolutionary religious teachings of Buddhism, the Bodhi tree symbolism was associated with Vishnu, a major archetypal Hindu god. Vishnu is the sustainer of the universe and part of the holy trinity with Brahma and Shiva completing the divine triad (Phillips, 2015).

As based on the analysis between society's belief and history, there is a relation in between; whereby the society as belief the Bodhi Tree at Wat Chetawan provide them the protection, relax their mind when meditation and solution towards their life problems as its somehow synchronised to the Buddha's cosmology (Defeating the Mara's Story). As a summary, the Bodhi Tree is belief functioning as enlightenment to the society. As the worship tree (Bodhi Tree) in Wat Chetawan serve the same function as protection in the Buddha cosmology protecting the society around the area.

### Field Observation 3: Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple, Batu Cave

**Hinduism.** The Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple, Batu Cave (see Figure 8), located in Gombak, Batu Cave, Kuala Lumpur, is also a popular tourist spot and the staircase (see Figure 9) is one of the main unique attractions about the place. Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple limestone temple hill is one of the most popular Hindu shrines outside India. The researcher met up the pre-arranged interview at Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015.

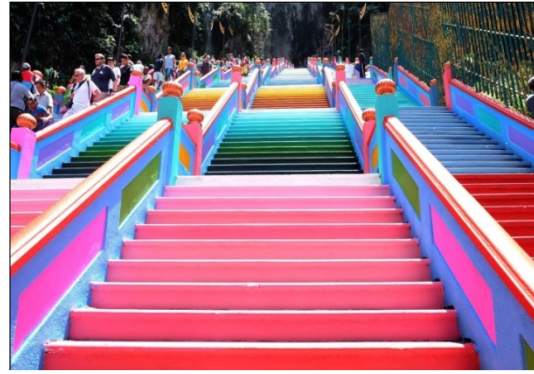


Figure 8: The Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple, Batu Cave.

Figure 9: The U  
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The worship tree is located at the new subdivision temple (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). Previously the sacred tree is stand-alone at the exterior area but now the committee builds a subdivision-roofing temple with major upgrading renovation as contributed by the donation from society and visitors. The sacred tree believed connected to the god of “Sri Nagaraja” in Hinduism. As society’s belief, the tree is the shelter for the spirit of “Sri Nagaraja”.



Figure 10: The sacred tree at subdivision of the temple.



Figure 11: The sacred tree in the temple.

Generally, trees considered friends of human as they provide us shelter, food, fuel, and oxygen for good living. The worship tree is the ‘Vilva’ types of a tree as the only tree that have uniquely three-pronged leaves that sprout together like a trident. He also claimed that the leaves of the worship tree as ‘Vilva’ type can be the function to relief the diabetics disease and the pulp of the fruit can heal diarrhea. The fruits from the tree are called ‘Bel’ and was a favorite fruit of Lord Shiva; the Supreme God within Shaivism, one of the most influential denominations in Hinduism (Sharma, 1996).



God of Sri Nagaraja in a Sanskrit word from Naga (snake) and Raja (king) meaning "King of Snakes". It applied to three main deities; Sheshanaga, Takshaka, and Vasuki. Ananda, Vasuki, and Takshaka are brothers, children of Kashyapa and Kadru, who are the parents of all snakes. The worship tree is a comfortable shelter for the god Sri Nagaraja as belief as king of snakes. He entwines the neck of Lord Siva and function as the bed of Lord Vishnu (Phillips, 2015). A lot of Hindus and visitors worship the tree as sacred with the god of Sri Nagaraja. They worship the tree in paying the spiritual respect to the Sri Nagaraja. Some of them make a wish towards this sacred tree to solve their relationship problems and asking protection purpose but less on wealth perspective. The statue of 'Sri Nagaraja' set at the tree (see Figure 12). It is believed that every wish made from the society will use a yellow ribbon or red string or others ornament (see Figure 13) to make a mark to the sacred tree as a reminder to the god of Sri Nagaraja. In addition, for those who wish on the matter of relationship problem, they tied a note that folded on the tree with written their wishes as a message (see Figure 14) to the god Sri Nagaraja.



Figure 12: Statue of 'Sri Nagaraja'



Figure 13: A marking of wishes.



Figure 14: A wishing note of relationship wishes tied to the worship tree.

This summarized that in Hinduism; they worship the tree because it is a metaphor for their god named "Sri Nagaraja" and believe the tree is a comfortable shelter for "Sri Nagaraja" as a king of snakes. The believer makes a mark using yellow ribbon or red string or others ornament as a reminder message to "Sri Nagaraja" as to wish for safety and a better relationship in life.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, after in-depth interview and observing the three fields of Ipoh Road Chinese Temple, Wat Chetawan and Sri Subramaniam Hindus Temple, Batu Cave have the similarity in their concept of worshipping the tree. Divine beings manifest as trees, and believer worship them to fulfill their desires or to please the belief of the spirit or god. In addition, a tree is a vital form of communication for believers to express their personal problems and releasing negative energy. The practice was able to motivate, strengthen, comforting and giving them a direction of hope.

The essential contention of this research is that the practice was a natural cosmology religious existed as a part of tradition according to the animism belief, which functioned to serve in the cultural life of the society. Stories of the sacrifice and service done by trees are told from our childhood time. In fact, the tree owned the earth before man appeared on it presently, the world seriously threatened by the destruction of forestlands and the extinction of many species of vegetation due to human's callous attitude. It is everyone duty to plant and nourish the trees, as the trees serving us with its oxygen, giving us the vital factors that make life possible on earth and last but not least giving a positive psychological motivation towards animism believer to journey through the life path.

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