

# **Animism in Zomia:**

## **Possibility of ‘Anarcho-Animism’**

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### **Summary**

In my experience working for a global law firm, we are bound by the system and authority created by global industrial civilization. To move beyond such oppression of an autonomous “life”, it may be necessary to reassess “Animism in Zomia” in the world beyond its domination. This paper will organize animism's historical context, starting from James C. Scott's Zomia and Iwata Keiji's animism theory. The relationship between animism as a theory of life and anarchism as a political theory, which is academically located in different contexts, is then examined in light of the artistic practices of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and other artists in Zomia. Animism and anarchism transcend the boundaries between life theory and political theory, allowing us to rethink our “life”. As an idea that evokes a concrete movement, the writer would like to present "Anarcho Animism" as a trial theory.

### **Introduction**

The writer organizes an art network of artists, curators and others in Asia called ‘Production Zomia’<sup>1</sup>. Production Zomia organized the exhibition ‘Anarcho-Animism’ at the Reborn Art Festival in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan, from 22<sup>nd</sup> August to 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022, inviting six artists from Asia<sup>2</sup>. Based on preliminary research and exhibition experience here, the first chapter of this paper

introduces animism thought and its artistic practice in Zomia. In chapter 2, the historical context of animism theory in the post-modern period is summarized. In chapter 3, the relationship between ‘animism as a theory of life’ and ‘anarchism as a political theory’, which are academically located in completely different contexts, is examined. In the final chapter, I take the expression of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (1970-) as a starting point to reconsider animism and anarchism as ideas that transcend the boundaries between life theory and political theory, and evoke a new idea and concrete action about our ‘life’. To this, artistic practice is added and presented as a trial theory on ‘Anarcho Animism’, a term the writer myself coined.

## **1 Animism in Zomia**

### **1.1 What is Zomia?**

First, ‘Zomia’ is a geographical concept that refers to the mountainous areas of continental South East Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar) and Southern China (Figure1) and derives from the Tibetan and Myanmarese word ‘Zomi’ (highlanders). According to James C. Scott (1936-), the people living in Zomia, such as Akha and Lahu<sup>3</sup>, are those who escape all forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Production Zomia is an art collective formed in 2021 and is an anonymous organisation consisting mainly of artists and curators from South-East Asia. Recent exhibitions include ‘Zomi: Trans-Local Migrants on the Water - Contemporary Art from the Mekong Region’ (Semba, Osaka Prefecture) and ‘Orange Mandala’ (Kinan, Wakayama Prefecture).

<sup>2</sup> More information on Production Zomia can be found on the Reborn Art Festival website [Reborn Art Festival 2021-2022].

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the Akha, other ethnic minorities such as Karen, Kachin, Hmong, and Hani are the people living in Zomia today.

<sup>4</sup> The area of mountainous terrain in the red part of the diagram is the so-called Zomia.

domination by the state in the plains, such as taxation, military service, and slavery, and live in a non-state society based on animism and with little hierarchy [Scott 2013: ix, x].

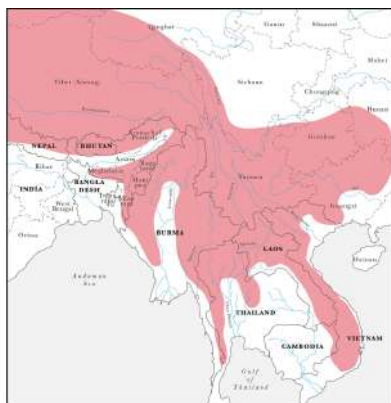


Figure 1: Map of the Zomia made by the writer

Among these ‘Zo-mi’ are extant ‘hilly Zomi’ who were driven from the plains and migrated to mountainous areas, and those who fled to the sea via rivers and continued to migrate as ‘watery Zomi’ [Scott 2013: xv]. For example, the sea gypsies of the Southeast Asian islands<sup>4</sup> who crossed from continental Southeast Asia to archipelagos such as the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra are the latter [Suzuki 2016: 120]. Japanese anthropologist Nakazawa Shinichi (1950-) also states that the ‘*wajin*’ (Japanese) who migrated to the Japanese archipelago from continental Southeast Asia may be the ‘Watery (sea) Zomi’ [Nakazawa 2021: 61]. Furthermore, Nakazawa argues that in Japanese society, before the establishment of the religion of ‘*Shinto*’, there were no powerful kings, and that nature worship, with its source in the natural power

of the serpent standing on sacred mountains, and the sea spirits who ruled over the sea realm, has long been the foundation of Japanese belief. Moreover, he indicates that the ‘Watery Zomi’ have influenced the historical formation of Japanese culture at an archaic level.

From the above discussion, it is believed that the Zomian people have had faith in the lesser spirits in nature and have lived with their blessings and disasters. Therefore, they may have formed a wisdom that avoids exclusion and purification and does not produce a single center, that is, animistic wisdom that creates mixed relationships with various beings, such as plants, animals, inorganic substance and spirits.

To begin with, animism is said to be “One of the original forms of witchcraft and religion” [Kojien 2018: 73]. ‘Anima’ is Latin for ‘life’ or ‘soul’, and ‘animus’ means its dynamic ‘spirit’ or ‘will’ [Rawa Jiten 2011: 40,41].

## 1.2 Art in Zomia

The animism of the trees, the birds, and so on, the universe is the protagonist of its own world and speaks for itself, waiting for the time to come when it can be heard by each other [Iwata 2020: 12].

In considering animism in Zomia, the anthropologist Iwata Keiji (1922-2013), who

<sup>4</sup> This includes Borneo, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Taiwan.

<sup>5</sup> The writer has lived in Southeast Asia for more than 10 years and when entering the actual Zomia region, the writer could not help but feel a connection with the Kumano region, the writer's homeland. This is only intuitive, but there seem to be many similarities between the two. Kumano is also full of animistic elements, and as typified by the Nachi waterfalls, the seat of the *kami* of Kumano is extremely diverse, including stones, trees,

forests, islands, and caves. Folklore scholar Nomoto Kanichi (1937-) states that “The use of natural objects as the seat of *kami* can be found throughout Japan, but the variety, quality, and distribution of these objects are characteristic of Kumano” [Nomoto 2010: 274]. In the past, based on the similarities between Kumano and Zomia, the writer wrote ‘Kumano and Zomia - starting from the starting from the expression of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’

descended from a member of the Kyoto School, offered a suggestion. Whilst conducting research in various parts of Southeast Asia, Iwata reassessed animism from the perspective of Buddhism and other Eastern thoughts<sup>5</sup>. In response to Iwata's words, anthropologist Katsumi Okuno (1962-) summarizes animism as "The idea that humans are not the only masters on earth" [Okuno and Shimizu 2021: 311]. In other words, animism is a way of thinking that promotes respect for the self-participation and involvement (commitment) of various beings, both humans and non-humans. In addition, regarding the interconnectedness of various beings, Iwata states that animism means that "Spirit resides in all beings. It is both a thing and a *kami* (God)" [Iwata 2020: 12]. He also says that "Spirit is like an ocean", and that "The links with various beings are continuous and unbroken" [Iwata 2020: 82]. In other words, the interrelationships of various beings in animism are not fixed and are always in flux at their core.

In Zomia, the Thai people's Phi, the Khmer people's Kamoi and the Malay people's Hantou beliefs believe that spirits reside in everything, including stones, mountains, and water [Iwata 2020: 82]. There is a limit to consideration within the scope of human consciousness, and they try to reconsider the world from the perspective of trees and birds. In other words, Iwata's theory of animism can be characterised as a 'theory of animism' that tries to go beyond the so-called 'Cartesian Western' dualism of humans and non-humans, spirit and matter, subject and object.

Art has so far functioned effectively as a way of

making this visible. In Japan, for example, the *iomante* (spirit sending) of the Ainu people of Hokkaido is often taken up as an example of animism, showing the fluid and reciprocal links between various beings. People send the souls of hunted bears and foxes back to the 'world of the *kami*' (*kamui*) with appropriate etiquette; thus they can finally eat the meat. The accompanying festivities, in which both joy and sorrow are expressed, have given rise to performing arts and songs as part of the culture of many hunter-gatherers. These were regarded as 'rituals', and furthermore, in the present day, they are created as universal images common to humanity and sublimated as 'art' in order to share their essence.

In recent years, anthropologists and artists have developed a movement to re-evaluate and recapture animism. For instance, Rane Willerslev (1971-), an advocate of 'taking animism seriously', has theoretically examined how the souls and lives of hunters and hunted creatures communicate in hunting rituals in Yukaghir, Siberia. As Willerslev states, "The hunter's psychological stability, his sense of self as a personality, depends precisely on the animal as a personality" [Willerslev 2018: 186], the hunter is given the personality of an animal from the personality of a human in the course of his immersion into hunting practice. That is, the subject attempts to demonstrate the gradual and practical diminishing of the boundary between human and non-human in the experience of the 'double negative' oscillation between human and non-human, where the 'I' means 'I = not myself', 'I = probably not myself'.

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<sup>5</sup> After the war, he stayed in Kyoto and, with Dogen's Shobogenzo in hand, and influenced by geographer Alexander von Humboldt's (1769-1859) 'Cosmos', sought a monistic view

of animism based on the coexistence and intersection of multiple perspectives [See Okuno & Shimizu 2021: 105-107].

For example, Busui Ajaw<sup>6</sup> (1986-) from Chiang Rai, a mountainous region in the northernmost part of Thailand, continues to produce paintings and sculptures with formidable concentration, based on her background as an Akha<sup>7</sup>, one of the ethnic minority groups in Zomia. As in the body of work exhibited at the Singapore Biennale 2019 (Fig. 2), through a process of collaborative production with nature, she attempts to exchange different perspectives between humans and non-humans including wood sculptures. Busui's production of artworks through a state of immersion allows the viewer to experience the oscillation between subject and object: 'I = not myself' (being a tree) and 'I = probably not myself' (being both a tree and possibly being myself)<sup>8</sup>.



Figure 2: installation view of Busui Ajaw at the Singapore Biennale 2019 (photo: courtesy of the artist).

<sup>6</sup> Busui-Ajaw began making drawings at the age of 15, and has developed a practice of invisibility, such as spirits and soul, in her paintings and sculptures. Born in a remote mountainous region of Myanmar, Busui was forced to leave the area with his family and friends soon after birth due to military invasion. Busui's artistic practice reflects his unique local upbringing and family environment, and she is known to draw on oral literature in her expression. Alongside his installations, she uses visual language to express Akha culture and the history, legends and customs of her people [see nca | nichido contemporary art website].

<sup>7</sup> 'Akha' means 'far from the river' in Thai. They are said to have migrated to the mountainous areas because of the epidemics that once spread in the rivers. The Akha are said to account for around 65,000 people in Thailand as a whole, and are also found in Myanmar, Vietnam and southern China. They are famous for their colourful folk costumes and silverwork.

<sup>8</sup> In other cases, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 1951- presents the animist view that the inner life of humans, animals, spirits, etc. is

In light of this junction between animism and contemporary art, over recent years 'Zomia', as represented by the Busui exhibition, has been attracting attention, particularly in the field of contemporary art due to its geopolitical specificity, and the cultural diversity and richness produced by its animism-based minority groups. Morris Berman (1944-) defined the immersive state in animistic rituals and expressions as 'Participating consciousness', but on the other hand, engaging with the world while distinguishing between humans and nature as while distinguishing between humans and nature as 'Non-participating consciousness'. He states that, like Busui, 'Immersive production and expression' is, in other words, 'Participating in the world', and in this sense, selfless production and expression has the potential to become a source of a generative world that transcends Western dichotomies [Berman 2019: 430-431].

In this context, Zomia's animistic art practice has the potential to become one of the centers of a backlash against scientific rationalism. In other words, it plays an important role in the restoration of mysticism, surrealism, and other forms of romanticism in art history, and in the reappraisal of

the same. This presented multiple 'perspectives' among many species, a shared worldview across species, and extended art that had previously been bound to the 'human perspective' [Hasegawa 2022: 36]. David O'Reilly (1985-) exhibited a work entitled *Everything* (2007) at the Thailand Biennale 2021. Born in Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1985, O'Reilly is an artist who continues to produce CG animation in an innovative style. In 2015, he released *Mountains*, a video game about "looking at mountains". His 2015 game *Mountain*, about "looking at mountains", and most recently his critically acclaimed film *Everything* [see bound baw website]. The game is a simulation game in which you get a pseudo-perspective of all beings, including planets, ticks and cigarette butts. It is based on Jakob Uexküll's (1864-1944) 'Umwelt' and brings the different dynamic worlds of human/non-human and various creatures into the contemporary art world. The 'Umwelt' is "a world that each subject constructs by giving meaning to various objects in the environment" [Uexküll 2015: 164].

‘re-enchantment’ against the ‘dis-enchantment (rationalization)’ of Max Weber (1864-1920) in his theory of modernization. It is clear that the restoration of animism is steadily progressing, as evidenced by the large number of enchanted works on display at international exhibitions such as the 59th Venice Biennale<sup>9</sup> and Documenta 15<sup>10</sup>, which the writer visited last year.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that there will be even more Zomia-related exhibitions in the future<sup>12</sup>.

In light of the above, I presented an exhibition of works by six artists from Asia who are considered to be projecting Zomian elements in the aforementioned ‘Anarcho-Animism’ exhibition. As it is not possible to introduce the works of all six artists in this article due to the depth of the paper, only three artists will be introduced.

First, there is Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Figure 3), who has won awards at many festivals, including the Cannes Film Festival, and has participated in numerous art festivals. Apichatpong's films deal with life/death, spirits/ghosts, past/future, etc., and are often non-linear, creating strong value inversions, while

making presentations on personal memory, politics, and social issues.



Figure 3: Apichatpong Weerasethakul (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Apichatpong revisited Nong Khai in northeast Thailand where he had previously shot several films during the period when there was increasing cases of COVID-19 and urban lockdowns, to produce and present ‘The Light of Longing’(2021, Figure 4). This simple photographic work, an inverted composition of the Mekong River on the Thai-Laos border, while evoking memories of a land that has been erased, shows a quiet resistance to the violence of state boundary determination and development against nature<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> The Venice Biennale is an international art exhibition of contemporary art that has been held every two years since 1895 and has had a strong influence on contemporary art. In 1893, it was decided to organise the 'Exhibition of Italian Art' (later the Venice Biennale) as an opportunity to revive the city's influence, particularly in the cultural sphere [see Venice Biennale official website].

<sup>10</sup> Documenta is an international art exhibition of contemporary art that has been held annually in Kassel, Germany, since 1955. It is held to revive German art after the Second World War and to restore the honour of avant-garde art, which was regulated and suppressed as 'decadent art' under the Nazi dictatorship. Since then, DOCUMENTA is said to be as influential as the Venice Biennale as an exhibition of world contemporary art trends [see DOCUMENTA 15 official website].

<sup>11</sup> See the writer's report on Venice, Documenta 15, etc., ‘The present coordinates of Orange Collective’ [Yabumoto 2022: Kinan Art Week 2021 website].

<sup>12</sup> A recent exhibition held in relation to Zomia was the Asia Art Biennial, which took place in Taiwan in 2019. Titled ‘The Strangers from beyond the Mountain and the Sea’, the exhibition

was truly about Zomia [see the official Asia Art Biennial website]. The exhibition was curated by Hsu Chia-Wei/Ho Tzu-Nyen and focused not only on the existing ‘mountain zomia’, but also on ‘Watery Zomia’ through the power supply and water source issues upstream of the Mekong River. Other events include A Life Beyond Boundaries (The Geography of Belonging) in Thailand in 2021, curated by Lorendana Pazzini-Pracciani, an Italian anthropologist at SOAS, and based on Benedict Anderson's (1936-2015) ‘Imagined Communities - Origins and Trends of Nationalism’, in light of this, the main focus was on the representation of artists from South-East Asia [see A Life Beyond Boundaries (The Geography of Belonging) official website]. Other exhibitions include ‘A Few in Many Places’, curated by Indian curator Abhijan Toto, the video works focused on Hmong families living in Thailand [see A Few in Many Places official website]. In addition to these, there is a trend of an increasing number of exhibitions related to Zomia, particularly in South-East Asia. In addition, Chiang Rai in the northernmost part of Thailand is the venue for the Thailand Biennale 2023, which is drawing attention to the artistic practices of the Akha people.

<sup>13</sup> The work is an extension of the ‘Ghosts of Nabua’ exhibition described in Chapter 4, ‘Minor History’ (the exhibition was shown at the 100 Tonson Foundation in Bangkok, Thailand, and



Figure 4: The Light of Longing (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Next, Irwan Ahmett (1975-) and Tita Salina (1973-, Figure 5), are an artist duo from Jakarta, Indonesia. Living in a megacity of 15 million inhabitants and in the context of contemporary large-scale power struggles, the duo intervenes in public space and provide incisive social critique on issues related to urban development, political repression, and the exploitation of ecological resources.



Figure 5: Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Rivers flowing from Jakarta's mountains carry nutrients from the forests and create a rich sea. Mussels, farmed by fishermen in Jakarta Bay, are an

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at venues in Isaan. More information can be found on the 100 TONSON FOUNDATION website). The Light of Nostalgia was exhibited at the the landscapes and rivers of the Mekong River Basin dig up memories of the land. The Mekong River is the mother of life for the local people, evoking the animistic belief in the Naga (water snake) that has taken root in the local people and

important source of nutrition and income for the region, acting as a cheaper source of protein than meat. However, pollution from household and heavy metal waste and large-scale development are disrupting the livelihoods of the people living there. The film 'Harvest from Atlantis' (2019, Figure 6), was inspired by the 'lost city of Atlantis', which, as its name suggests, is believed to have sunk in Jakarta Bay. As if to coincide with the sinking of that civilisation, Jakarta is still gradually sinking today due to land subsidence and rising sea levels. Therefore, Irwan and Tita, working with mussel fishermen, decided to sink trees in the sea and wait for the shellfish to 'bear fruit'. The time it takes for the mussels to grow, reminiscent of the subtropical trees that have been reduced by deforestation, is a symbol of hope, but also concern for the future.



Figure 6: Harvest from Atlantis (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Finally, Montika Kham-on (1999-, Figure 7), is an artist with roots in Northeast Thailand (Isan). In order to examine history and present multiple futures, she utilizes video technology and incorporates dance, theater and other fields dealing

restoring their ideological connection. However, the people's lives have been greatly transformed by the damming of the upper reaches of the river, and the film captures a situation where the memory of the life seen there is being lost and the place is dying as a result of modernization and the state.



with the body into her films, attempting to transcend the boundaries of language through non-verbal 'narratives'.



Figure 7: Montika Kham-on (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Siamese Futurism, (2021, Figure 8), a three-sided video work, is a music video that attempts to tell and create a new story about<sup>14</sup> the historic uprising against the central government in the Isan region between 1901 and 1936. Montika imagines as the backdrop to a story that unfolds in sleep, starting from a water jar in the Isan region, which regained its autonomy from the Thai central regime.

<sup>14</sup> This rebellion is also known as the Rebellion of the Saints. The practice of resistance to Bangkok by the spirits and the Isan people remains, and the historical facts are exhaustively organized on THE ISAAN RECORD website.

<sup>15</sup> The other three artists who exhibited at the 'Anarcho-Animism' exhibition are featured in this note.

(1) Aung Myat Htay (1973-) continues to incorporate contemporary sensibilities into traditional forms in Myanmar and express socio-political messages. In the video work *A Land of Ghosts* (2019), people and animals from stories handed down in the Buddhist world of Southeast Asia, as well as anonymous people discovered in Aung Myat Htay's photographic archive, appear. They emerge and disappear silently against the backdrop of the many life-giving, rich forests and seas that evoke the mountainous regions of Zomia. One image is intricately linked to another, as is the idea of reincarnation, which is spread over an area where people of many different ethnicities, cultures, languages and religions are competing. In the long course of time, everyone is born and dies, regardless of ethnicity or species. However, there are also people who bare their deepest desires even after they become ghosts. Aung Myattee's reverting worldview includes animals, plants, insects and minerals, as well as migrants and stateless people who are stripped of their citizenship and forced to 'live bare' (nuda Vita, Giorgio Agamben), quietly criticising human selfishness.

(2) Ting Tong Chang (1982-) is a Taipei-based artist known for his collaborative projects using various media, including installation and video. Chang spent two weeks in the mountains with Amis hunters in Taiwan, creating a living space using local materials, and produced a two-sided video work *Betelnut Tree*,



Figure 8: Siamese Futurism (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Another Isan depicted by Montika makes us aware of the existence of nations and cultures that have disappeared after conflicts and assimilation, and of people buried in the shadow of the victor's history. It seems to be both a questioning of the universal view of history and an anarchistic resistance to oblivion through visual representation<sup>15</sup>.

## 2 Historical Context of the Theory of Animism

### 2.1 What is animism?

The 'animism' described so far theorized by Edward Tylor (1832-1917) and others<sup>16</sup> was

*Bird's-Nest Fern and African Snails* (2020). The film is titled 'Betelnut Tree, Bird's-Nest Fern and African Snails, 2020'. The betel nut tree mentioned in the title was brought to Taiwan by the Dutch, but was banned under Japanese rule. However, when betel nut was industrialised, it became a favourite food of workers. The striped cottonwood, used by the aborigines for food and medicine, has also become increasingly popular as a luxury food and ornamental plant in recent health-conscious years, and was introduced from Singapore under Japanese policy as a substitute protein source for meat. The African mai mai is considered by the Han Chinese to be a pest to the striped cottontail and is about to be eradicated. This seems to highlight the finiteness of human egoistic activities in the endless web of cooperation and mutual support created by organisms in nature, and also re-proposes a relationship of mutual support between humans and animals and plants.

(iii) Mech Choulay (1992-) & Mech Sereyath (1993-) are the sister duo of the next generation of Cambodian contemporary art, exploring the existence of invisible spirits and souls, utilising media such as photography and video. They attempt to visualise that invisibility. Chulay and Sereyath undertook a residency in Anlong Veng in the north-west of Cambodia to learn about local history and the local community's relationship with the forest. They spent time in a forest community of monks and villagers, observing their religious practices with the forest, which they sublimated into artworks.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to Tyler, James Frazer (1854-1941), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and others researched the relationship between primitive religion and animism.

theoretically examined in the late 19th century. Humans have the exceptional ability to perceive ‘something’ that does not exist in the physical environment, and Tylor termed the idea that non-humans could recognize life or a soul as ‘animism’.

Yet, this Tylerian animism brought with it an ordered Cartesian dualism that divided human beings and non-humans, where the soul and spirit are possessed only by humans, and anthropomorphic souls and spirits are projected onto non-humans [Okuno, Yamaguchi and Kondo 2012: 51]. As a result, animism was thought to be an occult idea of the uncivilized world, which believed that life dwells in the things that exist in the world, and in the 20th century, animism was considered to be a creation of uncivilized societies and not something real [Okuno & Shimizu 2021: 152].

However, recent anthropologists have attempted to take soul and animism seriously, saying that it is not possible to separate human and non-human and easily discard the soul and animism as ‘non-existent’. For example, Philippe Descola (1949-) re-examined animism in a way that did not simply separate human and non-human existence. Descola organized them into four categories: totemism, animism, analogicalism and naturalism, and regarded ‘animism’ as a state in which humans and non-humans are similar [Akimichi 2018: 414] and connected in their invisible interiority, although their visible materiality and physicality differ [Okuno, Yamaguchi, and Kondo 2012: 39]. The importance of Descola’s point is that in the order of religious evolutionary theory, animism which had

only been regarded as a primitive, uncivilized idea in the history of religions, was once again juxtaposed in the matrix of world religions [Ishikura 2022: 102].

In addition, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1951-), building on Descola’s argument, sees ‘animism’ as the fact that the insides of humans, animals, and spirits, etc. are the same and it is only the exteriors, such as the body, that are different [Castro 2015: 89-92]. It avoids the human/non-human, and human/nature divisions and tries to move away from anthropocentrism. De Castro’s view of animism also communicates with Iwata’s animist philosophy in that it is an inseparable view based on the inner continuity between humans and non-humans, as Iwata stated that “spirits are like the sea”<sup>17</sup>.

## 2.2 The idea of seeing things in life

Beyond the aforementioned discussion of Descola and de Castro, of crucial importance when considering contemporary animism is the argument from Tim Ingold (1948-). Ingold significantly shifts the way in which he approaches animism and develops his theory of animism by focusing on the concept of ‘being alive’ (animacy). Ingold is quoted as follows:

We are not talking about objects owning life, life hiding within objects and being the secret ingredient that makes objects move on the world stage. Rather, we must think of life as the invisible force of the circulation of matter and the flow of energy that flows through the world to

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<sup>17</sup> This is joined to the worldview that unites people and non-humans, which is also a back-and-forth between non-humans and humans, such as animals, plants, insects and minerals, as

depicted by the Myanmar artist Aung Myat Htay in ‘Land of Ghosts’, as indicated in the annotations.



give rise to forms and make them exist for a certain period of time. Therefore, it is not that life is in the stone. Rather, the stone is in the life. In anthropology, this understanding - this ontology, if we can call it that - of the existence and creation of things is known as 'animism'. Once dismissed as the most primitive religion, built on a false belief in the spirituality of things, animism is today regarded as a poetry of life that surpasses science in its understanding of the fullness of reality. It results from taking the other seriously [Ingold 2020: 84].

In other words, Ingold's 'animism' is a position that sees things in life, rather than life in things. It is the idea that life is the background of all things, rather than trying to forcibly find a soul or life in lifeless things. The theory of animism up to now was the idea that the world is composed of all things, in which life and spirit dwell. In contrast, Ingold believes that, in the first place, life constructed the world prior to the ontological divisions of spirit and matter, which were then reduced to individual objects [Ingold 2021: 191]. In other words, the world as a whole has always been in dynamic flux, and it only appears to be fixed in the present day, but in fact the world as a whole has no beginning and no end, but is in flux, in a cycle of rebirth and circulation [Ingold 2021: 84].

It is the words of Shinichi Nakazawa that echo this idea of Ingold.

'That which is moving throughout the universe' – let's tentatively call this 'spirit'. This spirit is the stream of power that fills the whole of the universe and keeps it moving. When that

'moving thing' stops, that is where what we call 'presence' appears. A spirit that stands still in an imposing way and stands still for thousands of years is called a stone, while a spirit that stands still for two hundred years or so is called a tree. When encountering a magnificent tree or stone, Indians pray not to the stone or tree itself, but to the great 'moving thing' flowing behind it [Nakazawa 2016: 180-181].



Figure 9: Earth and Human Beings (photo: courtesy of the artist).

Nakazawa argues that Native Americans and Jomon people do not believe that stones and wood exist as non-living objects from the beginning, and that a soul can enter them from the outside. All beings are in constant movement and generation, never pausing in constant change [Ingold 2021, 314]. This is what Nakazawa means by 'things in motion' and what Ingold means by 'being alive'. This sense is evident, not only in Native Americans and Jomon people, but also in Busui's aforementioned work 'Earth and Human Beings' (2020, fig. 9). She depicts individual objects on the canvas, but many of the depictions are also given a view of life in the background, giving a glimpse of

the larger movement of life that flows behind the objects<sup>18</sup>. In other words, the 'animism' of Zomia surely seems to be rooted in a thinking that emphasizes that all things are always in flux and that the world, life, and the societies that these lives create are not to be fixed.

### 3 Animism and Politics

#### 3.1 Anarchism, Animism and Art

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the writer grasps 'animism' as an idea that transcends humans and non-human beings and emphasizes the importance of promoting the self-commitment of various beings in each world, while respecting their mutually beneficial relationships, and avoiding the fixation of a fluid world (including life and society). Until now, animism and the discussion of political theory have been considered completely separate, but from now on, it may be necessary to return to the 'life' of various beings and reconsider the world beyond the boundaries between life and political theory. This is because contemporary society is inundated with labor and institutions that are disconnected from life and lack a 'sense of being alive'. The writer, who runs a law firm abroad, is also stuck in a kind of limbo, restrained somebody and sometimes is restrained by the laws and authorities created by global industrial civilization and modern capitalism<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, we want to continue our efforts to resist these oppressions and restraints and preserve alternative ways of 'life' for the future. Therefore, I would like to go beyond the realm of 'animism as a theory of life', quoting

Keiji Iwata and James Scott, to describe the possibility of extending animism into the political sphere.

Needless to say, the religion called 'animism' has no doctrine, no cult, and no religious professions. Thus, by nature, it is a religion of each individual [Iwata 2020: 19].

According to Iwata, animism does not have any social disciplines or norms such as 'doctrines', nor does it build large social communities such as the 'animism orders'. In other words, animism is based on 'self-commitment' and is a fundamental way of thinking to stand alone in the world. However, until now, politics and religions in the western world have tried to abandon animism, which is not based on 'doctrine' or 'social community', as an uncivilized faith. And they have seen the monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam as the final form of humanity and the top of the pyramid structure. Iwata has proclaimed this structure as the evil of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution, as "A weak and strong race, fighting for turf, and in a constant race for survival" [Iwata 1989: 50]. In de-territorializing this religious and political pyramid, animism should be an important concept, as Scott states.

The continued solid presence of animistic substratum beliefs in popular religions, including salvation religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, confirms that 'real'

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<sup>18</sup> The same is true of the other representations of white mist in the 'dead trees' of Cambodian artists, Mech Choulay & Mech Sereyrath shown in the notes. The view of the world in which invisible life and objects in the material background, with the forest as its mother, become a harmonious whole, repeating

movement and generation, overlaps with Nakazawa's and Ingold's words.

<sup>19</sup> As David Graeber describes in *The Bullshit Job - The Theory of the Bullshit Job* and other books, the work of lawyers has actually become a "document filler" and a "scaremonger".

practical religion does not ignore worldly concerns. The majority of animist religious practices seek to influence a variety of secular concerns and are conducted with prayers for the assurance of a good harvest, the healing of illness, successful hunting, the fulfilment of love, victory in battle, the thwarting of all enemies, the passing of exams, and the procreation of children. The workings of salvation religion reflect an animistic attachment to the fulfilment of worldly affairs, despite its lofty doctrines [Scott 2013: 298-299].

In Scott's words, animistic base beliefs are firmly at the root of religion, and animism is always present behind the popular religions of the world. For example, in the society of the Karen people<sup>20</sup>, animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. coexist in a pluralistic manner, such as 'Christian but animist' [Kubo 2014: 162]<sup>21</sup>. In other words, no religion could have abandoned animism in order to establish a world before the emergence of social communities and a fundamental 'self-commitment'. Furthermore, as Scott states, animism, in relation to popular religion, plays the 'back' side of the inextricable tableau.

<sup>20</sup> The Karen are one of the minorities of the Zomia world, a generic name for a mountainous ethnic group living in north-west Thailand and south-east Myanmar.

<sup>21</sup> As Scott has also stated, "Burmese Theravada Buddhists' Nat beliefs and Siamese Theravada Buddhists' Peeth beliefs penetrate deep into society and the general public seldom builds on the tension between popular animism and normative Buddhism" [Scott 2013:298-299]. there is a tension or equilibrium between the two. In this respect, in Thailand, there is a history of the late 19th and early 20th century when Buddhism was nationalised by the central government, and animism was placed on the periphery as the superiority of Buddhism and other faiths was



Figure 10: Siamese Futurism exhibition view (photo: taken by the writer at the Reborn Art Festival).

As a function of this 'behind-the-scenes' function, the aforementioned Siamese Futurism by Montika Kham-on is one case study. In this video work, the 'Prophecy' and the 'Gong' (Fig. 10) are strikingly projected. The 'Prophecy' is a newly produced document by Montika, but as Scott states, "In the mountainous massifs of Southeast Asia, there are born prophets" [Scott 2013: 288], prophets are always in place in Zomia. In the cosmology of the prophets and charismatics, a system is always in place in which the saints revolt against the existing order as a last resort. This has served the function of preventing the fixation and perpetuation of institutions and power.

clearly divided. However, the Buddha in Buddhism was born into a royal family, but renounced authority without succeeding the royal family and followed the path of enlightenment. He lived freely, and through the gift of mendicancy, he lived an anarchistic way of life, unbound by anything [Mori 2017: 19]. In contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhist countries, Buddhism has an aspect of being closely related to the state and used as a means of strengthening power, but I feel that animism, which occupies a fundamental position, and anarchistic practice, which overlaps with Buddha's root thought, are deeply connected. The writer would like to deepen this point in the future.

Furthermore, the ‘gongs’ in Zomia are precious or prestige goods, which serve as the starting point for the animism practice of deriving circuits to the other world, while at the same time, the percussion of the gongs induces people into a trance-like state [Okuno & Shimizu 2021: 131] and creates an anarchism resistance to power. It is noteworthy that the ‘gongs’ of Zomia are symbolically equipped with the function of connecting both animist and anarchist practices.

In light of the above discussion, the modern state and popular religion have tried to separate animism and anarchism and abandon them (but in fact have failed to do so), whereas Zomia is unique in that it does not separate animism, anarchism and art, but sees them as one and the same. Can we not see here the possibility of transcending the institutions and powers of global industrial society, of reclaiming our ‘life’ and then extending it anew?

### 3.2 Animism = Anarchism?

As I have mentioned previously, in addition to ‘self-commitment’ and ‘mutually beneficial connections between various beings beyond the human and non-human’, as discussed in quotations from Ingold and others, I believe that animism, while based on the constant flux and generation of the world, may have elements of resistance to the ‘fixing’ of not only life, but also of society (this point requires further exploration in the future). The writer would like to examine whether the ‘fluidization’ and ‘avoidance of fixation elements’ of animism can be joined to anarchist theory. In this respect, animism has not been considered to have an impact on realistic communal composition, but it may be possible to extend the idea further by

forming a complementary relationship with anarchism, a socio-political theory that has an impact on contemporary democracy and community.

#### 3.2.1 From anarchism to self-commitment

To begin with, ‘anarchy’ is derived from the Greek word ‘anarchos’, meaning a state of ‘absence (an-)’ of ‘power (arche)’. In other words, anarchy means ‘a state of no government’ and ‘anarchism’, derived from it, is a ‘socio-political theory’ that essentially means ‘a state of no government (anarchism)’ [Kojien 2018: 71]. However, with the rare exception of ‘Zomia’, it is a difficult state to imagine. This is due to the fact that, as Scott states, “Practically every major successful revolution ends up creating a state even more powerful than the one it overthrew” [Scott 2017: vi], and the more you try to eliminate the state, the more powerful one it creates <sup>22</sup>. Considering the importance of the state’s financial policy and its ability to address issues such as poverty through social security, it is hard for me to say that ‘non-government’ is desirable. In this sense, the philosopher Hiroaki Yamada (1956-) said that “Anarchists are not oriented in any sense towards the seizure of power”. He also stated that “On the basis of being anti-authoritarian, the basic principle of anarchists is their permanent refusal to allow power to rise within themselves and society [Yamada 2021:197]”. In brief, it can be said that an important element of contemporary ‘anarchism’ theory is the constant fluidization of ‘power’, which does not fix ‘power’ in society.

Moreover, as Michel Foucault (1926-1984) states

<sup>22</sup> As Scott states that he "does not believe that the state is an enemy to freedom anywhere at any time" and that "the state may,

depending on the circumstances, assume an emancipatory role and even extend the free domain" [Scott 2017: x].

that ‘power comes from everywhere’ [Foucault 1986: 120], the state is not the only entity that exercises ‘power’. ‘Power’ is always embedded in everyday life. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink anarchism, not as an inherently political theory of ‘anarchism (abolition of the state)’, but as an idea of practical resistance to oppression in everyday life. ‘In Anarchism of Life’, anthropologist Keiichiro Matsumura (1975-) states that anarchism is the wisdom of “how to rebuild our own lives under a powerless and incompetent state, how to rebuild the ‘public’ from underneath” [Matsumura 2021:13]. In other words, just as animism was a way of thinking to stand alone, anarchism has no doctrine, etc., but is a real and concrete way of thinking to stand alone in the midst of social customs. This is backed by Shunsuke Tsurumi's (1922-2015) ‘substantive anarchism’ [Tsurumi & Kurokawa 2019: 184-185]. Tsurumi states that ‘substantive anarchism’ differs from ‘original anarchism’ in that “It is an attitude of not relying on the state or the community, but when one is confident that one can do it on one's own until one finally collapses, then one will do it forever”. That is, anarchism is a way of thinking and acting on one's own and resisting all forms of oppression through a commitment that can be carried out on one's own [see Tanigawa 2022: 244-253].

### 3.2.2 Anarchism and Mutual Aid

Matsumura also states that anarchism is the wisdom of living to rebuild one's life through its ‘self-commitment’ and to construct a mutually beneficial public space [Matsumura 2021: 13]. Indeed, ‘personal freedom’ and ‘the pursuit of solidarity (the construction of mutually beneficial public space)’ may seem to contradict each other, however as Yamada states, “Securing personal

freedom is the condition for true solidarity” [Yamada 2021: 195], anarchism and solidarity are never contradictory. That is to say, anarchism is the idea of building a society without domination through the free agreement of various beings, while rejecting coercion and oppression by any authority. And it does not necessarily have to aim at “building a sustainable organization”, as Yamada states [Yamada 2021:197]. This is similar to the way of thinking and moving of the people of Zomia, who constantly move and disperse and, depending on the situation, celebrate personal freedom and solidarity.

Anarchism does not and will not have a coherent theoretical work like Thomas Aquinas’s ‘Summa Theologicae’ or Marx. This is because it is an idea that has lived alongside human history, hidden within the social customs of mankind. It is largely an unacknowledged form of habit, and the part that can be clearly stated to oneself and others is small. Let us begin by roughly defining anarchism as the ideal of human beings helping each other to live without coercion by authority [Tsurumi 1991: 3].

The discussion so far overlaps with Tsurumi's words above. It was the Russian political thinker Pjotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) who first used the term ‘anarchism’ in this reciprocal sense from the dimension of anarchist theory of ‘non-domination’<sup>23</sup>. Through his observations of wildlife in Siberia, Kropotkin pointed out that, in fact, living creatures are not the stronger in a world where the strong prey on the weak, but that species that voluntarily build relationships in which they

<sup>23</sup> The term ‘anarchism’ was used by both Proudhon and Berkunin, but it was Kropotkin who first used the term ‘anarchism’ [Mori 2017:124]. Unlike Proudhon and Berkunin, who were closer to revolutionaries, Kropotkin theorised

anarchism [Mori 201: see also Mori 201] and is known as someone who contributed to the development of the theory of ‘mutual aid’ [Okuno and Ishikura 2018: 132-133].

help each other succeed in survival, and called the principle of social formation based on cooperation from the principle of competition 'mutual aid'. [Mori 2017:161-162]. The elements of this mutual aid 'anarchism' overlap with the elements of 'animism', which builds mutually beneficial relationships.

And its range applies to non-humans as well as animism. Kropotkin proposed anarchism mutual aid from the various relationships between plants and animals. In other words, mutual aid and symbiotic relationships in nature are a kind of 'state of nature' [Mori 2017: 160-162]. Naturally, given that humans are also a type of animal and therefore part of nature, anarchism is not a concept exclusive to humans, but a concept that can be applied to many and various beings.

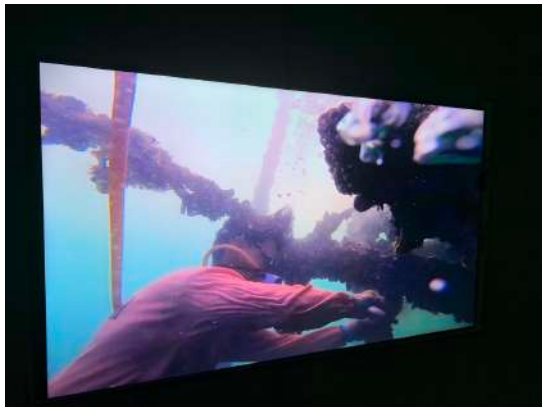


Figure 11: 'Harvest from Atlantis' exhibition view (photo: taken by the writer at the Reborn Art Festival).

For instance, in Irwan and Tita's 'Harvest from Atlantis' (Fig. 11), the pure gift by mussels to other species and the rituals of Indonesian locals in return are rich expressions of animistic ideas and their connection to life. On the other hand, in addition to the small communities that are composed of human beings cooperating with each other, real-life co-operation with trees, mussels, and chickens, etc.,

can be seen to be unconsciously embedded in the inner workings of life. The writer is not alone in feeling that the landscape of life glimpsed in this video visualizes the very relationship between the two concepts before modernization, when animism and anarchism were separated.

Based on the above, animism contributes to the composition of community in the ideological dimension by building mutually beneficial links between various beings, while encouraging the fostering of 'self-commitment' by each individual. On the other hand, anarchism, while encouraging the 'self-commitment' of each individual, gives wisdom in the concrete dimension to the composition of solidarity through practical mutual assistance. In consequence, when the complementary relationship between the two concepts is intertwined and driven, the unique 'life' of each individual will presumably expand, operating autonomously, away from the domination of power and authorities.

#### 4 Conclusion - Anarcho-Animistic Artistic Expression

Now, in the light of the previous discussion, it seems that 'animism' and 'anarchism' are ideas that apply to all beings and are used to prevent the fixation of the world and society by gaining freedom through self-commitment and, at the same time, by building reciprocal relationships with those beings. In this sense, the writer would like to propose 'Anarcho-Animism' as a trial theory as a way of thinking and rethinking our 'life' in a new way, crossing the boundaries of both concepts of life and political theory.

Finally, the writer presents an expression of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who presents the most anarcho-animistic image in Zomia. I have had several dialogues with Apichatpong, and when it

comes to political talk about Isan and its neighboring countries, his words suddenly begin to heat up. Could this be due to the complex history of Isan and stories that have been altered or erased as animistic, Phi beliefs have been marginalized in the process of Thailand's centralization, and the nationalization of Buddhism? Imagining these backgrounds, the writer experienced the strength of Apichatpong's 'self-commitment' (a commitment that one can carry through on one's own)<sup>24</sup>.



Figure 12: Emerald exhibition view (photo: at Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, photo by the writer).

Apichatpong's visual expressions also evoke the inner imagination and bring to spirits and ghosts that were invisible, as well as memories of the land [ Nakamura 2022: 71]. Apichatpong's view of life is full of rich animistic ideas about the greater life behind things. For example, the shifting 'memory of things' is often dealt with in Apichatpong's works. In the short film 'Emerald' (2007, Fig. 12), a floating feather-like object in a closed hotel describes memories of the past, while in the latest feature film 'Memoria' (2021), a man named Ernan,

who can read the past memories of objects, appears, reading the 'memories' recorded on stones and trees. The story unfolds by reading the 'memories' recorded on stones, trees, etc. This is easily understood in light of Ingold's statement that 'things are in life'.

The broadleaf evergreen forests that evoke the mountainous regions of Zomia are also symbolic of Apichatpong's animistic expression. In 'Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives' (2010), Boonmee, who has kidney disease and little time left to live, summons his wife's sister Jen, and nephew Tong, to his plantation in Isan. There, his wife Faye, who died 19 years ago, visits him as a ghost, concerned about her husband's illness, and his son Bun Song, who disappeared a few years ago, comes as a monkey spirit to welcome Boonmee. Boonmee sits around the table with his wife's ghost, the monkey spirit and other beings, and receives help and support from them in the 'forest', which is like a mother's womb, on his way to death.

In addition to this belief in life and mutual support based on such a fundamental maternal conception, another characteristic of Apichatpong is his 'supple resistance' to the state and authority. For example, in the video work 'Phantoms of Nabua' (2009, Fig. 13) in the Primitive Project, a group of boys are playing football on a grassy field at night in the village of Nabua, Isan. A blazing mass of fire (anima) is treated as a ball, which then catches fire on a white screen, which eventually burns down. Nabua village was the site of a US airbase for air

<sup>24</sup> Apichatpong has, from past interviews, basically positioned himself clearly as an artist, rather than a revolutionary, political activist or the like. He rarely directly denounces the state, government, etc. This overlaps in part with Tsurumi's attitude towards the government and the state. Rather than denouncing

others, Tsurumi would rather transform himself, which is said to be at the heart of his animist philosophy [Tanikawa 2022: 245], and such a philosophy can be felt to a great extent in his dialogue with Apichatpong.



strikes in Indochina in the late 1960s, when the US invasion of Viet Nam was in full swing; in the 1970s, anti-government student groups were based on the Thai-Laos border, and as a corresponding measure, the Thai National Army established a base in Isan. Civilians fled into the forest to escape the violence, but some of these people were labelled communists and they were caught in the crossfire [Yomota : 2016]. The ‘fire’ projected on the screen exposes the memory of the firearms and the massacre, generating an ideological centripetal force against the place. On the other hand, through the teamwork-based sport of football, the film shows the possibility of organized resistance to the violence of the state and power, while building a small community in reality.



Figure 13: Phantoms of Nabua (Exhibit: artscape ‘Apichatpong Weerasethakul - Politics and the intimacy of the everyday<sup>25</sup>’)

However, Apichatpong does not vocally advocate resistance to the violent nature of power. Like Tsurumi’s ‘substantive anarchism’ and Matsumura’s ‘Anarchism of Life’, Apichatpong does not expect anything from the government or the state. Rather, it seems to me that he attaches more importance to cooperation and mutual

assistance beyond human and non-human relationships. For example, in the Primitive Project, Apichatpong played together with the youth of Nabua village, talked about the future, collaborated with them and created a ‘spaceship’ together, utilizing various materials [Minato 2016: 88-91]. In this way, Apichatpong (whether he is aware of it or not, and whether he intends it or not) moves back and forth between the concepts of ‘animism’ and ‘anarchism’, trying to promote the self-commitment of other beings through art projects and to rebuild mutual support and reciprocity in a small community. The writer would like to continue to follow the idea and artistic practice of ‘anarcho-animism’, using this artistic practice of Apichatpong as an example.

The relationship between ‘anarcho-animism’ and ‘making (art)’ could not be fully described this time due to the space available, but this is an issue for the future, and the writer would like to further deepen the relationship between ‘animism’, ‘anarchism’ and ‘art’ as we reconsider and reclaim the ‘lives’ of various beings.

<sup>25</sup> For more information, see Takuichi Tokuyama (author), Apichatpong Weerasethakul - Politics and the Intimacy of the

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