Contemporary Japan is sometimes described as a Latourian utopia where humans and non-humans, specifically robots, live and work together in harmony. This acceptance of non-human others is explained by anthropologists as stemming from an “animist unconscious” (Allison 2006) that allows people to attribute ‘life’ to robots and other man-made objects, a notion that is usually linked to the "Shinto universe" of "native animist beliefs" (Robertson 2010). Contrary to the darker tone of robot fantasies in the Euro-American tradition, this "techno-animism" (Block and Jensen 2013) turns technological objects into non-alienating allies.

This paper will critically examine the ontological underpinnings of these arguments and will suggest an alternative account of Japanese animism. I will argue that the distinction between ‘ancient animism’ as the underlying structure of belief for ‘modern techno-animism’ is problematic and that it makes more sense to treat Japanese animism as technology tout court. Following Komatsu’s suggestion (1999) that the distinction between gods (kami) and monsters (yōkai) is the degree to which they are worshipped, I will suggest a relational theory of animism in opposition to the “ontological gambit” (Graeber 2013) that hinges on the assumption of the radical alterity of worlds.

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