

SPIRIT OF THE RAINFOREST: A YANOMAMO SHAMAN'S STORY

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In the book, *Spirit of the Rainforest* by Mark Ritchie, we are introduced to the Yanomamo Indian tribe living in the Amazon rainforest, specifically southern Venezuela.¹ These people struggle to survive physically for basic needs such as finding food, medical care or fighting off attackers. Spiritually we are introduced to people who have no knowledge of Creator God (“Yai Pada”),² instead they invoke the spiritual realm, asking spirits to reside in them. These spirits are identified by animals or by characteristics of what they do. The tribe relies on the “Shaman”³(sorcerer) to give guidance, have healing powers, intervene spiritually in death and to cast spells on enemy tribes. The Shaman is expected to be a hunter and fierce warrior.

As Yanomamo rely on the oral passing down of their culture and rituals, the Shaman becomes the historian as well as the one to enforce their rituals. This tribe stays together collectively and their existence depends on staying together to fight wars, forage for food, and to look for ways to be self-sustaining. Yanomamo are violent and they seek revenge for the death of adult relatives whether they physically witnessed the death or if the death happened through the spiritual realm. This may come in the form of a curse or spell on a child and as a result the child dies.

Women are identified as child bearers, are often raped in war, taken as plunder, and given as child brides. Parents may arrange marriages for their children. Women are treated as servants with little say as to who they can marry. Women are sexually molested by men and can be forced to become wives against their will. A young girl before puberty may become the bride of an old man. Violence against women is common. However, if she is killed by her husband, the girl’s family are expected to avenge her death.

1 Ritchie, Mark Andrew. *Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamo Shaman's Story*. 2nd ed. Island Lake, IL: Island Lake Press, 2000, 7.

2 Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 83.

3 Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 18.

The family kinship system is complicated as women are fought over and may have several men as husbands. A family of men may sleep with the same woman or a family of women may sleep with the same man. Therefore, children may call several men “father” or several “women” mother. Consequently Yanomamo will refer to relatives as sister-cousin or brother-cousin.⁴

Parents look for a son-in-law that can hunt and bring meat to them. Food is scarce and therefore, parents are willing to give their daughters to old men (experienced in hunting) even if they will treat their daughters badly. Women are expected to get used to being married to these men. Women who are homesick or take a liking to a man their age in another village will face the wrath of their husband after abandoning him. The man “loses face” or is humiliated which then leads to explosive anger. It is common for men to chop women’s limbs off or mutilate private parts.

So Yanomamo people do not experience peace. They fear being attacked by an enemy village, having their children killed as a result of an enemy’s curse or even being killed by wild animals while foraging. They recall the faces of those who cried for mercy before killing them. They constantly remember which village they raided and therefore, do not have other villages for support or friendship. At night they cannot sleep. The leader most of all is plagued by fears of the unknown. The Shaman doesn’t know where to get more food, how to be safe from attacks, or how to provide for the village.

While the practices of the Yanomamo tribe evoke internal conviction that treating women this way is wrong, the Yanomamo had no other culture to model after. When the “naba” (non-Yanomamo)⁵ people started to live among them and show deviant sexual behaviors, the

4 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 262.

5 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 260.

Yanomamo were able to assess for themselves what was socially correct and what was not acceptable to them. Even though they had no concept of who God was, they internally knew when something was not right.

For example, when A.H. (a foreigner), committed sodomy against the young boys they knew it was wrong. However, they felt powerless to do anything about it. They wanted what A.H. was bringing to trade and realized it was their poverty that prevented them from disassociating with A.H.⁶ They knew how evil A.H.'s ways were and that he did not respect their people or their ways. Additionally, they understood that the concept of giving their little girls as brides to old men was not good but they continued doing it because it was their custom.

The Yanomamo grieve for their dead. When someone has passed, they will wail loudly individually and as a tribe for the person who passed. They grieve so much that they will not mention the name of the deceased as it brings up many memories.⁷ They grind the bones of the deceased and drink them in banana juice⁸ but someone has to cut the flesh off before they can grind the bones.

As these are some of the rituals of the Yanomamo people, we realize that they actually want to be spiritual. They have a conscience. They understand when they let their anger get the better of them and that they should not kill. When the Shamans discover the village of Honey and how it is different from other villages, they are curious. Honey has missionaries and Christian Yanomamo living there. They also realize the war in their spirit as shamans. The spirits continually tell the shaman not to throw them away when they visit Honey. Some are afraid to go to the village and wait in their canoes.

6 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 149.

7 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 8.

8 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 24.

Honey as a village has changed their ways because the naba missionaries there truly lived the gospel. Pepe (Joe Dawson) and his son Keleewa (Gary Dawson) inhabited Honey and taught the Yanomamo not to fight, to treat women with respect and to live in peace. They also modeled how to live better by teaching them to farm, build houses, and to not take revenge. The Dawsons showed compassion by caring for the sick and injured. Most of all they taught Yanomamo about God. They were able to explain that God is the creator of all the other spirits (the great spirit) and that was why the shaman's spirits were afraid. The Yanomamo were afraid of this great spirit as they were lied to about God. Shoefoot was one of those who were able to grasp the gospel and explain it to another Yanomamo (Jungleman) about Christ's death and resurrection. He was able to make allegory of "unokai" which was a ritual cleansing after killing someone and relate it to Christ's death and how that cleanses so one could be friends again (not enemies) and be on the "trail to his land."⁹

As the Gospel is life changing, we see in the story that Shoefoot is one of the few that truly grasps the meaning and "becomes a new creation in Christ."¹⁰ He no longer wants to fight, dance, take ebene or have sexual involvement with women who are not his wife. He understands that God is loving and caring. When another village called Shoefoot a coward and holds one of Honey's women (Shoefoot's relative) against her will, Shoefoot knows how to pray. He passionately tells the Yanomamo people not to get revenge or return to their former ways of war. He pleads for his people like Moses plead for the Israelites. Shoefoot knew no matter what happened, he would not return to his former ways before Christ. He did not want revenge.

For a tribe to understand the ways of Christianity without ever hearing of it before, it is interesting that they can see spiritually into the heart of a person and know what kind of spirit

9 Ritchie, Spirit of the Rainforest, 160

10 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

they possess. Their spiritual awareness is heightened to a level we do not see and when the Bible states that "...God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."¹¹ While the shamans realize the spirits will try to kill them in the end, Jungleman was saved by Jesus when the demons tried to end his life. While the Yanomamo may not have a word for grace, mercy or thankfulness, we can hear those sentiments in his testimony. Although he feels regret for not following Jesus sooner, he experiences the peace he has longed for.

As the internet shows they have an audible Bible (at least of the New Testament), this is amazing as now they can know more of what God wants for the Yanomamo people. God's word will give them the guidance to know what is right from wrong and how they are to live. This way the Yanomamo will understand what a true Christian is to exhibit lifewise and not guess. Also they will have God's word to help them understand how God's heart is toward us, His faithfulness, love, forgiveness, kindness, etc. Hopefully it will put into context that their lives have meaning and purpose. It will also show them who the Trinity is and that the Holy Spirit is our teacher, comforter and will never leave us.

The Yanomamo coming to faith was a lengthy process and took living with them. When the Dawson family arrived there, it took time to cultivate friendships, and create the trust needed to establish deeper relationships. As difficult as it was for them, we see their commitment to living out the gospel among the tribes. The missionaries knew to be honest, steadfast and have a servant attitude. They knew to be quick to ask for forgiveness and to give an apology as in the

¹¹ Romans 1: 19b-20 (NIV)

case of Fruitman and when the missionary hit the legs of his wife for wailing too loudly. The guilty person quickly apologized to Fruitman and expressed sorrow over the act.¹²

It is interesting to note that the Yanomamo were very observant when Shoefoot visited different villages. He was not interested in capturing the women or having sexual acts with them. He modeled good behavior and since he was a Yanomamo, it left an indelible testimony. The Yanomamo did not think it was possible to have a man treat women with respect and not as sexual objects. It was so captivating, that the village of Turkey wanted to get to know more about the spirit that Shoefoot had.

This taught me that words are not always the way to bear testimony of the gospel. People are observing and as they say “actions speak louder than words.” Perhaps Shoefoot knew being a living testimony was good enough to get their attention. The many times that the main character/narrator (Jungleman) of the story went to visit the village of Honey where Shoefoot lived, he was always treated well and saw the physical blessings (health, food, companionship) the people of that village experienced. This is living in victory as Christians. We need to show the world that being a Christian has life changing properties in the physical and spiritual realm.

Included in living a missional life was the change in mindset. Yanomamo wanted to stop fighting, to stop living the way they always lived. They were attracted to the light. They were curious. Everything in them cried out for more of what the Christians had. They knew when they encountered good spirits and when they encountered bad ones. For the missionaries, it taught them that God can change the “savages.” Nothing is too difficult for God. When one of the babies was born with a big birthmark on her face, the grandmother wanted to kill her so she would not live life treated as an inferior person. She is challenged by Keleewa to think about how killing the baby would bring up the old tribal rituals and pain that she herself saw and

12 Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 136-137.

experienced. Her husband tells her not to do it. The birth parents also want the baby. They realize that God gave them the baby as she was and to accept her. When a Yanomamo asks Pepe could they ask God to take the birthmark away, he responds affirmatively. When the prayer is not answered for quite some time, the explanation that God does not always do what we want is brought up. Eventually the prayer is answered and later in the book, we find out a doctor does the operation free of charge to remove the birthmark.

All of this helps to bring the Yanomamo to faith. They were told by one of the Yanomamo before his death that he saw “angels.” They did not understand but the person died in peace and made sure they would not go on a “revenge” for his death.

After reading this book, I saw what a difference the missionaries made in the lives of these people. It is unimaginable what the missionaries had to go through. Living in the jungle with no modern conveniences was truly an act of self-sacrifice and obedience. Also to be willing to live among people who were so violent would strike fear into one’s heart. A person would have to be committed wholeheartedly to Jesus so their heart would be free of any anger, bitterness, strife or sexual sins. When Slottail (Yanomamo resident of Honey)¹³ mentions that he sees an evil sexual spirit in one of the nabas, Keleewa is upset. He did not understand that Yanomamo can see what type of spirit a person has. Slottail mentions there was “no connection with his spirit.”¹⁴ We have the same as in Romans 8:16 “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”

A missionary would have to ask God for special grace to master the language, learn the rituals and for spiritual discernment of spirits to live in a place like this. Additionally, a missionary would need physical endurance to start from scratch to build a house, plant crops,

13 Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 267.

14 Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 164.

harvest crops and defend oneself. While living in a place like the Amazon, it would take bravery, resourcefulness, wisdom and patience. I wonder whether they were attacked by snakes or jaguars. In one incident, Padre Gonzales has to know how to tactfully express his anger towards A.H. for sodomizing the boys. He stood up to A.H. and told him to leave the village. It was not until A.H. threw punches to Padre Gonzales' face that Padre had no choice but to fight back. Thankfully he was able to endure the punches and knocked out A.H. to the ground.¹⁵

I believe it takes a special calling from God to answer the call to missions, especially when it is to a place where there is no civilization. Yet, if these missionaries had not answered the call to go tell the Yanomamo the good news of the gospel, they would have gone to hell. They would not have known there is another way and that way is Jesus. The Yanomamo realized they were lied to about God. They were not aware of the spiritual war for their souls. It is fascinating that they have strong connections to the spiritual realm.

For myself, I am thankful for the spiritual formation class that I am taking. While I cannot see the evil spirits in myself or others, God gives an inner knowing when something is off. This class has a component on deliverance and while that word is not mentioned in the book, that is exactly what God did for the Yanomamo people at Honey. He delivered them from evil spirits. We have the light of Jesus and yet like that naba with the sexual (howashi) spirit, we need to be free even as Christians.

I am thankful that there were people obedient to Christ to tell the Yanomamo about Jesus. This is a challenge to myself as I need to be obedient to whatever His call.