

Karen Liang

*Spirit of the Rainforest***Culture**

*Spirit of the Rainforest* is a story of warfare, vengeance, and spiritual redemption among the Yanomami people in Venezuela. A people group unlike any other, the Yanomami's are known as being fierce, violent, and uncivilized. For the longest time, they have lived their ways, uninterrupted and unexposed to the outside world until the early 1950's when anthropologists and missionaries began coming in to their world. The spirit world is interconnected with the Yanomami people, so much so that their existence revolves around the spirits and their relationship with one another. For instance, their violent nature and killing for revenge is a direct result of what the spirits ask them to do. They are utterly depended on the spirit world and boast about how many "good spirits" a shaman fought for that allows them to control and gain power and respect from the village. It is a repetitive cycle of raiding villages, bloodshed, unokai, and eventually being killed by one's own spirits. This unfortunate way of living, however, is all that a Yanomami knows. This begins to change with the establishment of nabas in their communities.

**Identity**

The Yanomami people built their identity on this one thing: being fierce. As the narrator Jungleman put it, there is nothing more powerful than being fierce because with that comes respect and power from the community, and everyone wants to be known as the fiercest shaman there is. No one wants to be seen as weak or a coward, as they describe it, especially not men. Throughout the narrative, there is a constant push and pull and a fear that is so prevalent and real among the Yanomami but no one would ever admit they are afraid. Jungleman would often speak of the fear that he and other shamans felt but would never say so out loud in fear of losing

their reputation as a fierce leader of their people. Instead, they wondered to themselves what the other might be thinking, or if they have perhaps felt the same way too. But would never verbally mention any of it. This identity is built upon the desire to please their spirits. The spirits are happiest when they kill, take revenge, and steal and rape other women. For a Yanomami, there is nothing more important than to listen to the spirits wishes and obey every word. Largely because the more spirits a shaman has, the more powerful he is and the more he is able to get what he wants. For instance, most of the village people look up to the shaman because he can heal the sick, retrieve a dying soul from the “enemy spirit,” and send his spirits to curse or even kill someone from another village without even having to physically go there. In Jungleman’s case, because he was one of the greater shamans, he saw things that other younger shaman’s couldn’t: his spirits would bring him to see places he had never been before in person. Because their lives revolve around the spirit world and because spirits have more power than humans, a Yanomami’s identity, therefore, hinges on what the spirits have to say. They are trained to listen to the spirits voices and be one with them.

Though their cultural identity is based on such spiritual roots, the main motive may be fear. Fear is what drives one shaman to question what others might be thinking of him. It is the reason for their continuous cycle of warfare and bloodshed. There is mistrust and fear on every side. Jungleman recalls being restless and unable to sleep for many moons for fear that another village might attack at any moment. Fear is the reason the Yanomami people are not stingy, because stingy people are thrown to the fire pit and nobody wants that. Ironically, the fear that has haunted their lives is the very thing they avoid talking about at all costs because it contradicts who they are as fierce people who would prefer dying than being called a coward. Because this is what defines a Yanomami, such culture favors and is biased toward male over female since most

shamans are fierce, capable men unlike women who have less physical power to fight and defend themselves. Therefore, being a great Yanomami equals to being a powerful *male* warrior.

### Family and Gender

In a Yanomami's world, family exists beyond the nuclear, immediate one. It is always about one's relationship to another. For instance, Deemeoma grabbed the attention of more men looking for a wife because she was on her own: she had no relatives or in-laws that she would have to take care of. Because she was her own person in the hands and ownership of her killers, they could do with her as they pleased. She had no obligation to anyone. However, if she did still had relatives in other villages, they would eventually come for her to avenge blood for those that killed her family and village. The Yanomami people believe vengeance came from families across generations because stories are passed on. They extended this belief even to nabas as was the case of one village leader who feared that the naba, whom a child was stealing food from, had more powerful relatives who might come after them. Despite not being one of their own and clearly a white man, they held on to the idea that his relatives would somehow or another return to avenge for him. This is how tight-knit and interwoven a Yanomami's life was. And it only gets more complicated for them as they turn to Yai Pada. The social and cultural lines become complex because while Creator Spirit asks for peace over war, forgiveness over revenge, love and not hate, a Yanomami can never turn their backs on a relative who is in need, even if it means wounding another with clubs. This is the reason that Keleewa and Miquie did not take sides and Shoefoot stood alone on the day of battle against the death of Redhair: they struggled to understand what Yai Pada required of them and what was culturally necessary and for that matter, the life of Yoshicami was at stake if they didn't act! Nonetheless, the significance and identity in relation to family is undeniable and consistent throughout a Yanomami's life.

Roles between male and female are heavily contrasted and graphically exposed. The main belief being: women are here for us men. They have no chance in the world and if they have any value, it is for sex and giving birth. Women have little value in the Yanomami culture because they are not fierce like men, so they are looked down upon and even beaten to death occasionally. They hardly ever have a say in who they want to marry because her parents and in-laws decide who is best according to his fulfilling of the duties as a good hunter and provider. And the only comfort they give is that the woman will eventually accept and get use to him. This is the life for a Yanomami women: no freedom, no respect, no real love, no tenderness or affection given. It is control and manipulation from men, using women to get them what they want. However, when more people begin to follow and change their ways in Honey Village, suddenly there is not only a new sense of peace, but women are also treated with dignity and respect. The power to choose what she wanted in life, the feeling of being loved and wanted, such things a Yanomami woman could only dream of but never possibly attain in her world. The men saw how the nabas in Honey treated the women around them, never abusing or trading for sex, and they sought to imitate this better way of living. These beginning cultural shifts in gender identity and equality is changing the narrative of the Yanomami people as it creates value, worth, and a voice for indigenous women.

### Language

Stories are told through spoken word, not written, that is carried on from generation to generation. The author begins the story by explaining the concept of word usage to a Yanomami because words and symbols are only culturally appropriate. To a Yanomami, for instance, names are an insult because they typically speak of one's childhood name that is shameful to even say out loud as an adult. So for a new naba to enter a village and ask for a Yanonami's name is an

insult, though it may be considered normal and a sign of respect in more civilized societies. This could spark misunderstanding and frustration for the naba who does not understand and has not fully immersed into the culture to establish meaning to things. One especially does not speak the name of a dead person or relative as it is a sign of disrespect as much as it becomes too much to bear. Another example of word choice is observed in the initial reference of God as Yai Wana Naba Laywa, the unfriendly, enemy spirit versus the latter part of the story where He is referred to as Yai Pada, greatest, Creator Spirit, once the people come to know the true God. The meaning around the former term caused the Yanomami's to fear and distant themselves from God because the language created a false belief in their minds. This is the power of meaning attached to a language. And because most of the people did not read or write, there was more emphasis on word terminology in relation to culture and the spirit world.

### **The Gospel**

In a world dominated by vengeance and death, the Yanomami's search for a different way of living, perhaps a greater spirit they keep hearing about that could end their misery. This is the reason that the Yanomami people have come to Honey Village: to seek hope and relief from their miserable lives and last remaining members of their village. It was only a matter of time before the entire village died and because the spirits became of no use to them, they sought for outside help from the nabas in hope of finding healing for their dying relatives or a new spirit that would give them strength and power that their older spirits couldn't. What attracted these people to the gospel came through the visible change that marked the once Yanomami person who was vengeful and followed the ways of the spirits. Jungleman noticed how peaceful and happy they were after letting go of old spirits and turning to Yai Pada. A new feeling had taken over, a friendliness, a love and kindness unlike any other Yanomami has ever seen or felt. Hence,

the good news is the breaking of bondage from old ways of killing, chest-pounding, drinking bones, and stealing and raping women. Whoever turns to Yai Pada no longer has to be controlled by such rituals and misery anymore because they now have the Greatest Spirit. There is no longer any need for performing unokai because Jesus came and walked the trail for us, even to the point of death. As many Yanomami leaders came to acknowledge, not only did it become unnecessary to go back to the old ways, but one would be a fool to want to return to reckless bloodshed and killing innocent lives to appease the very spirits who hated them and whose end goal was to kill them. Contrary to how the foolish nabas viewed them, these people were smart in their thinking and even while living in their old ways could distinguish good from evil spirits versus the nabas who didn't even recognize they had evil spirits living inside of them. With Yai Pada now, this means being able to have access to the most powerful Spirit 24/7 without any more fear living inside of them. This certainly was news worth celebrating.

### **Mission**

One of the advantages that separate the Yanomami people from other groups is their keenness to the spiritual world. Because their lives are built around the spirit world and because the spirits are all they have, if there is a new, more powerful spirit they will recognize it and do whatever it takes to have this spirit. This is why the Yanomami's held on to Yai Pada once they understood He was the Greatest Spirit. It was not a matter of what others might think now. They were willing to give up everything in a moment to follow Creator Spirit. Such a willingness and obedience reminds me of the first disciples of Jesus and how they immediately followed Him with no question or resistance. Another reason the Yanomami's gladly accepted to forsake their old ways is because there was nothing to lose if they chose to reject their spirits and turn to this new Spirit. They knew that their way of living was not working and to stay with their spirits

meant more misery, more suffering, wailing, and pain. There had to be an end to all of it one way or another. In some ways, Yai Pada was not so much an option as it was a tangible, physical need for Yanomami's who were searching for hope and healing. Most of their lives had been "bad news" because of what the spirits told them to do and therefore, they suffered under the hands of the very ones they once sought to keep as a young shaman. But they never thought that they were the ones living in bondage because the spirits were controlling them and their families.

Although the idea of faith and trusting an unseen Spirit is not a new concept for the Yanomami's, the ways of Yai Pada may take some time to get use to. For instance, while the old spirits showed up each time the shamans took ebene and did their chant, the new Spirit may not show up anytime that the people want or expect. He doesn't always give his people what they ask for. They're also now limited to where they can go or see in the spirit world. They have to adjust to the Spirit and surrender even the good things they might have enjoyed with the former spirits. In many ways, the Yanomami people are challenged to have a greater level of faith and trust in the true God who knows all things. No doubt there may be times that one questions Yai Pada's ways but it doesn't mean He is not good and loving. But more importantly, they understood that the pain of staying in their old ways was far greater than the cost it would take to leave their spirits and walk in Yai Pada's ways.

### **Personal**

The story of the Yanomami people makes me want to further understand not only their people more, but the way of the spirit world. I find it shameful that the modern world has lost sight and understanding of the spiritual. Especially as a Church, we have failed in our understanding of the spirit world, valuing and emphasizing the physical world over the unseen and supernatural as if our present reality is more real than the spiritual domain of God and

Satan's battleground. We have lost touch of the spiritual kingdom that is eternal and traded it for temporary visible comforts. They Yanomami's knew better because they understood something we didn't: the spirit world is connected to us because we are all spiritual beings, whether we like it or not. I have a high respect for the Yanomami people who have a deep keen sense of awareness of God's presence and live everyday as if their lives depended on his power and spirit. That's the kind of attitude and faith I want to have. To be utterly depended on the One who truly matters, sacrificing all things for the sake of the gospel. I felt a need to confess to the Lord after reading this story: the fact that I have prioritized material things over God and overcomplicated the very things that have been simple all along. These people had little to nothing left and yet they knew who the true God is. I'm reminded how complex we are as cultural beings and that there is not always a black and white answer to everything. Being a missionary amongst a new people group is challenging and creates problems of its own. Often more misunderstandings than connections are made, but through perseverance, it becomes a "harvest of righteousness" to those who sow in peace. If it were not for nabas like Pepe and Keleewa's family, the Yanomami people would have never heard the gospel and about Yai Pada, and they would have most likely perished without any hope for the future. The missionaries' presence and love ultimately saved entire villages of people. I am encouraged and challenged as I pursue the spirit of the kingdom and continue to follow the footsteps of Yai Pada, the Greatest Spirit.