

Book Analysis: Spirit of the Rainforest

A. Culture-Analyze the Various Elements of the Yanomamo Culture

1. Introduction-The Yanomamo: A Brave or Violent Culture?

A large tribe of Tropical Rainforest Indians exists on the border between Venezuela and Brazil¹. The population is approximately 20,000 and they are depicted as the most primitive, most violent, and most famous tribal society in the Amazon². The Yanomamo tribe suffers from challenges including raids and killings in their villages as well as sicknesses, they believe are tied to their spiritual world. While in the past, they have been responsible for maintaining complete control of their lives, today they have been faced with excruciating problems from gold-miners to disease². In this paper, the cultural, spiritual and missional aspects of the Yanomamo people group are analyzed in the context of a Yanomamo Shaman coming to faith in Christ. Part A of this paper analyzes the various elements of Yanomamo culture.

2. Social Structures: Yanomamo Culture

The following kinship rules apply to the Yanomamo people group. For this people group, descent through the male is more important than the female, especially regarding marriage. This is called a patrilineal family group since all the individuals can trace descent through genealogical connections back to some male ancestor using only the male genealogical connections¹. The rule with marriage for Yanomamo is that everyone must marry outside of his or her own patrilineal group. Therefore, all members of the patrilineage must marry outside of it into a different patrilineage. The following model for the Yanomamo society takes into account

¹ Chagnon, N.A. *The Yanomamo (Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology)*. Cengage Learning, 2012.

² Ritchie, M.A. *Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamo Shaman's Story*. Island Lake Press, 2019.

rules regarding kinship, descent, and marriage. This model is based on principles of patrilineal descent, bi-lateral cross-cousin marriage, and the classification of bi-lateral cross-cousins as “wives”. What does this model show?

The model shows the following:

- (1) The Yanomamo society can be bifurcated into two intermarrying “halves”.
- (2) Each individual belongs to the patrilineage of his or her father, and all men marry women who are simultaneously their Father’s Sister’s Daughters (called FZD) and their Mother’s Brother’s Daughters (called MBD).

Kinship Rules and Rule Breaking

In the case of Hairy marrying his dead wife’s sister, YellowFlower, he broke kinship and marriage rules². Based on our previous model, Yanomamo men can only marry one category of women that are marriageable (ie: FZDs or MBDs). All other categories of women are prohibited, and sex or marriage with people in these categories is considered to be incestuous. As a result of this incestuous relationship between Hairy and YellowFlower, this led to a fight and conflict in the Yanomamo village and also contributed to the fission of his family group.

3. Stories and Events of the Yanomamo People

To understand the Yanomamo people, we must understand their stories as well as the events that take place in their life. As discussed in Ritchie’s book, “Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamo Shaman’s Story”, the story of the Yanomamo people can be understood by understanding their spiritual world². Let us gain an understanding of their spiritual world by looking at the stories of the events that Jungleman experienced as boy through being an adult. For example, as a young boy venturing in the jungle alone, he encountered a beehive and spirits that emerged from it.

The author asserts that, “They all came to me and told me to stand still and they stung me”. I was about to run, but they all kept saying, “Hold still! Don’t run! Don’t leave us! We will protect you²!” From there he encountered the spirits that took him to the Omawa spirit or the leader of all spirits. Jungleman stated in the book that, “Just being near him is the greatest thing that could happen to a Shaman. He is beautiful, with an overpowering smell of the loveliest flower of the jungle²”. Why was the Omawa spirit so important? Omawa spirit was important to the Yanomamo people because he helped them become the “fiercest and most beautiful people” on the planet. In addition, he taught a young Shaman to grind up the bones of his relative and stir them into a big banana drink, drink it, and then go kill the person who caused their death.

In another event, the spirits returned to Jungleman and showed him more. One moment, he watched the Shaman attempting attempting to save a girl from dying. When the girl was nearly dead, the enemy spirit sent his hawk to grab her soul. In response, the Shaman called on the “Ice Spirit” and both chased after the hawk to try and get the girl’s soul back. Their attempts were challenging since as they got closer to the land of the enemy, it became too bright and too hot. As a result, the Iceman covered the Shaman with ice to cool him down. It is the ice that made saving the girl’s soul possible. So right before he reached the land of the enemy, the Shaman snatched the soul of the child and brought it back into the body.

So, what beliefs and practices of the Yanomamo do we learn about from these stories? First, we learn that revenge is taken when someone kills one of the Yanomamo people. Their response is that they grind up the bones of the dead person, stir them into a drink and drink it, and then take revenge on the person who killed one of their people. Secondly, when a person is near death, the enemy spirit tries to steal their soul and take it into the land of the great spirit. Since it is too hot

and too bright there the Shaman cannot go there and save the person's soul. Because of this the person's soul could be lost.

Another significant story in the book involved Deemeoma's father, Wyteli, a powerful Shaman leader². Wyteli practiced Shamanism and taking a drug called ebene. After inhaling the ebene powder, he was taken into the spiritual world. He soon went into a trance and began dancing and chanting. Wyteli would then share a story what his spirits had done. He asserted that, "You know that story we heard about the man who just died? I sent my spirits to kill him". This got everyone excited. He went on further to say, "Remember those babies that died over in Sandy Place? My spirits and I traveled over there and blew alowali powder all over them. Within a few days they were all dead. We can be happy that we won't have to worry about these babies growing up and coming back to kill us²". What is the lesson learned here? The lesson learned here is that as a result of the spirit work or Shamanism of Wyteli, this resulted in the death of babies in another village. That is when Wyteli killed the babies in the spirit world, this resulted in the death of the babies in the natural world.

Next, another important story in the book involved Tigerlip getting a revelation from "Papa", Coco's headman². Papa treated Tigerlip with kindness and love and put his hands on Tigerlip's head. Coco said that, "That touch will be very good for you". "This is because he has the power from the creator spirit", Coco commented. The events that transpired next showed that the power of the "Papa" did help Tigerlip. He also gave him wisdom and a powerful revelation that Nabas would come and give them things in exchange for their women. He stated, "This is something you should never do". As Papa predicted, Nabas came to the village and traded things in exchange for sex with the women.

The last and most significant story in the book focuses on Jungleman coming to Christ later in life when he was an old Shaman². Before his encounter with God, Jungleman was very vengeful and fierce. He also believed and held onto the lies of his spirits that had been with him most of life-That he would be killed if he threw his spirits away. The transformation event that happened to Jungleman is taken from the book². “Just before they killed me, a bright light came. It was so bright that I could not see anything. And there was something very warm like I have never felt. A creature stood over me, more dazzling than anyone could ever think. As soon as I felt him, I knew who he was. He was the one we have always called Yai Wana Naba Lagwa-The unfriendly spirit, the enemy spirit...I lay on the ground in the cloud of brightness and I saw my whole life, and I saw how completely tricked I had been. I remembered all the things my spirits had told me. Now suddenly in this bright light, I saw that they were all lies. Everything they said was a lie....Yai Wana Naba Lagwa reached out and grabbed me. I felt so safe.

He stood over me, pulled me away from my spirits, and said to me, “Don’t worry, you’ll be alright. I’m here to protect you”. Then with a big voice the spirit said to my spirits, “Leave him alone. He is mine”....After the village came to him to help him, he said, “No I’m good,” “It’s true, they did come to kill me. But while I was dying from the blows of my spirits, Yai Wana Naba Lagwa came and save me²”. After the transformation experience instead of being vengeful, Jungleman became forgiving and instead of being fierce, he became loving and kind. All of this stemmed from Yai Pada, the great spirit.

B. Gospel: Analyze What the Gospel (Good News) Means for This People Group

1. Salvation

The first area of what the Gospel means for this people group is salvation. This is affirmed in the book when Jungleman exclaims, “But while I was dying from the blows of my spirits, Yai Wana

Naba Lagwa came and saved me²". Revelation 7:9 talks about a 'vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language'. All clothed in the white robes that symbolize salvation. Salvation is for everyone. God's salvation is for people of all races, nations, genders, and physical or social conditions, for God loves the whole world (John 3:16). Salvation is not just for the educated, the westerners, the whites, or the blacks. Christ wants to save the people from every tribe and every background before he comes back (Matt 24:14; Rev 5:9) including people of the Yanomamo people group.

Let us be far from racial, ethnic, or cultural biases. We are called to acknowledge all fellow Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ and treat them as family. Be thankful that God loves all his children-those from every race, color, and nation. Paul announces this idea of the Gospel that includes all people. "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:28).

2. Imago Dei-Created in the Image of God

The second key area of what the Gospel means for the Yanomamo people group is based on the notion that we are all created in the image of God or the Imago Dei. This is supported by the book which documents an important story where Tigerlip gets a revelation from "Papa", Coco's headman. Papa treated Tigerlip with kindness and love and put his hands on Tigerlip's head. Coco commented, "That touch will be very good for you". This is because he has the power from the creator spirit", Coco stated². Genesis 1:27 asserts that, "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them". While we see how magnificent God is through his creation, the Bible says that humans regardless of race, color, or nation are created in his image and bear his likeness. It is also written that men and women are elevated to a status above all created things (Gen 1:26). With the fall of mankind, the relationship between man and

God was broken and this broken relationship was in need of a savior to restore the relationship. The Yanomamo beliefs and practices is quite similar to Christian beliefs and practices found in Genesis. Throughout the book, the author makes mention of the “creator spirit”².

Out of being created in the image of God regardless of our race, color, or nation of origin, we are called to love others. Much like Jesus, we should strive to share the Gospel with the Yanomamo culture and show them love and compassion, by serving them and treating them with dignity and respect. This means that we should be respectful of their culture, beliefs and social status. We should bridge the gap between the Christian and Yanomamo faith by looking for common ground like the Imago Dei and take the opportunity to share God’s love and compassion with them.

3. The Truth of God’s Word

The third area of what the Gospel means for this people group is the truth of God’s word. This is affirmed by the book when Jungleman admits and confesses that he has listened to the lies of the spirits all his life and needs to listen to the truth of the great spirit or God². John 8:32 asserts, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free”. By renewing our mind and meditating on God’s truth found in his word, we can be set free from the “lies of the enemy” or false beliefs. This is what Jungleman did². He refused to hold onto the lies of the enemy and embraced the truth found in God’s word. The truth did set him free!

C. Mission: Analyze the Process of How the People Come to Put Their Faith in God

The objective of this section is to reflect on the key processes that are involved in the conversion of an individual and how this interacts with the reading in the book². The key processes that will be analyzed and discussed are (1) God convicts us of our false beliefs or lies of the enemy through God's word, revelation from God, or another believer, (2) Revelation of God's truth and encounter with God, and (3) Sinner's prayer-Where an individual repents for their sins and asks forgiveness from God and confesses from their mouth that one believes that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died, and God raised him from the dead. With each of these steps of conversion, the interaction between Jungleman's personal experiences and these steps will be evaluated.

1. God Convicting Us of Our False Beliefs

The first step of the conversion process that will be analyzed and discussed is God convicting us of our false beliefs or 'lies of the enemy'. This conviction that one is holding onto false beliefs or the "lies of the enemy" can come through reading God's word, through having a personal revelation from God like Paul had on the road to Damascus through dreams or visions, or signs and wonders or through another believer. In the book, Jungleman was convicted of the false beliefs that he was holding onto when he had a personal encounter with God. Through this experience, he confessed and admitted that he was holding onto false beliefs².

2. Revelation of God's Truth

The second step of the conversion process that will be analyzed and discussed is Revelation of God's truth through an encounter with God. An example from the NT where someone had a personal encounter with Jesus was Paul. Acts 9:35 says, "As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shown down around him. He fell to the ground and

heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what to do”. The transformation event that Jungleman experienced in the book is in alignment with the scriptures².

3. Reciting the Sinner’s prayer

The third step of the conversion process that is discussed here in this paper is reciting the sinner’s prayer. Jungleman in this book acknowledges that he needs to confess and repent for holding onto the “lies of the enemy” or false beliefs, believing in God and promising to follow God and not the spirits he has been following all his life². He even states, “But while I was dying from the blows of my spirits, Yai Wana Naba Lagwa came and saved me²”. After the God encounter, instead of being vengeful, Jungleman became forgiving and instead of being fierce, he became kind and loving. All this stemmed from Yai Pada, the great spirit or God.

D. Personal: Conclusion with Personal Reflection and Missional Significance

1. Personal Salvation

Like Jungleman in the book², I had my own Damascus road experience. On a cold wintry day in Wellsboro, PA, I was going through personal, financial, relationship and job challenges. I encountered God in my driveway and he told me that if I trusted in him, he would make me pastor of a church and give me a ministry of ministering and helping youth and teens. My response was that I bowed down in my driveway and worshiped God and declared him master and savior over my life.

2. Hearing God's Truth

In Clinton's book, "The Making of a Leader", the author asserts, "Our greatest challenge as leaders is to develop Godly character³". The foundation of leadership is character. There are four important process items that the Lord uses to test character: (1) Integrity checks, (2) Obedience checks, (3) Word checks, and (4) Ministry tasks. A word that the Lord gave me not only served as a word check but also an obedience and integrity check. The word God gave me directly and confirmed through other Christian leaders is "If you are faithful in the little things, you will be faithful with in the large ones" (Luke 16:10). Being faithful in the little things means not only being faithful with our money by using our resources to help others, but also being faithful with our time with ministry tasks that we are given.

For example, I was given the ministry task of serving as an Assistant Chaplain at Bowery Mission in East Harlem, New York. Through being faithful with the ministry task of helping the homeless, and those with trauma and mental illness, I have seen a lot of good fruit come out of the experience. By ministering and helping the men's population at the Bowery Mission through teaching and preaching God's word and using the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, and reading and meditating on scripture, I saw men's lives changed transformed! Men that were previously angry were now loving and men that were unforgiving were now forgiving. And men that were prideful were now humble. By being faithful with the little, this resulted in me helping my spiritual formation team and see men's lives changed.

³ Clinton, Robert. The Making of a Leader. Tyndale House Publishers, 2018.