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Introduction

There are various things that make up a culture. How people conduct themselves, their beliefs, the foods they eat, the attitudes they carry, the clothing they wear, and their social norms are all themes that make up one's culture. Having an open mind to a group of people's ideologies, ways of living, and beliefs, will help a person to embrace everything that one's culture comprises of; similar to how I chose to embrace the differences, the norms, the challenges, and the strengths of the Yanomamo Indian culture in the book *The Spirit of The Rainforest*. This book illuminates the experiences of being a part of this culture group, and by the conclusion of the book I was able to identify not just their culture, but the missional significance for this group.

Cultural Analysis

In *Spirit of the Rainforest*, Mark Ritchie provides insight on everything he learned over the course of thirteen years about a particular community and culture, namely the Yanomamo. Ritchie visited a place called "The Amazonas", located in Southern Venezuela six times over the course of thirteen years. During this time period, he was able to collect the history, the experiences, and the culture of one of the most powerful, yet violent groups of people. Ritchie sheds light on their physical stature, their beliefs, their interactions with the spirit world, their way of living, what they deem valuable as a culture, and lastly their violence. Ritchie describes the physical stature of the Yanomamo Indians from the very beginning. He states that "the Yanomamo Indians are small, rarely over five feet tall, but have the speed, strength, and agility of a jungle cat." (Ritchie, p. 8) Ritchie also alludes to the fearlessness of the people as a key

characteristic. This is evident in their attitudes, the way they hunt, and in the way they approach war. Even in the face of fear, the mentality of the Yanomamo men was to never show fear. Jungleman states, “They couldn’t tell that I was just as scared. No great fighter ever shows fear. Even when he knows he is being killed, a great warrior will stand and let them fill him with arrows, but he will never show fear.” (Ritchie, p. 42) The Yanomamo Indians were indeed a fearful group of people.

The story demonstrates key aspects of why the Yanomamo Indians were known for their strength and power. Their fearlessness was even demonstrated in the way they lived. The Yanomamos weren't just skilled at hunting, or identifying potential danger, but they would fight off animals who were also a threat. Jungleman shares his interaction with a jaguar. He states, “As the jaguar got close...when he reached my level, he moved slowly around the trunk. But I was ready. I stabbed him in the neck with the end of the bow and knocked him off the tree.” (Ritchie, p. 54) We also notice the Yanomamo people’s ability to build for the purpose of survival. Ritchie states, “...we began the long hard task of staying safe from retaliation...first we built a huge palm wood walla across the front opening of the shabono.” (Ritchie, p. 37) From hunting, to building, to protecting themselves in the face of danger, the Yanomamo Indians lived in survival mode. As a culture who is always in survival mode, there is a need for a place of refuge and release; this group of people found their interaction with the spirit world as just that, a place of refuge.

One of the major spiritual aspects of the Yanomamo culture is their belief in the “*Omawa Spirit*”, which is the leader of all spirits. (Ritchie, p. 23) Ritchie quotes Jungleman, “I saw Omawa come to the Yanomamo people to help us become the fiercest and most beautiful people on the earth.” (Ritchie, p. 24) One of the rituals the Yanomamo performs is grinding up the bones of their ancestors, stirring it in a banana drink, and then going to get revenge on the person who

killed their ancestor. They believe that this gives them the strength and the power they need to carry out their vengeance. This ritual is something that the Omawa spirit exposed them to. Jungleman states, "I saw him teach a young shaman to grind up the bones of his relative and stir them in a banana drink". Then Omawa told him, "This is the body of the one you love. All of you, drink it. Then we will go and kill the person who caused his death." (Ritchie p. 24) Not only is violence a part of their culture from the wars they engage in, but even the leader of all spirits guides them to seek revenge in a violent way. Which makes sense as to why Ritchie referred to this peculiar group of people as violent.

Another key spiritual concept for this culture is their interaction with the spirit world. The Yanomamo's guidance for all of life's essentials is provided from the spirits within the spirit world. Ritchie quotes Jungleman, who states "...you must understand the spirit world...No story of my people can be understood without knowing about the spirits." (Ritchie, p. 21)

Interestingly enough, Ritchie gives a story of his encounters with the spirits, where we see communication between the individual and an object within the forest. Furthermore, we get a sense that the Yanomamo are empowered by these spirits. In order to begin engaging with the spirit world, or to be a man of the spirit world, one must be a "*shaman*". The men in the village take a powdered substance called, "*ebene*" which welcomes the spirits, and brings them into the spirit world to interact with their spirits. Shamans interact with the spirits from the spirit world in order to lead their village. However, this act doesn't just attract good spirits, but it also has the possibility of welcoming bad spirits. Ritchie quotes, "If he is a good shaman - I mean if he can avoid the bad spirits and get the good ones... all the things that will make them into a good village."

Shamans not only look to their spirits for guidance on how to navigate through life, but they also engage physically with their spirits. Jungleman states, “Her father always looked so strange when he danced with his spirits. It scared her. He wasn’t like himself.” (Ritchie, p.27) This statement gives some insight on what the physical interaction appeared to be when a person danced with their spirits. An onlooker would view this as strange, scary, and ultimately not the normal way the individual would conduct themselves. Dancing wasn’t the only physical interaction with the spirits within the spirit world. The shamans even went as far as having sexual intercourse with their spirits. Ritchie sheds light on the relationship between Jungleman and Charming spirit. Jungleman referred to Charming as the most beautiful woman he’s ever known in the spirit world or the real world. Ritchie further describes a sexual interaction between Jungleman and Charming spirit. Jungleman states, “My spirits are always dressed so perfectly...but Charming finally ran them off...She danced me out into the jungle and made love to me until I was weak. This was the greatest victory of my life.” (Ritchie, p.37) While I shed light on some of the joys and pleasures the shamans physically experienced with their spirits, they also had physical altercations with their spirits. Jungleman sheds light on a time when he had to jump into the spirit world to save his mentee from being killed by spirits. He states, “On the trail, they attacked him and hit him over the head with a huge tree limb...I jumped into the spirit world and battled with these new spirits... My spirits joined me in the fight.” (Ritchie, p. 60) The interaction with the spirit world is a major component within this group, and it’s shown within how they receive guidance, how they lead their village, and how they even relieve themselves with their physical interactions with their spirits.

One of the significant characteristics of the Yanomamo is how violent they are. Violence is a theme of their culture and a way of life for them. Throughout the book, Jungleman glories in

the way they war in his culture and in the way they abuse women. He states, “That day proved we are the fiercest Yanomamo warriors anywhere. In our killing frenzy we would do anything.” (Ritchie, p.33) All of the key themes seemed to knit together, from the killing, the interaction with the spirit world, and the raping of women. These different characteristics are in some way, shape or form, knit together in the Yanomoma culture. Ritchie quotes one of the men from the culture named Shoeman, he states, “You know our old spirits always told us to kill for vengeance.” (Ritchie, p. 219) Here, we see it’s the interaction with the spirits from the spirit world that encourages them to kill, which supports my statement on how all of the major characteristics within the culture ties in with each other.

While the violence is significant for this culture group, I cannot separate it from the abuse on women being that one of the ways the Yanamomas celebrated victory was to take the women from that village, rape, and torment them. Jungleman states, “We all took turns raping the women... There were four groups of warriors, one woman in the middle of each group. We kept on until we could go no more... Each time we stopped, we would use all four women.” As a form of victory they’d rape the women, and physically abuse them. Ritchie shed light on the actions of the Yanamomas towards the women after winning a war and killing everyone within Potato Village. The men kidnapped the women, and not only were they sexually abusive, but also physically abusive. Jungleman states, “The women whimpered and moaned at the retelling of every story and we had to hit them to make them stop. Sometimes hitting them didn’t help. But we tried”. (Ritchie, p.34)

One of the themes I couldn’t help but to analyze was the differences and similarities on how women and children are treated within this culture, the Bible, and American culture. Ritchie sheds light on how, during a time of struggle, children died off because they were the last to eat

or sometimes weren't able to eat. If food was caught, the men were sure to eat first. This somewhat reflects their power and superiority within the culture. This observation prompted the thought of a former similarity within American culture and the history women faced with the same issues of lack of equality as men. The Bible constantly sheds light on taking care of the widow, children, and the poor. One of the moments when it seemed like this act was reflected in their actions was when Redfoot left his wife, the people in Forgetful Village tended to her while she was sick and helped with supplying her and her child with food.

Gospel Analysis

The people at honey village showed that the gospel can reach anyone. It doesn't matter how violent, how gory, or how much bloodshed one has committed, the gospel is able to pierce the heart of a warrior. Furthermore, one person's action can impact a whole entire group of people. One Yanomamo named "Doesn't Grab Women" or Shoefoot, broke the norm of the culture through his actions, and this sent Jungleman on a quest to find him. As a result, he comes to a place that is far beyond what he's ever experienced, a place where there is peace and harmony. Jungleman learns that the very spirit that he was always told to stay away from by his spirits, is actually the spirit he needs to grab a hold of. This becomes evident and a defining moment when Jungleman's spirits try to kill him and in the midst of this taking place, he encounters who they call "Yai Wanna Naba Laywa". He states, "As soon as I felt him, I knew who he was. He was the one we have always called Yai Wanna Naba Laywa...I have never seen such a beautiful light." (Ritchie, p.227) This defining moment showed that Shortman planted a seed within their conversations and through his ability to show love and light he showed while welcoming Jungleman into his family. As a result Jungleman, while in the face of death was able to acknowledge who they call "Yai Wanna Naba Laywa".

Missionional Analysis

From missiological analysis, it is rather difficult to discern how this story applies. Nevertheless, there is one thing that is common amongst the gospel and missiological standpoint- that is, the view of the Yanomamo and their customs. Ritchie states, "To the anthropologists and Protestant and Catholic missionaries I can only say that I have not come to this project with the intent to favor anyone." (p. 240). This gives severe implications, but particularly towards this story in the eyes of the church. From the outside looking in, the missiologist would assume this is just a story about gore and violence. Ritchie's argument is that this is the reality of a people group. As difficult as it may be to stomach this reality- with all of the vivid descriptions- the missiologist is challenged to understand the culture and deliver the gospel in this context. It is from this view that one can see there's essentially no favor on any side, but only hope that the gospel message brings about a change in what the Yanomamo deem as their reality.

Personal

During my time of reading this story, there was a lot that had both a spiritual and mental impact on me. While I do believe it is important to educate yourself on the various themes of other cultures, I also believe you have to be mindful of what you spend your time reading. Reading about some of the rituals practiced in this culture reminded me of how some of the very things they practice are contrary to what believers practice. I saw the initial warnings about the book, but it wasn't until I began to read the book that I understood the emphasis on the disclaimer at the beginning. Aside from the spiritual differences I mentioned in the previous chapters, I had a difficult time reading through how the men within this culture tormented, physically, and sexually abused women. Rape and abuse is a cultural norm amongst this group

and that was rather disturbing to read through. I thought about my positionality; my role as a Christian, a husband, a son, and a man within society, and I couldn't comprehend how one of the ways for men to celebrate victory was to mentally, emotionally, and physically abuse and take advantage of someone who is physically weaker than them.

What made this concept even more difficult to understand was the fact that it was so normalized that multiple men participated in the act of rape. Ritchie quoted, "Even before we knew better, we knew our ways were bad. But it was all we knew." (Ritchie p.234) This reminded me of how important it is to ground yourself in the Word of God, and to look to it as the ultimate source of how we should live. One of the reasons I am adamant about one grounding himself/herself in the precepts of God is because he or she could be led astray by the precepts of culture and the ways of society. If a person is only exposed to things within their culture, and some of these things are not morally acceptable, then they'll be participating in things that could be spiritually detrimental. Keeping this in mind, this story caused me to reflect on my own culture and some of the themes within my culture that I've identified that don't align with my beliefs as a believer. One of the themes that I often see in my culture is men impregnating women and leaving them to care for themselves and their children. I thought about this theme as I read the story of Redfoot leaving his wife and children for a younger woman, during a time when his wife was sick. Though the theme is different, the concept is the same. In my culture and in the Yanomamo culture, women are abandoned during a vulnerable time period. Lastly, my main takeaway is the importance of making sure that following God remains foundational, because following any other spirit could be dangerous.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of the Yanomamo proves to be a valuable lesson for the church. It certainly brings us to the reality that surrounds some cultures, and the need to be aware of them all the while delivering the gospel. Furthermore, one is faced with the challenges within his or her culture; the story may not be as vigorous, but there may be things hidden that must be addressed in order for the effective experience of the gospel. What Ritchie has done is certainly commendable, and must not be ignored, as it challenges the church to recognize and acknowledge the realities of this world, and to show the gospel of Jesus Christ as the ultimate solution.