

BOOK REVIEW: *SPIRIT OF THE RAINFOREST: A YANOMAMÖ SHAMAN'S STORY*

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SUMMARY

In his book, *The Spirit of the Rainforest*, Mark Ritchie depicts the conversion of a Venezuelan shaman, named Jungleman, to Christianity. The story, which begins in the 1950s, and concludes in the 1980s, is a story of the shaman and his spirits. It is a story of murder, rape, revenge, power, joy, and fear. It is a story of the shaman's interaction with, and dependence on, spirits, for daily life. However, it is also a story of Jungleman's people, the Yanomamö. It is a story of the impact of Christianity on the cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs, of the Yanomamö people.

Ritchie's burden in writing the book seems to be manifold. Firstly, he wants to dispel the myth that the Yanomamö people live an idyllic life, a life in Eden.¹ Secondly, Ritchie desires to present an authentic insider's view of the spirit world, and its impact on the Yanomamö.² In the book, we see daily life through the eyes and mind of Jungleman. Thirdly, Ritchie wants to show the supremacy of the Great Spirit *Yai Pada* over all spirits.³ Although Ritchie never states it directly, it is easy to recognise *Yai Pada* as the God of the Bible.

¹ Mark Andrew Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest*, 2nd edn, Chicago IL: Island Lake Press, 2000, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 227.

Ritchie hopes *The Spirit of the Rainforest* will influence the reader, in several ways. Firstly, Ritchie hopes his readers will see their world through spiritual eyes, just as the Yanomamö do.⁴ Secondly, he wants his readers to understand that change in culture begins on the inside of man, a spiritual change that exhibits itself in changed actions.⁵ Thirdly, Ritchie hopes his readers will see the potential impact that *Yai Pada* could have on their lives.⁶

EVALUATION

Spirit of the Rainforest has several strengths. Firstly, Ritchie accurately unfolds the truths of the spirit world. For most Westerners, interested in world evangelisation, the spirit world is something studied in the classroom, but not recognised in daily life. Ritchie brings the spirit world of the Yanomamö to life. The stories in *Spirit of the Rainforest* should challenge every reader to look at cultures, whether it is the reader's own culture, or another culture, through spiritual eyes.

Secondly, the structure of the book highlights the long-term mentality a person interested in world evangelism should have. The story begins in approximately 1950, when Jungleman was a child, and warrior male spirits and beautiful female spirits came to him.⁷ Later, when Jungleman was a man, *nabas*, the Yanomamö word for "foreigners", came to the area.⁸ A shaman named Shoefoot subsequently decided to throw away his spirits and follow the Creator Spirit, *Yai Pada*.⁹ Many years later, in 1982, *Yai Pada* "reached out and grabbed" Jungleman, and chased away his spirits.¹⁰ It had taken a long time for Jungleman to follow *Yai Pada*.

Thirdly, Ritchie writes the book from the perspective of Jungleman, which brings the reader into the story in a way that would not be possible, from a

⁴ Ibid., p. 251.

⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 21. They took him to *Omawa Spirit*, the leader of all jungle spirits.

⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 228.

third-person perspective. For example, the power of first person is evident in the following quote. Jungleman says, “When you have spirits as wonderful as mine are, you would never think of ignoring their advice.”¹¹ A person interested in world evangelism must understand that they are dealing with thinking, feeling people, not objects of conversion.

Fourthly, Ritchie aptly shows the power of *Yai Pada* to change lives. In the book, many followers of *Yai Pada* live in the Honey village. Consequently, the Honey village gains a reputation as a peaceful and prosperous village, and becomes the envy of all other villages.¹² This positive impact should encourage those interested in world evangelism, that the gospel will show itself, if accepted and followed.

The only weakness in the book is a subjective one. Western readers may question the credibility of the book. The events seem so outlandish that it seems impossible for them to be true. Nevertheless, Ritchie repeatedly states that the events are true.¹³ In fact, he states at the beginning of the book, “truth is stranger than fiction”.¹⁴ The book authentically tells the story of the Yanomamö people, no matter how strange the truth.

REFLECTION

Several thought-provoking ideas surface, after reflecting on the material in the book. Firstly, the conversion stories in the book emphasise aspects of salvation that are refreshing. Evangelical Christians from the West discuss salvation primarily in terms of the judicial concept of justification. However, Ritchie characterised the conversions of the Yanomamö people from a relationship standpoint, a changing of allegiance – a giving up of old spirits to follow the Creator Spirit. For instance, Jungleman followed several spirits before his conversion: Charming – a beautiful female spirit who Jungleman

¹¹ Ibid., p. 42.

¹² Ibid., p. 123.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 8, 245, 246, 247, 248.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

regularly seduced;¹⁵ Healing Spirit – a spirit Jungleman would call on to heal sicknesses in the village;¹⁶ and Jaguar Spirit – a spirit who gave Jungleman courage.¹⁷ Ritchie then describes Jungleman’s conversion:

Yai Wana Naba Laywa 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 all right. I’m here to protect you.” Then, with a big voice, he said to my spirits, “Leave him alone. He’s mine.” They scampered in every direction, like a herd of terrified hogs. And he was right; I was his.¹⁸

Anyone interested in world evangelism must realise that different people will respond to different truths regarding salvation. Salvation is justification, but it is also adoption, reconciliation, repentance, regeneration, and redemption. The Yanomamö people seemed to latch onto the adoption aspect of salvation in their conversions. They now belonged to the Creator God. The book, however, may not have adequately captured all of the Yanomamö believers’ pre-conversion understanding of the gospel. For example, after his conversion, Jungleman states, “You told me, before, about how the Great Spirit had become a man, but I was kept from seeing it.”¹⁹ The incarnation is not discussed anywhere else in the book.

Secondly, the power of the jungle spirits, in the *Spirit of the Rainforest*, was unsettling. The fact that the spirits could cause sickness and death is beyond the thinking of most Christians in the West. Jungleman states,

I asked my spirits if they could kill other children. “I don’t do that”, Charming told me, “but I can get you spirits who can.” She introduced me to Snakeman. . . . The next day I followed the directions that

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 229.

Snakeman gave me. . . . We later got a message from the village that one of their children had died of a snake bite.²⁰

The author's addendum to the book contains an unsettling aspect. Ritchie states that a Yanomamö, while on a trip to the United States, "identified the signs and symbols of many of the spirits right here in our 'civilised' society. He has no problem understanding the Columbine High School massacre (Colorado, 1999), or any other killing spree."²¹

Missionaries must be cognisant of the power of evil spirits. Eph 6:12 clearly pronounces, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood". Most Christians from the West do not give much credence to these words, despite the fact that the words are from God's Word. However, missionaries cannot afford such an attitude of indifference.

Thirdly, the allure of the jungle spirits was disquieting. Jungleman states how he enjoyed his time spent with the spirits, "My spirits came into the *shabono* of my chest, and I was happy to see them. We danced, and they talked to me."²² At another time, Jungleman states:

I danced with my spirits, a dance that lasted through most of the night. It was a wonderful celebration. Some of the other beautiful women come to dance with me. They are wonderful, too. . . . [Charming] danced me out into the jungle, and made love to me until I was weak. It was the great victory of my life.²³

Most Christians in the West do not understand how appealing false spirits can be. However, scripture states, "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). It is interesting that Jungleman, in his first encounter

²⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

²¹ Ibid., p. 251. The Yanomamö was Shoefoot, the first shaman to become a Christian.

²² Ibid., p. 36. A "*shabono*" is an enclosure around a Yanomamö village, built primarily for protection from enemies. The use of *shabono* in this passage may imply that the spirits indwelt Jungleman.

²³ Ibid., p. 37.

with the false spirits, described the experience saying, “Suddenly, I looked up and the jungle turned so beautiful – more beautiful than any Yanomamö has ever seen it. The most beautiful Yanomamö people in the world came towards me.”²⁴ Missionaries must acknowledge how attractive false spirits can be to those seeking answers to life. People, desperate for answers to problems of life, will turn to anyone to solve those problems. Such was the case of the Yanomamö people.

Fourthly, people are concerned most about meeting their daily needs. The Yanomamö called on spirits for many reasons, two of which were hunger²⁵ and sickness.²⁶ Where there are needs, people will look for solutions. Missionaries must be ready to give answers. Christ provided food for the hungry (Matt 14:21), and healing for the sick (Matt 8:16). To be effective witnesses for Christ, missionaries must be practical in their help. Missionaries must seek to help provide the daily necessities of life. Missionaries must have a compassionate hands-on flavour to their ministries, to minister as Christ did.

CONCLUSION

The *Spirit of the Rainforest* is an eye-opening book into the spirit world of animists. Ritchie powerfully and accurately tells the story of the spirit world’s influence on village peoples’ lives in the jungles of Venezuela. Anyone interested in working with animistic people or believers, who have come out of animism, should read this book. It may very well change your worldview.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 47.