

The Basics of Animism

Spiritual Warfare in Tribal Contexts

Animism is a growing concern in all parts of the world and forms the basis for new religious movements. Sitton lists basic characteristics which help to identify the worldview of tribal peoples. All of this leads to the challenge of doing effective spiritual warfare among animist peoples in order to reach them with the Good News and plant the Church in their midst.

by David Sitton

The existence of spiritual beings and vigorous activity in the spirit world is a constant reality in both the Scriptures and the animistic worldview. The spiritualistic worldview affirms that ultimate reality is spiritual, not physical or material. The vast majority of the world's 5.9 billion inhabitants hold to some form of a spiritualistic world view.¹

Generalizations can be made about the animistic practices of tribals, but it must be remembered that animism takes many forms and how it is applied to a particular culture will vary widely from tribe to tribe. Even tribal clans living in close proximity along a shared mountain range may exhibit remarkable differences in how their spiritualistic view of the world affects their daily existence.

Animism Defined

Defining tribals is like describing the proverbial elephant... Your perspective all depends upon which piece you've got hold of at the moment. But here are some basic definitions of animism.

Animism is the belief that non-living objects have souls (life) and that natural phenomena possess supernatural or magical power. Gailyn Van

Rheenen gives a more comprehensive definition:

Animism is the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that human beings must discover what forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.²

Is animism a religion or a culture? In reality it is both. Religion, relationships and culture are inseparable in the tribal world. Their spiritualistic religion is an integral part of the culture and the tribal way of life. Following the rituals of their religion is a totally taken-for-granted requirement of living in the tribe. Animism is an all-of-life daily experience based upon spiritualistic beliefs. In contrast, the Christian religion (not Biblical Christianity), as commonly understood in the Western world, is merely a set of dogmas to be believed. These dogmas are easily labeled as spiritual and can be separated from the rest of life which is considered secular.

Animistic Beliefs in the United States

Otto Friedrich made the insightful observation that "a strange mix of spirituality and superstition is sweeping across the country."³ Here are a few examples:

1. An estimated 50 million Americans believe in astrology and regularly consult their horoscopes.
2. The annual Halloween or All Hallow's Eve Festival is nothing more than a celebration of North American folk beliefs in the reality of ghosts and goblins. More than just innocent fun, Halloween is satanism's most powerful night of the year.
3. Lucky rabbits foot, horseshoes, and lucky numbers.
4. The toast of glasses originated as a ritual to ward off evil spirits.
4. Sneezing is traditionally unlucky because it is an involuntary expulsion of breath. Breath is equated with the soul to the Hebrews, Greeks, Indians and Chinese. Expelling breath was believed to make room for demons to rush in and possess the sneezer. The common "God bless you" that follows a sneeze originated as a way to protect the sneezer from evil influences.
5. Good luck superstitions abound among sports stars and politicians alike. Some famous ones are:
—Jim Palmer was nicknamed "Cakes" because he ate pancakes before every game.
—Frank Lucchesi, manager of the Texas Rangers from 1975 to 1977 was called "Hippity-Hop" because of his extreme observance of the long-

standing notion that bad luck will follow the player who steps on a baseline. He frequently jumped over foul lines.

—Donald Regan, former White House Chief of Staff for President Reagan, disclosed in his book, *For the Record*, how astrology greatly influenced the schedules and plans of the former President and First Lady. The former president also put a gold charm in his pocket every morning. Although Mr. Reagan appeared to have a deep Christian faith, he seemed untroubled by the contradictions of depending on the mystical powers of astrology even while professing faith in Christ and the gospel.⁴

How does all of this relate to a study of animistic tribal peoples? The above serves as documentation that there are a large number of Americans who believe that their lives are being influenced by “cosmic forces” or evil spirits, which is a basic belief of animism.

From the reading of horoscopes, to Nancy Reagan’s consulting of a medium while in the White House, to Shirley MacLaine’s obsession with the occult, to Coach Pender’s refusal to cross baseball bats in a bat rack, animistic customs and New Age thinking are being promoted and is a growing concern in American society.

Animistic Assumptions about Life

Animistic cultures have many underlying assumptions about what is true and real in life. The following statements are common assumptions about life that most animistic societies consider to be unchallenged truths. Many examples will be used to illustrate these vital assumptions in the following pages.

All of life is spiritual. The spirit world controls everything in life. Spiritual beings are everywhere and they

shape all that happens. Ancestral spirits control the living. The material world is subservient to the spiritual. Spiritual power is gained through secret knowledge and magic. Spirits are able to cause sickness. These assumptions about what is true and real in the world of the animist fall under one large category, usually called *mana*.

Animistic Concepts of Spiritual Power

Three wood carvings lie undisturbed beneath generations of dust and cobwebs deep within the belly of a large slit-gong garamut drum in the manhouse of a Sepik River village in Papua New Guinea. An old tribal leader carefully removes one of the crumbling pieces and explains that no one in the village knows who carved it or the legend it represents. Yet it is a serious taboo to tamper with these sacred objects. Handling one wrongly will rile the spirits of the dead who would then cause terrible catastrophe. Not only would the local villagers be destroyed, but, it is strongly emphasized, people worldwide would be severely punished. The manhouse itself seems to tremble at the thought of anything happening to these old soggy pieces of ancestral wood.

The animistic concept of indwelling spiritual power within certain objects or people is almost universally referred to as *mana*. Among the first to comprehensively study and document this phenomena was R.H. Codrington back in 1891.

Codrington described *mana* as “a supernatural force which operates behind all human activity in the world. *Mana* is a force altogether distinct from physical power which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil and which is of the greatest advantage to possess and control.”⁵

Mana is considered the power behind success or failure.⁶ Insufficient

mana is thought to be the cause of failure; great *mana* the cause of success. A man is successful at fighting not merely because of powerful arms, quickness of eye, and innovative weapons; he is successful because of *mana*. The *mana* may have been received from an ancestor, from a warrior killed in battle; from an amulet that once was in contact with a *mana*-filled person or spirit; or from a distinctive tooth or rock that when worn, placed in one’s house, or planted in one’s field has power to bring success. Likewise, the speed of a well-made canoe does not depend upon its design but on the *mana* it possesses. Without *mana*, an arrow cannot inflict a mortal wound nor can a net catch many fish (Codrington 1891, p. 118-120).

Theodore Ahrens, in describing present-day Melanesia, comments, “The main religious question in Melanesia is how to gain access to power and control it in order to make life successful.” *Mana* provides the animist with power to be successful; the absence of such power explains failure.

Influential people hold their positions due to *mana*. Ancient Hawaiian kings were thought to be so charged with *mana* that the common man would die if he came into contact with what the king had touched. His touch automatically made things taboo to the commoner. Codrington writes that a son in northern Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides) does not necessarily inherit his father’s chieftainship since such a position is due to powerful *mana*. However, the father will attempt to pass on to his son the *mana* that has made him chief by the use of charms, magical songs, *mana*-laden stones, and secret knowledge (Codrington 1891:56).

Objects are assumed to possess *mana* because of their distinctiveness. For example, a man may find a stone

resembling some fruit of his garden. He says to himself, "This stone is so unusual that it must possess power to make my garden productive. Let me put it to the test." He lays it at the foot of a tree or plant whose fruit it resembles. An abundant harvest proves that the stone possesses *mana*.

Cannibalistic tribes in New Guinea believed that eating enemy warriors was the way to gain their power (*mana*). The very personality of the person was thought to be contained within the bodily parts. Hair, fingernails, flesh, blood and sex organs are all considered to be rich in *mana*. It is still common to visit villages in Papua New Guinea where human bones and skulls are coveted for their *mana*.⁷

This impassioned belief in the power of *mana* posed a problem for the government of Papua New Guinea when they tried to establish a blood bank. No one would give blood! The people feared that once their blood was collected and stored away that the government would have spiritual power over them. Even after extensive teaching only a few volunteered blood.

The scientific and secular mind set of the West may scoff at such beliefs and practices. Yet it is interesting to parallel the concept of *mana* with our ideas about coincidence and luck. A businessman may consider his promotion to chairman as a result of his hard work and intellectual abilities, but he may also recognize that he was "lucky" to be at the right place at the right time. A person who has just won a lottery will reckon himself to be lucky. Similarly, a person who is successful in growing plants may happily say that he has a "green thumb." And touching or "knocking on wood" for luck remains part of English folk magic.⁸

R.H. Codrington rightly recognized that without a thorough understanding of *mana* "the outsider could not understand the religious beliefs and practices of the Melanesians" (*The Melanesians*, p. 191).

"The FORCE is with you" was the advertising slogan for the Hollywood movie "Star Wars" in the 1980s. This modern twist expresses well the animistic concept of *mana*.

Tribal peoples are physically tough, but spiritually tormented. They routinely display superb courage in tribal warfare and endure incredible pain... Spiritually, though, these same warriors tremble at the thought of witches, ghosts and spirits.

This concept of spiritual power, or enablement, is prevalent throughout the world and is dominant within animistic societies. It may be called *Toh* in parts of Indonesia, *Baraka* in the Muslim world or the *Universal Life Energy* among New Age followers. However, whatever the label the concept is much the same.

The Controlling Emotion of Animistic Peoples

Tribal peoples are physically tough, but spiritually tormented. I have seen Papua New Guineans perform almost superhuman feats, carrying monstrous loads up perpendicular mountains, and chasing wild pigs and cassowaries all day long through some of the world's thickest jungles with hardly a drop to drink. They routinely display superb courage in tribal warfare and endure incredible pain from every imaginable disease and mishap.⁹

Spiritually, though, these same warriors tremble at the thought of

witches, ghosts and spirits. They may refuse to walk through a forest alone or sleep in a room unless there is someone to keep them company. I have had guides lead me hours out of the way over rough terrain simply to avoid walking through an ancestral burial ground or through areas known to be inhabited by spirits.

Animistic peoples believe that their troubles in life are generally due to their inability to keep the spirits satisfied. They live their lives fearfully looking back over their shoulders wondering if every ritual was performed adequately enough to keep the spirits happy. Constant fear everywhere dominates tribal people.

Where did fear originate? The early chapters of Genesis document the entrance of sin into the world. Fear was the immediate consequence of that sin. Fear is the result of the break in man's relationship with God because of rebellion. We are alienated from God; we are not at peace; there is unrest, uneasiness and dread.

Fears and phobias of every kind abound. Animists fear the power of an ancestor to take revenge upon them for some past grievance; they are terrified of the power of the evil eye to kill a newborn or even ruin a harvest; they tremble when confronted with the power of spirits who possess mediums; they dread the power of magic that controls human events; and on and on it goes...

It is worthy of note that many creation myths among tribal peoples describe a time when there was no separation between mankind and God when humans were immortal.¹⁴ But the time came when there was a separation between God and man. Some tribal legends say that the separation came as a result of man breaking a taboo; in others it is explained as an accident beyond human control. The

gruesome result is that humans have become mortal and die. Tragically, no real solution for reconciliation with God is found within tribal mythologies.

Controlling the Spirits

One tribal assumption about life is that spirits are evil and unpredictable and they must be approached with extreme caution. From the breast, children are taught about the power, presence and danger of the spirits. Their existence is one of constant fear and never-ending submission (worship) to a variety of spirits. Great energy is expended in their pitiful attempts to satisfy the spirits through magic and sacrifices. These demonic entities aggressively participate in all of the affairs of village life and the people are endlessly seeking to settle accounts with them.

Much of life is an attempt to discover which spirits are dominating them at the moment and then finding the right magic rituals to temporarily satisfy them. The whole emphasis is upon gaining power (over spirits) in order to live a successful life. A few examples of how animists attempt to manipulate spiritual powers are:

1. By seeking secret knowledge through mediums.
2. By approaching their ancestors for help through elaborate dances and festivals.
3. By employing the power of sorcerers to take care of a specific problem.

Spiritual Warfare in Tribal Contexts

It is unfortunate that many people in our 20th century humanistic and secular oriented society deny the existence of anything beyond the reach of their five natural senses. Evangelicals are often ridiculed because they believe in a literal living devil, who has demons under his control, and who is actively devising

detailed strategies to destroy Christians and to keep unreached peoples in bondage. To our detriment, the post-Enlightenment Western worldview in which most of us live, has filtered out much of what the Bible reveals about the spirit world.

Most amazing is that many Christians are also incredibly unaware of this warfare in the spirit world. Since they cannot see demons, and since they cannot hear the shrieks of the rulers of darkness, and since they cannot physically feel the fiery darts of wicked spirits, they convince themselves that none of this really exists. If one adheres to secular worldview assumptions that deny spiritual realities, then it follows that the demonic dimension will be virtually ignored.

This warfare is called *spiritual* because it is normally unseen. It is a conflict that takes place in an unseen realm with hostile, wicked, and invisible forces. Whether Westerners believe it or not, this spiritual war is as near to us as the air we breathe.

In fact, the entire biblical record of God's redemptive activity (of salvation history) is set in the context of warfare between the two kingdoms.¹⁰ The story of Elisha and his troops in 2 Kings 6:8-17 is a great illustration of the spiritual war that is constantly being fought "behind the scenes." Though invisible, this encounter in the spirit realm is more important than the conflicts we see with our natural eyes. Therefore, whether facing a jungle witch doctor or a big city bureaucrat, theologians and missiologists agree that we are up against far more than merely a flesh and blood foe.

The Reality and Nature of the Devil and his Legions

The Bible begins (Gen. 3) and ends (Rev. 20) with clear testimony to the existence of Satan and evil spirit

beings. They are powerful and, with God's sovereign permission, they are sometimes able to accomplish their evil intentions. Both the Old and the New Testament are replete with references to a variety of spirits and demonic activity. It is not my intent to develop a study on demonology for this article. Whole books are available on this subject.

For our purposes, however, let me quickly note some of the characteristics of Satan and his demons as described in Scripture:

- Satan claims authority over the world (Luke 4:6).
- He is a murderer and the father of lies (John 8:44).
- He blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4).
- He opposes the growth of God's kingdom (Mark 4:15).
- He persecutes the church (Rev. 2:10).
- Evil spirits assist Satan in his deception and destruction of men (1 Peter 5:89; Eph. 6:12)
- They are spirits without bodies (Eph. 6:12).
- * They were originally in fellowship with God (Jude 6).
- * They are numerous (Mark 5:8-9).
- They have supernatural power (Rev. 16:14)
- They are knowledgeable about God (Matthew 8:29).
- They are allowed to roam the earth tormenting people (Matthew 12:43-5).
- They can inflict sickness (Matthew 9:32-33)
- They can possess or control animals and human beings (Mark 5:13; Luke 8:2).
- They can cause mental disorders (Mark 5:2,3,5)
- They know that Jesus Christ is God (Mark 1:23-24).
- They tremble before God (James 2:19).
- They teach and lead people into

false doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1).

- They oppose God's people (Eph. 6:12).
- They attempt to destroy God's kingdom (1 Peter 5:8).
- They can exert authority over an entire region (Dan. 10:13).
- God takes advantage of the actions of demons to accomplish His divine purposes (Judges 9:23).
- God is going to judge demons in the last judgment (2 Pet. 2:4)

Though defeated by Christ in his death and resurrection, the devil and the angels that fell with him are permitted to be aggressively active in the affairs of man, primarily because most people, consciously or unconsciously, are duped by his trickery.

Although the devil's role in spiritual warfare is most often associated with supernatural power, his most effective strategy is deception and trickery. Various points to ponder:

- Satan and his angels were created by Jesus (Col. 1:16).
- Christ is head over them (Col. 2:9-10).
- He defeated them on the cross (Col. 2:15).
- Their end is hell (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10). When Satan reminds you of your past, remind him of his future.

Satan's Power

There are no rules in this warfare. Satan is not limited to a single plan of attack, but will take every advantage to bring people under his control. We often speak of strongholds, demonic oppression, depression and possession. What does all this mean?

1. A satanic *stronghold* is any fortified place Satan establishes to exalt himself against the knowledge and plans of God. A "fort" is a strengthened dwelling built as a means of protec-

tion against an enemy bent on penetrating their camp.

"A studied observation of demonic strongholds reveals two universal characteristics—they repel light and they export darkness." (George Otis Jr.)

"A stronghold is a mind set impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable something we know is contrary to the will of God. A demonically induced pattern of thinking". (Ed Silvosa)

Spiritual warfare is what happens when believers aggressively take the Gospel into a situation where Satan has a stronghold.

Demonic strongholds seek to hold a person, system, organization or territory under its grip. Church planting is essentially God establishing His sovereignty (stronghold) and dominion over a group of people once held in Satan's grip. God becomes their stronghold and fortress.

2. *Demonic oppression* is Satan's powerful influence from outside of the body. Oppression occurs when evil spirits tempt our minds, tamper with our emotions, soften our wills, and assaults our physical bodies.

3. *Demonic depression* is an unshakable bout of depression that occurs for no observable reason.

4. *Demonic possession* is to be inhabited by evil spirits.

5. *Demonic obsession* is an uncontrollable preoccupation with demonic phenomena.

6. *Demonize* is a word used of believers who have given place to the devil and have, in some way, come under the influence of evil spirits. Perhaps this is what happened to Peter (Matthew 16:23) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3), and king Saul (1 Sam. 18:10).

Jesus Himself acknowledged that Satan was powerful by calling him a

strong man (Matthew 12:29), and until he is bound, no amount of effort, strategy or clever techniques will accomplish much. Having said that, however, it must also be remembered that there is One who is stronger than the strong man. The stronger one is Jesus (Luke 11:21-22). He crushed Satan's head and "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15).

Though defeated at the cross, Satan remains an extremely powerful foe. He still "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He still has the ability to destroy people, just as a rattlesnake with a crushed head can still be dangerous.

Spiritual Counter-Attack

Spiritual warfare is what happens when believers aggressively take the Gospel into a situation where Satan has a stronghold. There is an inevitable spiritual confrontation between God and the forces of evil that hold the people in bondage. God always wins. And through the process of spiritual warfare captives are set free.

Deliverance is the demolishing of Satanic strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-4). This is done through the proclamation of the Gospel, accompanied by a "demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:3-5). Deliverance occurs when God breaks the demonic power over a person's life and enables him to establish a relationship with Christ.

In Conclusion

There has never been a time of easy advance for the kingdom of God. We cannot expect to come against a powerful enemy and quickly drive him out of his heavily fortified stronghold

where he has been entrenched for centuries. Satan will and must give them up, but there will be a fight, and there will be casualties as we come under the fire of Satan's attack. The following word of the Lord is imperative in the mission context to tribals:

"On this mountain the Lord will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoke." (Isaiah 25:7-8)

Throughout Scripture the devil's domination over the nations is represented as darkness. Isaiah describes it as a shroud that enfolds all peoples, as a sheet that covers all nations. Spiritual darkness is not merely a passive absence of light, as on a peaceful summer's evening. Instead, spiritual darkness is an aggressive, attacking, oppressive stronghold that is duty-bound to strangle all those within its grasp.

Satan is incredibly powerful. As a frail human being, I sometimes marvel at the enemy's ability to keep tribal peoples in the grip of fear and unbelief. "On earth is not his equal" is how Martin Luther put it. But I disagree with those who perceive the conflict between God and the devil as a toss-up and that we're waiting in limbo to see who wins the final round. We must be clear about one thing. It is a truth that will come in handy when you are slugging it out in the trenches of evangelism and missions:

The devils every breath is inhaled only by the permission of God. Satan cannot exist in the brilliance of God's glory any more than an ameba can survive on the surface of the sun. Our God reigns—and He reigns right now. He will reign in every tribal people group in all the earth!

End Notes

1. Edward F. Murphy, *Worldview Clash, A Handbook for Spiritual Warfare*. International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol 10:4, Oct. 1993, P 163.
2. Gailyn Van Rheenen *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Baker Book house, 1991), p. 20.
3. Otto Friedrich. *Time Magazine* (1987).
4. Dr. Richard J Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kesho Publications, Kijabe, Kenya, 1989) p. 98.
5. R. H. Codrington. *The Melanesians*. 1891, p. 119.
6. The following three paragraphs are borrowed from Gailyn Van Rheenen's excellent book, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, pp. 208-210.
7. New converts in the Solomon Islands came to perceive communion as a Christian ritual which gave them power (*mana*), in much the same way as eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their deposed enemies had once done. The symbolic significance of communion is not the primary meaning these Melanesians derived from this form of worship. Darrell Whiteman, *Point* (Series No. 5, 1984), *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*.
8. David Burnett. *Unearthly Powers* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), p. 26-27.
9. I have personally witnessed men pulling arrows out of their thighs with hardly a whimper. The most gruesome thing was a young man who accidentally pierced completely through his own foot with a steel axe as he was chopping down a tree. He maintained complete composure through what must have been excruciating pain. He

endured this without pain killing medications of any kind.

- 10 Excerpts of *A Creation Myth from the Abaluyia people of Kenya*.
11. Dr. Ed Murphy. *Worldview Clash, The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), p. vi.
- 12 The following two definitions from George Otis Jr. and Ed Silvoza are from the *MARC Newsletter*.

Photo here
of
Sitton

David and
Tommi Anne
Sitton have been
involved in
church planting
and
leadership
training
ministries in

Papua New Guinea for the past 20 years. The Lord has used David in making the first Gospel contact with several cannibalistic and headhunting tribes in the interior of New Guinea. Altogether, 34 churches have been established with more than 2,100 disciples through this ministry. Presently, David is doing tribal research, conducts tribal seminars, and leads short-term missions to New Guinea and Mexico. He also continues church planting in New Guinea on annual Summer trips. David and Tommi (with their three children) are now basing their work TO EVERY TRIBE MINISTRIES, located in Los Fresnos, Texas.

[Editor's Note: This article is a reprint from Sitton's excellent manual entitled *To Every Tribe With Jesus: A Tribal Awareness Seminar*. Permission to reprint this article has been granted.]