

UNDERSTANDING ANIMISM AND FOLK RELIGIONS



SCRIPTURE FOCUS

“For he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” 1 John 4:4

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:12



QUOTE

“Missionaries must not only study Scripture and formal religions of the people they serve, but also the day-to-day religious beliefs and practices that rule the people’s lives if they want to communicate the gospel as an answer to all people’s hopes and fears.” Paul G. Heibert



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings, discussion and activities in this session, the candidate should be able to:

- Recognize and explain basic beliefs and practices of folk religion
- Suggest ways that one may present the Gospel in a relevant, understandable way to animists or practitioners of folk religion.
- Find Scripture references which will be useful in addressing issues which concern animists.



In 1974, when I first was appointed as a missionary to West Africa, I had no idea of the spiritual

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battles that I would be facing. Certainly I had heard of superstition and good luck charms, but I considered that only uneducated and backward people were duped into these practices. I did not realize how widespread and deep-seeded these practices are – not only in Africa, but around the world, not only among the poor and uneducated, but also among the wealthy and educated.

ANIMISM AND FOLK RELIGION

As you make your journey in cross-cultural ministry, you will encounter practices which are common in many parts of the world. We of the Western world tend to view the world differently than our host people. The temptation to look on these followers of folk religion as inferior, uneducated, or superstitious is a common error which can become a barrier to your efforts to share the Gospel with your host people. As you study folk religion, try to get beyond your Western mindset.

Westerners tend to compartmentalize our everyday secular life from our religious life. We separate the supernatural world and the natural world. Everything in the supernatural world is classified with religion. The natural world is viewed as science. If someone becomes ill, the Westerner will look to science and medicine first for the solution. Seeking spiritual help through prayer is frequently an afterthought.

Most other peoples see the supernatural and the natural world as one world. Spirits, deceased ancestors, and the unborn are just as much a part of the world as humans, animals, and plants. Magic, witchcraft, and the evil eye are just as much a force in the world as gravity or fire. Even non-Christians often recognize the power of prayer. If a person becomes ill, he may seek help from a physician, but he will also recognize that the cause of the illness may be spiritual. When the physician asks for prayer for a patient, they recognize that this communication with God is powerful.

CASE STUDY: MEET THE BABY

The following story is true, an experience in West Africa in the mid-seventies. Although this event occurred long ago, it is just as common today.

Two Western missionaries shuffled along the dusty path into the bush village, wiping the sweat from their faces. As they approached one of the huts, they saw a small child sitting on the ground, wearing only a key on a string around his neck.

Amusing himself in the dust, the child's face revealed pure joy. The child looked up in surprise at the two white people coming near, and then began to cry.

“What a darling baby!” the newcomer missionary exclaimed.

“Don't compliment the child,” the veteran worker advised under her breath.

The baby began to scream at the sight of the strangers. The child’s mother rushed to pick him up and comfort him.

“What is the baby’s name?” the newcomer asked. “Old Man,” replied the mother.

“Oh!” replied the newcomer, unsure what to say next. The veteran picked up the conversation, turning the focus away from the baby.

As the Westerners left the village, the newcomer asked, “Why did they name that beautiful child such a derogatory name?”

“Did you notice the key around the baby’s neck? That is protection from evil spirits. The mother fears that if the spirits see someone admiring the child, they will become jealous and bring sickness or death on the child.”

REFLECT #1
 How could a natural Western response have destroyed any opportunity for a Christian witness with the mother of the baby?

IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS TO UNDERSTANDING ANIMISM

Animism (also known as popular religion) is not a single, formal religion. It is not practiced the same way in every setting, but varies from people group to people group.

“The term animism (from Latin *anima* (soul) commonly refers to belief systems that attribute souls to animals, plants and other entities, in addition to humans. Animism may also attribute souls to natural phenomena, geographic features, everyday objects and manufactured articles.

More generally, animism is simply the belief in souls. In this general sense, animism is present in nearly all religions. British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor argued in *Primitive Culture* (1871) that this belief was the most primitive and essential part of religion. Though animism itself is not a religion in the usual Western sense, some scholars believe that it contains the foundations on which religions are built.

Syncretism refers to the blending of folk religious practices with other world religions.

Animistic beliefs are not limited to primitive people in remote areas. Syncretism, the mixture of animistic beliefs with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, is widespread. Many folk religions are syncretistic, a blend of folk practices and those of a formal religion. Here are some examples:

Popular Islam

Muslims who practice folk Islam usually wear traditional Muslim robes, skull caps, and scarves. They appear to be following the Five Pillars of Islam. However, underneath this shallow veneer of Islam, folk practices are common. For example, they may ask their religious leaders to help prepare a fetish to protect them from evil spirits. Sometimes this fetish is in the form of a miniature Quran worn around the neck. Possibly some Quranic verses would be placed in a pouch to be worn.

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Popular Hinduism

Hindus worship many gods and goddesses. Many homes have a special prayer corner where small statues or icons of these deities are displayed as a focus of prayer. Some add Christian icons or statues to the mix.

Popular Christianity

Catholic saints are often adopted as an individual's own saint, based on his/her birthday. A statue of this saint is prominently displayed and kissed for good luck.

Reaching adherents of popular religion requires different strategies than those seeking to minister to more standard practitioners of the faith. Often folk practitioners are not aware of the tenets of the faith they profess to believe. If they have a holy book, they might be unfamiliar with the message it contains. Frequently folk practitioners are dependent on the traditions they have been taught by their family. Questioning them about the official tenets of their faith or on special passages of their holy book will probably meet with a quizzical facial expression.

BASIC BELIEFS OF ANIMISTS

Reality includes both Natural and Supernatural

"Most people see the world as full of beings (spirits, ancestors, humans, unborn, animals, plants, and earth spirits) and forces (magic, mana, witchcraft, evil eye, fire, gravity), visible and invisible, that interrelate in everyday life."¹ The Westerner views the natural world as completely separate from the spiritual realm. When illness, accidents, or mishaps occur, the Westerner's first response is to look for natural or scientific explanations. The animist perceives that illnesses, accidents, or mishaps might have a spiritual cause.

REFLECT #2

1. Suppose that you awakened one night with a sharp pain in your abdomen. What would your first assumption be? What would you do in response?
2. If an animist awoke in a similar situation, what would he assume? What would he do?
3. When an animist shares their concerns or troubles, how should a Christian respond in a way that would speak to the needs as the animist views them? Would prayer be an appropriate response?

EVERYTHING HAS A SPIRITUAL EXPLANATION

Animists already know that there is a god and spiritual beings. They do not have to be convinced by Christian apologetics. Fear of displeasing spirits or ancestors is common. What would you suppose causes this fear?

Animists often wear charms or fetishes for protection or good luck. How does your culture protect against these same concerns?

Animists view life and death as a series of transitions

Birth rites and baby-naming ceremonies mark the time when a child becomes human. Initiation rites mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. Marriage rites mark the

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establishment of families. Funerals and anniversary rites of death mark the transition from the dead into ancestors.

Rites of these transitions in life and death include some practices which contradict Biblical teaching. During baby naming ceremonies, the baby's head is shaved or the hair is cut to capture the power of the child. During initiation rites, female circumcision is also sometimes included in the secret society bush schools.

How should a Christian respond to these practices? What rites could be substituted for Christians who must remain in their culture to have a positive influence for Christ?

THE AWUJO

The Krio people of Sierra Leone believe that the spirits of the ancestors hover close around the earth for forty days after death. At the forty-day feast, the awujo (a diviner) throws kola nuts to the ground inviting the spirits, while the women prepare food for the ancestor feast. The prepared food is placed on the roof, and it is believed that the ancestors, in the form of vultures, eat the food. If the vultures eat the food, everyone is relieved and happy, for the ancestors are satisfied. If the vultures do not come to the roof, the ancestors must not be pleased, and the family seeks the advice of a moreman (shaman) to learn what they must do to rectify the situation.

The Krio people consider themselves the most civilized in the country of Sierra Leone.

Animists seek spiritual explanations to define the good life and account for crises.

The desire to have a good life is universal. However, different cultures have different perceptions of what a good life is. Some of the possible elements people perceive as essential to the good life are money, health, political power, control, honor, many descendants, God's approval and eternal life.

In life, one encounters difficulties which seem to be a barrier to the good life: sickness, financial failure, the death of dear family members, divorce, disobedient children, exams, etc.

In many cultures around the world, sickness is not considered to be caused by germs or viruses. Rather, it has a spiritual cause such as displeasure of ancestors or spirits, or perhaps the violation of a taboo, or a curse. When a West African requests prayer for a sick person, they recognize that this is a means of spiritual defense against the spiritual cause of this disease. When they ask for prayer, they expect the person they ask to pray immediately on the spot for the patient, not merely to promise to pray for them sometime in the future, as American Christians are prone to do.

REFLECT #3

1. How does the *awujo* reveal the animistic worldview that lies under their Christian facade?
2. How should the Christian from a western culture respond to the practices of the *awujo*?
3. How do Western cultures view success? How do you personally view success in life?
4. What is the difference between the ways that Westerners view success and the ways animistic cultures view success in life?

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“MY BABY IS SICK”

The nurse examined the severely dehydrated baby. “You are right. This baby is very sick. You must take him to the free hospital just down the road. “But, Missy, I don’t have money.” (The packet of cigarettes in his pocket and the radio he carried testified differently.)

Two days later he returned to the nurse. The nurse exclaimed, “You didn’t take this child to the doctor! This is very important! Do not delay!” She called a taxi for the family and paid the driver.

Some days later the nurse learned that the baby had not reached the hospital alive. Now the father had gathered \$75 (four months’ salary) to send for the Zo in another county. The Zo would be able to determine who “witched” the baby and made it die.

REFLECT #4

1. What is your initial response to the sick baby story?
2. What would you have done if you were the nurse in the situation? Why?

Animists seek spiritual ways of controlling one’s life and overcoming problems.

Animists seek ways to diagnose the causes of misfortune, disease, and death, to determine courses of action, to avoid danger, to determine guilt or innocence, to select someone for office, to find lost persons or objects, and to gain supernatural knowledge.

A SASSYWOOD TRIAL

Some mattresses were missing from the dorm at a prestigious school in West Africa. How could the perpetrator be found so that justice could be done?

A sassywood player was called in to find the culprit. After spreading out cowrie shells, mirrors, and other items, he made a fire and heated his cutlass until it was white hot. All the suspects had been lined up and told to roll up their pants legs.

The sassywood player then laid the cutlass against the legs of the suspects. If a suspect felt pain, he was guilty. The smell of singeing hair pervaded the area, but no one felt any pain. The culprit was not among the suspects.

COMMON PRACTICES OF FOLK RELIGION

Animal Sacrifice

On the edge of a Themne village, one may observe a small hut built particularly for the ancestors. Sacrifices of a white chicken are often made at the hut in order to placate the ancestor.

In March 2008, a local news program in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area reported on the complaint of a practitioner of Santeria. A man was not being allowed to sacrifice a dog as part of his religious rituals because of a ruling of the city where he lived. Santeria originated in Cuba where Yoruba people were brought from Nigeria centuries ago as slaves to help with the sugar

cane harvest. Roman Catholics refused to allow them to sacrifice to their nature gods, so they substituted the names of Catholic saints to represent each of their gods.

Signs and Symbols

An African Christian and an American Christian are walking together down a bush path in West Africa. Suddenly the African stops at an arrangement of certain plants in the path. “We can’t go here. This is where the devils are meeting. It’s very dangerous to cross this sign.”

What signs have religious significance in the Christian faith? If you saw a “666” on the sidewalk in front of you, would you walk over it or around it, or perhaps turn around?

Fetishes and charms – Made of special shells, hair, blood, and a variety of materials, fetishes, and charms are worn as protection from evil spirits and curses. They are also used as items for making magic and casting curses on people.

Taboos

“Taboos are mechanical prohibitions or restrictions associated with sacred or defiled objects, such as idols, offerings, and ritual oil. . . . Taboos are often associated with certain times of life. Young mothers and menstruating women are often isolated as unclean for a time. Warriors have to avoid sexual intercourse and strong drink before battles.”²

American folk taboos include: “If you walk under a ladder, you’ll have bad luck.” “Step on a crack and you’ll break your mother’s back.”

REFLECT #5

1. Read Hebrews 9:26. Do you see a bridge or redemptive analogy in the Bible which will connect to the practices of sacrifice in the examples above?
2. Can you find other Biblical passages which would help guide a folk religion practitioner who depends on sacrifices?
3. What fetishes and charms do we have in Western culture? Consider rabbit’s feet, four-leaf clovers, and horseshoes.
4. Can you think of other taboos in your culture?

Spiritual Transportation

Many animists believe that a person may be transported spiritually through magic. During the civil war in Liberia, checkpoints dotted the country in an effort to catch rebel factions. Word came through some of the checkpoints that rebels were turning themselves into birds in order to avoid the security searches. “You must examine the backs of those you catch. They will have marks on their backs where the wings were.”

Evil Eye

The evil eye plays various roles in different cultures. In some, the root of the evil eye is envy. Many animists believe that some humans have the invisible power to make bad things happen to people at their happiest, most enviable times. Prime targets of the evil eye: newborn babies, brides, pregnant mothers, ripe crops. For babies, adults will attempt to combat the possibility of evil eye by avoiding complimentary remarks about the baby, by calling a baby by an unflattering name, or wait to name a baby until the child is older and less vulnerable.

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof* focuses on the traditions of Jews in Russia in the early days of

the twentieth century. Their oldest daughter is praising the sweet nature of her baby, “Mama, he never cries!” The mother hurriedly responds, “Sh! Do you want to tempt the evil eye?”

In Arabic or Mediterranean cultures, the evil eye can be a symbol that is used to ward off evil spirits. It takes the form of a talisman, a trinket, that is painted or placed everywhere. Hanging from the rearview mirror, over a door, pinned on a babies shirt, on a keychain. It’s a pervasive belief that is ingrained in the very fabric of culture.

Totems

Totems are usually linked to families or clans. There is a spiritual connection between the family and the animal. Naturally, the members of that family would never eat the animal to which they are linked. Instead, they will protect their totem animal and make sure that it continues to multiply.

Native American totem poles indicate clans related by blood, by experience, by war exploits, and by adoption. Each symbol can be traced back to the ancestors who founded the clan. This ancestor, it is believed, once lived with supernatural animals, e.g. eagles, wolves, bears.

Rituals

Rituals among animists become a means of identifying individuals as part of a group. They often serve to strengthen relationships. Greetings are an important ritual in every society, but particularly in animistic societies. Frequently greeting rituals in these animistic cultures are quite prolonged, as the greeter inquires about health, family, work, and whatever else is important in the culture.

In Liberia, the handshake is particularly unique. It concludes with a distinctive click of the fingers on each other’s hands. Anyone who uses this kind of handshake can be quickly recognized as having a Liberian connection.

REFLECT #6

1. Give examples in the Bible where someone was instantly transported by God to another location?
2. What might be a Biblical response to the evil eye belief?
3. How is a Native American totem pole different from a British Coat of Arms, worn proudly by royal families?
4. What Christian rituals are observed in Western cultures?

Curses and Blessings

In animistic societies, a curse is an evil prayer, “a malevolent appeal to a supernatural being for harm to come to somebody or something.” (Encarta Dictionary). The spoken word is very powerful. The power of the spoken word can also have the opposite effect as it provides a blessing.

“Baraka” is the Muslim concept of divine favor. It can be used for curing and for blessing.

Secret Societies and Bush Schools

Teenage girls shuffle alongside the road, their bodies covered with white chalk. Their grass skirts are the only clothing. This is the only time that the uninitiated may see these girls. The initiation rites of the women and of the men are a very secret rite of passage. During the schools, these teenagers learn the important things about their society. Rumors have it that there is demon activity that is part of the training. Often circumcision is part of the training.

Devils

In West African countries, there are “play” devils, people who dress in costumes for all to see. They dance, they walk on stilts, and they chant. However, among the Dan people there are sacred costumes for the devil which are kept in a secret place and come out only in special ceremonies. Generally, they consist of straw covering and a wood mask. It is believed that the serious devils should not be seen by anyone other than the men of the tribe. When a man puts on the costume, they believe that he actually becomes the devil.

REFLECT #7

1. What does the Bible say about the power of the spoken word?
2. When a young person in such a society is under pressure to join the secret society or attend this cultural training, what advice could a Christian mentor give him? Is there a suitable substitute for these activities?
3. Are you familiar with cultural practices which involve the wearing of costumes? Are people considered to be transformed into the character the costume portrays? Are you familiar with the source of these practices?
4. What would a person in the country you are going think of Christians celebrating Halloween, a day with origins steeped in animism and spirits?

Ancestor Veneration/ Worship

Ancestors play an important role in the lives of many animistic groups. Frequently they must be consulted or placated in times of major decision. “What should we say when people ask about their ancestors? We dare not brush such questions aside lightly, for ancestors are important in the lives of the people.”³

November 1-2 Mexico and Southwestern U.S. Hispanic cultures celebrate “The Day of the Dead” (El Dia de Los Muertos). “According to popular belief, on the Day of the Dead the spirits of the dead return to commune with the living. Families prepare feasts for the dead, bake special bread, decorate graves, and strew flowers to please their ancestors.

Fertility Dolls



Fertility dolls are common among many animistic peoples. Usually, these idols have pronounced breasts or sexual organs. One of the most familiar in West Africa is the “Nimba”, the fertility god of the Baga people. This symbol is used on the Guinean franc and is a prominent part of decorations in the capital city of Conakry.

Although many fertility dolls have African origin, they can also be found in other cultures, including American Indian and Japanese. Infertility is a cause of great shame for women in many cultures, just as it was in the Bible.

REFLECT #8

1. What is the Christian response to ancestor worship?
2. What are some Biblical examples of women who were unable to bear children? How did they deal with their infertility?
3. Which of all these common animistic practices provide a natural bridge for sharing the Gospel?
4. Which of these practices are barriers to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ?

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LEADERS OF FOLK RELIGION

All religions have leaders with special roles. Most leaders in folk religion practice part-time. They have special training to help them serve as mediators between humans and the supernatural, but otherwise, they work as a member of the community.

Three types of religious leaders are particularly prevalent among animists: shamans, healers, and diviners. Compare and contrast these three types of leaders. Take note of the areas in which their services overlap.

Shamans

- Control spirits
- Primarily good
- Identify spiritual causes of disease
- Enter spiritual world through trances

Healers

- Heal through natural means, such as herbs
- Treat both the body and the spirit; no distinction between them
- Counselors and psychologists to mentally disturbed

Diviners

- Disclose the causes of misfortune and death
- Attend physical and moral ills
- Mild trance; symbolic tools
- Foretell the future

Consider these questions Christians may ask themselves:

- How should I find out the cause of my sickness or misfortune?
- How do I know what to do next?
- How can I avoid danger?
- How can I determine if someone is innocent or guilty?
- How do I know who to select for public office?
- How can I find things I've lost?
- How do I gain supernatural knowledge?

REFLECT #9

1. Is there any time when an animistic leader would be an appropriate help?
2. Should Christians go to a shaman? A healer? A diviner?
3. What are the Biblical guidelines for seeking help to these questions?

"You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes." Leviticus 19:26b

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“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” Galatians 3:26-29

“At that time Jesus declared, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.’” Matthew 11:25

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: LIFE IN CHRIST

Consider these Scriptures which can be used to address issues which are important to animists. Feel free to bring additional scriptural references into the discussion.

What is the meaning of Life and death?

Life in Christ offers new meaning to life and death. How is the life of a Christian different from that of an animist?

A Christian receives new things:

New identity in Christ – *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17*
Life has a new meaning in Christ. All of our past actions have been erased so that we can now be a new person with Christ living in our lives.

New community in Christ – *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Philippians 3:20*
Christians belong to a new family, the family of God. Our new home is in heaven, and we are waiting for Jesus to come from there and take us home.

New gifts in Christ – *“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” 1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4: 1-16*
When a person becomes a member of the community of Christ, he receives a spiritual gift which is intended to build up the church. There are many different kinds of gifts (message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues) but all of these gifts come from the Holy Spirit, who brings about unity and growth in the church family.

Why aren’t Christians troubled by fear of evil spirits? How can they be so confident?

“The Lord is my shepherd . . . I will fear no evil.” Psalm 23: 4

“The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Psalm 27:1

“Fear not, for I am with you.” Isaiah 41:1

“Perfect love casts out fear.” 1 John 4:18

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” 1 John 5: 14-15

Christians can come under spiritual attack just as animists do. The difference is the power of Christ that Christians have as a result of the Holy Spirit living in Christians.

"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." 1 John 4:4

What causes well-being and misfortune?

What is the source of blessing?

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" Matthew 25:34

The King, Jesus Christ, is the one who gives blessings.

How should Christians respond to human desires for a good life and for protection from misfortunes?

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19 *"For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills."* Psalm 50:10

God already knows what we need and is able to take care of all our material needs. Since God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, he has more than enough resources to provide for us.

God answers prayer

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." Matthew 7:7-8

"And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him." 1 John 5:14-15

We can be certain that God wants to answer our prayers, and He hears us when we pray according to His will.

God walks with us through trouble

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Romans 8:26-27

When we walk through times of deep distress and trouble, the Holy Spirit helps us. Even when we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit prays in our behalf.

Christians have the power of the Holy Spirit

"because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." 1 Thessalonians 1:5

When a person receives Christ in his life, he also receives the Holy Spirit, who brings spiritual power into his life.

EXAMPLES FOR US TO FOLLOW: UGLY AMERICAN VERSUS LEARNER

Westerners are frequently viewed as arrogant and rude because we assume that the rest of the world thinks as we do. The image of the “Ugly American” is quite common and very offensive. Americans are viewed as loud, obnoxious braggarts who make little effort to understand other cultures.

In approaching another culture, we need to assume the stance of a “**learner.**” A “learner mindset”: *“I have a lot to learn about your culture and your beliefs. My culture is not better than yours – just different. I know I will make mistakes, but can you help me understand?”*

Even assuming a learner mindset takes sensitivity to different cultures. In some cultures, asking too many questions is offensive. Since many of the cultures of the world are highly relational, a Westerner asking blunt questions about secret, mysterious things may meet blank expressions or irritated responses. Remember to be sensitive to the person whom you are asking for information. Take time to build a good relationship with him. Your first visit will probably not be the best time to ask your deep questions.

Here are some possible questions to help you understand the folk religion of your people?

- What beings or forces in the world are invisible?
- What causes sickness and trouble? How can you find the cause for misfortune?
- What are the most important celebrations in your life? Why are they important?
- What constitutes a good and successful life?
- Is sacrifice an important practice to you?
- Do some of your people wear charms or fetishes? What do they look like? What do they do for you?
- What are your cultural taboos?
- Can a person be transported through space by magic? Do you know anyone who has experienced this?
- What is the Evil Eye? How can you protect yourself or someone else from the Evil Eye?
- Do you have a totem? What does this mean in your everyday life?
- What rituals are important in your culture?
- How can words be used to curse or bless someone?
- Are there secret religious practices that you are not supposed to talk about?
- What happens to your ancestors after they die?
- If a woman can't have a baby, what can she do?
- Who are the religious leaders in your cultural religious practices?

Application:

Summarize what you have learned about:

- Basic beliefs and practices of animism and folk religion
- Bridges and barriers to the Gospel within the religion
- Issues which are important to animists
- Biblical passages which address these issues

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REFLECT #10

1. Based on all of these facets, how could a Christian teacher and evangelist share the salvation of Christ with an animist? What needs to be proclaimed that you might not normally say to someone in your own culture?
2. What adjustments would he need to make for a practitioner of folk Islam?
3. What adjustments would be needed to make for a practitioner of folk Christianity?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *UNDERSTANDING ANIMISM AND FOLK RELIGION*

Heibert, Paul G., R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tientou. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Belief and Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.

The primary text for this learning session.

Heibert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1997. pp. 208-224.

Particularly helpful in ministering to animists are the sections on “New Questions” (e.g. What do new Christians from an animistic background do about ancestors (p. 210) and on” Christianity and Folk Religions” (p. 222). Most of the chapter deals with contextualization of the Gospel message.

Heibert, Paul G. *Perspectives on World Christian Movement*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, Institute of International Studies, 1999. pp 373-383.

The section on cultural differences and the message suggest the contextualization of specific animistic practices.

Thompson, La Nette. “How Will They Hear? Reaching the Muslim Women of Sub-Saharan Africa,” *A Worldview Approach to Ministry Among Muslim Women*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006. pp. 109-127.

Folk Religion is often a blend of Animism and Islam. Thompson discusses what African women believe about spirit beings and how they seek answers to life’s problems through animistic practitioners.

Tippett, Alan R. “The Evangelization of Animists.” In *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 623-631. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

A brief discussion of the meaning of animism and a discussion of the Biblical theology of animism. A discussion of six problems to which evangelists should pay attention is extremely valuable in a study of animism.

Heibert, Paul G. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1994. pp 177-179.

PANORAMA

Evangelism in group-oriented societies is the focus. Although animism is not specifically mentioned, most animistic people groups have this societal structure.

Nida, Eugene A. "Communication and Social Structure." In *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 429-437. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

Nida discusses the difference between primitive and folk societies. The discussion on how to initiate communication in a folk or primitive culture is of interest.

Shenk, David. *God's Call to Mission*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994. pp 22-23, 67-68, 73-76, 189-196.

The primary focus of these reading selections the book is culture. The paragraph on witches (p. 67-68) is particularly helpful in a study of animists.

Steffen, Tom A. *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers*. La Habra, California: Center for Organizational and Ministry Development, 1997.

Chapter 10 touches on the subject of Power Encounters, a very real issue among practitioners of folk religions.

Stott, John R.W. "The Bible in World Evangelization." In *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 21-23. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

Stott points out some of the flaws of Western evangelism in the past. Far more urgent is the need for missionaries to engage the power of God's Word in defeating Satan's control of people's minds.

Rhennen, Gailyn Van. *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. pp 119-133.

Cultural perspectives of Africans vs. Americans (p. 119-128) helps provide background understanding of the society of animists and their way of thinking.

NOTES

¹Hiebert, Paul G., R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000, p. 35.

² Ibid., 158.

³Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1986, pp 210-211.

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