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Anthropology

Movie Essay – “Dead Birds”

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Is “Dead Birds” a Film about Warfare or Relgion?

The film “Dead Birds” depicts a practice that the Dani tribe of West New Guinea takes part in. The Dani engage in intertribal warfare on a regular basis. They do so because they understand that man must die; this is what a fable of a race between a bird and a snake tells them. The race between the bird and snake decides whether men are mortal like birds or immortal like snakes (who shed their skin). The bird wins and decides the fate of men. The Dani relate themselves to birds in many ways and believe that like birds they must die. They believe that ghosts of fallen tribesmen plague the tribe and cause misfortunes; this results in continuous warfare because tribes are always trying to avenge the deaths of their people. Also, war is much like a sport to them; they enjoy it and battles are like scrimmages. This film is both about warfare and about religion, because for the Dani tribe of New Guinea both are intertwined and maintain an intertribal balance.

The Dani’s practice of war is very much like a religious practice because their beliefs as to why they go to war involve the supernatural ghosts of dead tribe members, also their rituals and ceremonies all center around the outcome of war and they have specific traditions that dictate what to do when there is a victory (a member of the enemy’s tribe is killed) and when there is a failure (a member of their own tribe is killed). The movie centers on two characters: Weyak, a prominent warrior, and Pua, a young swine-herder. Weyak must always be on constant alert because he guards the most dangerous part of the frontier. The tribe’s territory is marked by tall watch towers that are a central part to their survival. The towers overlook the nomad’s land where battles take place. The significance of Pua’s character is his position as swine-herder. Pigs are very important to the Dani because they use them in their rituals of celebration for victory and mourning for death. In the movie, the tribe of the Dani that Pua and Weyak are part of is “playing” war on the defensive side; they had killed a soldier in a previous battle. Weyak must be even more watchful at these times because their enemy is looking to kill a member of his tribe. The religion that the Dani practice consists of a constant cycle of vengeance and mourning. Their religion centers on warfare; without war there is no way to avenge the deaths of tribe members. When a member of the tribe is killed they mourn him or her by placing the body on a handmade chair and adorning them with garlands made of shells. He or she is then cremated on a funeral pyre. As they mourn, the enemy tribe rejoices at their success and their songs of victory can be heard into the night. Similarly when Weyak’s people kill a member of the enemy’s tribe they celebrate long into the night. As part of the rituals of both celebrations and mourning they sacrifice pigs. The killing of pigs is another religious practice that satisfies the ghosts and allows them to be at peace.

Unlike what we in our society believe the purpose of warfare is (a means to seize power from or defend against another region), the Dani use war as a ritual to allow the ghosts of fallen soldiers or people to rest at peace. This inadvertently maintains balance between tribes; war never ends for the Dani. Un-avenged ghosts are the cause of sickness and misfortune and so the tribes will go on killing enemies to ensure the safety from the wrath of ghosts in their own tribe, because they believe that the destructive force of the ghosts can be far more deadly than the force of war.