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Anthropology

“Holy Ghost People” Essay

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Holy Ghost People

The movie “Holy Ghost People” should definitely be shown in the first of class of an introduction to anthropology class. If discussion after the film goes in the right direction, this movie can show students how to think as an anthropologist would; focusing on cultural relativism and the problem of ethnocentrism. Many people define anthropology as the study of indigenous people (or what they believe to be ‘primitive’ people), but they do not realize that within their own society there are people whose behavior can be studied through anthropological eyes. I think the Holy Ghost People are an example of this.

When I started this course I was fascinated to learn about the various other cultures and societies that had their own unique and bizarre traditions. Many of these societies were far from America, such as Tibetans or Samoans, but they all had traditions or customs that I found out of the ordinary and strange. I have always been an accepting person but this course has showed me that you can view every single society in the world with nearly unbiased eyes. It has most definitely changed how I see any and every society I encounter, whether it be on TV, in real life, or in reading.

Last year, if you had showed me the film “Holy Ghost People” I would have thought that the people in the movie were crazy and too fanatic. I had preconceived notions about “crazy Christians” who were too zealous and tried to impose their words on everyone else. What I did not realize then was that having that zealousness is part of humanity. Every known society has a religion of some sorts. Rituals that seem insane or strange to us do not have to come from tribes in Africa or remote societies in Asia; they can be right in our backyard. The Holy Ghost People are just another society that believes that there is a higher being that plays a major role in their life; just because they speak English and live in America does not mean that their society and rituals cannot be studied by anthropologists. I think that people have the idea that only indigenous people should be the focus of anthropological studies, but after watching this movie and reading articles like “Body Ritual among the Nacirema”, I strongly disagree with these people.

Ethnocentrism teaches us to look down upon those who have different customs than us, but for those of us who know better it becomes clear why ethnocentrism is such a problem. The Holy Ghost People handle wild and poisonous snakes without fear. They speak in tongues and in outbursts. When the Holy Ghost is “with them” they seem possessed and often many of them convulse violently on the floor as if in a seizure fit. I see this and immediately think it is strange and utterly insane, but I know that these people truly believe in the Holy Ghost and in the context which they practice their religion, their actions are understandable. This is cultural relativism. Of course, as contained societies, these societies that we study do no harm, but when globalization becomes a part of every society (as it is becoming now) anthropologists have to worry about the affects globalization will have on the society and, in-turn, what affect the society will have on the world.

I would definitely think that this movie should be played on the first day of class, but I also think it should be showed on the last day of class as well. If I were to show my students this movie the question I would ask would be: “How did your view on the Holy Ghost People change from the first time you saw the movie?”