

The Papuan Warfare in Anthropological Representations

Introduction

An anthropological document (documentary, text or interview) has as first aim, in my opinion, to represent a culture or a specific aspect of a culture in a “sincere” and “true” way. It might be curious the use of the adjectives “sincere” and “true”, but I think that it is important to distinguish truth from objectivity. A fact can be true, just because it happened, it is a concrete fact, but there can be many subjective ways to describe it and interpret it. A long debate about the impossibility of objectivity in an anthropological representation shows us how difficult it is to illustrate an aspect of a culture without interpreting it or depicting it in a subjective way. Every anthropologist introduces in his research a part of himself, his culture and his background, which interferes unavoidably with the objectivity of his research. I also wonder whether the anthropologist (probably unconsciously) shapes his film or his research report in a way that validates his theories or what he decides to “believe” and show. Probably when an anthropologist (or a film director) decides to study, to investigate and to represent a culture or a specific aspect of a society, he has a motivation or an original stimulus for the research, which could unawares distort the objectivity of the investigation.

In this Essay, I will focus on a specific example of anthropological documenting: the representation of warfare and violence in Papuan population in two particular films: *Dead Birds* (1963) by Robert Gardner and *Mama Tineke Returns Home* (2015) by Wensislaus Fatubun. They are very different movies, and a deep comparison would need a very long analysis. My aim is not to develop a cinematographic analysis, rather to use these ethnological representations to highlight the differences in the representation of one single aspect in the same population: the warfare among the Papuans. I chose these among the numerous Papuan films because I think that the representation of warfare in these movies is extremely significant. *Dead Birds*, that I will discuss in the first part, is a famous movie for the history of Papua because it is the first documentary about Papua, and represents the “first contact” of the indigenous population with a cinematographic crew. It is a controversial movie and had many consequences for the representation of Papuans, because it created a specific image of indigenous people, which is still actual in the common imagination today. I will compare it with *Mama Tineke Returns Home*, a modern Papuan activist movie that I will analyse in the second part, with the aim to illustrate the main differences in the representation of violence and Papuan warfare, and to reflect about the consequences and the effects of this powerful “tool” of representation.

Dead Birds

In this first part, I am going to reflect about *Dead Birds*, a 1963 documentary by Robert Gardner about the Dani of New Guinea. The film is the result of a three-year anthropological expedition

sponsored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University (Grant 2009, 46). Before the arrival of Gardner and his crew, Dani had already had few contacts with outsiders, but they had never seen a camera or a film crew. Gardner was accompanied by the anthropologist Karl Heider and the writer Peter Matthiessen (Otterbein 2009, 5). The purpose of the film is to represent Dani culture, with a special focus on warfare, violence and death. The images and the voice-over describe a society completely shaped by war, revenge and violence.¹ If we try to analyse the film with a focus on the representation of Dani warfare, we can realize how massive this dimension is in the film. The voice-over of the narrator opens the film with a fable of the mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a fight between a bird and a snake. The aim of this fight was to decide whether men would be like birds and die, or like snakes, which have eternal life because of the regeneration of their skin. The victory of the bird implies that men, like birds, will die. These opening words are significant because they create a context in which fight and death are central and very ancient. Gardner shoots birds many times in the movie in death scenes, as if he wanted to associate further birds and man with death. This is one other clue of the non-authenticity of the movie sequences and of the editing, finalized to the establishment of a specific image of Dani, immortalized as violent and uncivilized. The introduction in the Dani people's life continues with the description of one central figure in the film: Weyak is a man, described first as a warrior and as the leader of the band of men who guards the most dangerous sector of a frontier between his people and the enemies. It is interesting to notice the words used to describe him (warrior, leader, dangerous, frontier, enemies), all belonging to the violence field. The narrator explains² that the reason for a continual warfare between Dani and other tribes in the Baliem Valley is that in their culture, when a person is killed, the death must be avenged, so that the soul can be at peace. These continued battles yield neither territory nor plunder, but they fulfil the obligation toward the soul of the killed person. Every killed human being must be avenged, because unavenged souls are very dangerous: they wander in the darkness and they can bring sickness, unhappiness and misfortune; for this reason, they continually fight. Dani are described as obsessed by the ghosts and the revenge of their people, by the thoughts about how to defeat the enemies and how to give peace to their dead fellows. Even the territory and the activities of everyday life are concerned with warfare. Besides agriculture, the works in the fields and the care of the domestic sphere, Dani spend a lot of their time at the defence of their territory. During the description of Weyak's village, a great importance is given by the narrator to the high towers put up by each side of the village. Every day, tell us the narrator, Weyak takes his spear or his bow and arrows and starts for his tower, from where he can have a better view of the no man's land between a village and one other. The narrator explain us that the activity of control of the territory is essential in these villages, because the battles are continued and because to be successful, raids must

¹ *Dead Birds* has a fundamental role for many aspects in anthropological analysis: as anthropological film was largely criticized because of the lack of authenticity (what in the introduction I called "truth"). Gardner edited many shots and organized them in the best way to legitimize his opinion about Dani. Other important aspects are that the Papuan never talk, they don't tell their stories, and all their images and sounds are edited and "manipulated" by Gardner.

² The narrator provides explanations and interpretations of all what we can see in the film, but it is not clear how he collected all the information he gives us and whether he actually collected them or he just interpreted Dani's life.

come when least expected and at a place which is unguarded. However the raids are not described as completely uncivilized: although the film show us a long and violent battle between Weyak's group and the enemy, where men are shouting and launching the spear, as often happens there are unwritten rules and strategies in the war. If the adversaries are protected in their village, the enemies use to set fire to the small grass shelter beside one of the watch tower. The older men or the wounded warriors follow the younger, who are already at the front, but no battle can start until each side has their men in position. When the first arrow fly the front erupts and this is the beginning of the fight.

In *Dead Birds*, Dani are represented as immersed in a culture based and shaped primarily by violence and war, as uncivilized people unable to have peaceful relations with other tribes, as trying to survive in a culture that put death in first place. The continued raids and warfare, in Gardner's representation of Dani, are ritual, part of the everyday life, associated with dances, prayers and believes, as other types of ritual. It is hard to say how much this film show us Dani "true" life-style and how much it is an editing-work: answering to some critics and doubt about his film, Gardner admitted that a great work of editing was done with the shots, extrapolated from the context and organized in the best way to show what he wanted to show. The long and dramatic scene of the battle for example, central in the movie, is the result of the editing of shots of many battles, presented as one continuous event. The scenes are edited to prove his idea about warfare, silences are organized to transmit sad feelings when somebody is dead and sentences are said by the narrator to "let us understand" what Dani feel (or should feel) during the film (Sherman 1998, 40-45). To better understand what could be Gardner's idea or theory about Dani culture before, during and after his contact with them, it is important to note the year of release of *Dead Birds*. Dutch colonial power was in Papua until 1963, and in the same year the administration of Papua was transferred from Dutch colonial government to Indonesia. It is a significant year in the history of Papua and, I would say, the beginning of a long period of fights, violence and resistance between Indonesia and Papua for their freedom, independence and identity. At that time, the Dutch and Indonesia were interested to demonstrate the inferiority of Papuans and Papuan culture, their differences and primitiveness, and to represent them as uncivilized and in need of their control; in this way they could justify their presence on the territory. In this context, it is easier to understand what kind of prejudice and idea was in the projects of Gardner.

Mama Tineke Returns Home

In this second part, we are going to reflect about *Mama Tineke Returns Home*, the idea of violence of the filmmaker Wensislaus Fatubun, and its consequent representation in the film. Rather than an anthropological movie, I would describe *Mama Tineke Returns Home* as a political activist movie. The context and the creation of this documentary are very interesting and significant for the history of West Papua. As I outlined before, in 1963 the administration of West Papua was transferred from the Dutch colonial administration to Indonesia and in 1969 Papuans signed the Act of Free Choice, agreeing to the full integration of Papua in the Republic of Indonesian State. The Act of Free Choice was manipulated by Indonesia with massive and violent military operations against Papuans; therefore, Papuans became "Indonesian" despite their will. I would describe this important period

with two main words: violence and resistance. Indonesian military conducted tortures and massacres against Papuans, and the Papuans tried to react and resist in a peaceful way, demonstrating and claiming their independence and their ethnicity; all this (violence and resistance) is still present in West Papua. This is the context in which Fatubun, the Papuan filmmaker, designs *Papuan Voice*, a project that tries to give a voice to Papuan sufferance, struggle and resistance. In the movie, Fatubun introduces Mama Tineke, a woman activist in the Papuan struggle interviewed by Fatubun in 2013, who relates the violence of Indonesia against Papua starting from the military operations during the 1960s and the 1970s and concluding with the narration of the massacre of Biak of 1998.

Tineke Rumakabu is a victim of the Biak massacre and some years after that, she established a non-violent movement of Papuan people against the oppressive and violent Indonesian government. Mama Tineke explains the importance of her group of activists in the Papuan struggle: it is not easy to react and resist to Indonesian military operations, and the only possible way is the non-violent resistance and information. For this reason, we can see Mama Tineke and her group during prayers, singing moments and motivational discussion, in which she encourages Papuans to record the violence of the past and of the present, the abuses, and specially to record their life story, including stories about their families and relatives who have disappeared or were killed by Indonesian military. Some interviewed Papuans express the importance of organizing people and informing the new generations about Papuan struggle and history. It is interesting to note the contrast between the cruel and merciless Indonesian military, described indirectly by Papuan storytelling, and the peaceful and non-violent groups of pray and activism of Mama Tineke. We have to keep in mind the context in which Fatubun creates the movie, and it is important to note that Fatubun is himself Papuan. The aim of his movie is to show that Papuans have a voice, they are organizing themselves in a “civilized” way, peaceful and intelligent, to resist and to claim their identity and freedom.

In the movie, we cannot see scene of violence, because many of these episodes (the massacre of Biak) happened in the past, but the violence is not finished at all. Among the reasons of current fight between indigenous Papuans and Indonesian government there is the fight for the self-determination of Papuans, who claim independence from Indonesia (*Mama Tineke Returns Home* begins with the scene of a manifestation of a non-violent movement in which Papuans claim their independence: posters with inscriptions like “we have curly hair and black skin and we are very loved by God” or “West Papuan people is Melanesian community, not Indonesia” are a clear symbol of this struggle about liberation and independence). In the movie, however, we can see only Papuans, hear only their stories and their point of view and see the results of violence on their bodies, but not the violent actions self, which are described as terrible and inhuman, and the stories told by Papuan are grievous.

Conclusion

It is not easy to compare two film so different from each other. The history of Papua is one juncture between them, and analysing these movies it is possible to understand some central events of the last fifty years in Papua. One other significant connector between them is the violence, which in both

films is one of the central subject, although represented in completely different ways. I already demonstrated how *Dead Birds* represents indigenous Papuans in a culture completely shaped by violence, that is almost a ritual and seems to be continued and without a real reason. Violence and warfare are described as the main daily activity and concern, as if it were normal and right, a part of their lives. Gardner shows the violence of indigenous as a senseless ritual without purposes or important targets. All the opposite is Fatubun's opinion about Papuan struggle represented in *Mama Tineke Returns Home*, where the Papuan resistance is clearly showed as targeted and smart, as reaction to a concrete problem and threat. In the movie it is unclear the reasons of all this violence perpetrated by Indonesian military, and in this case Indonesian violence is showed as senseless and inhuman. The Papuans of Fatubun are conscious of their needs and problems, and they fight to get definite results.

It is interesting to think about the possible influences of a documentary film or an ethnography, especially if it is the first about a specific culture or an aspect of a culture, and *Dead Birds* is an example. It is the first film about Dani people, and the great success of the film allowed a broad diffusion of Gardner's images. However, these edited scenes do not represent the authentic life style of Papuans, but they build a strong image of violence and "primitiveness" and they created strong prejudices about Papuan culture. I would assume that the idea of Papua created by Gardner is also the cause of the great tourism in Papua (people looking for the "first contact experience"), the Christian missions, the increasing international business concerning Papua and the attention of the media. In the same way also *Mama Tineke Returns Home* could give a new (fundamental) image of Papua and catch one other type of attention, destroying the old prejudice and traditional beliefs of violence and primitiveness about this culture. I conclude this Essay confirming my personal opinion about the central role of the theories and ideas of the filmmaker, which shape the point of view and therefore the interpretation that he will lead, as we could see in the examples of warfare in *Dead Birds* and *Mama Tineke Returns Home*.

Bibliography

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