

A Death to Pay For: Individual Voices. 1996. Video, 49 min. Produced and directed by Charlie Nairn. Ray Fitzwalter Associates for BBC; distributed by Penn State Public Broadcasting (118 Wagner Bldg., University Park, PA 16802-3899; 1-800-770-2111; <http://mediasales.psu.edu>). US\$175.

Reviewed by Jason Carter and Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi, Truman State University

The central drama of *A Death to Pay For* is the Kawelka tribe's efforts to give and to have accepted a large compensation payment for the killing of a young Mokei tribesman by a Kawelka youth. It is soon apparent that not everyone agrees about how the killing—which occurred in a barroom brawl—should be handled or that a “traditional” compensation payment (including pigs, cassowaries, and cash) will satisfy the Mokei.

Ongka, a Kawelka big-man made famous in an earlier video also produced in association with anthropologist Andrew Strathern, continues to place a large measure of faith in the power of tradition. In a moment of reflection he admits that a taboo he had placed on beer drinking had no effect among Kawelka youth, the tragic result being the senseless killing. He does, however, advise: “If you want to kill a marsupial, you hit it hard and you hit it repeatedly. So it is with this compensation; hit it hard and hit it repeatedly.” A generation younger than Ongka (who was then in his late seventies), Kawelka religious leader Ru expresses the opinion that “as long as the younger men think the older men will help, they won't change their ways. The only thing that will change them is jail.” Having achieved fame by organizing traditional rituals, Ru is on the verge of converting to Pentecostalism, a faith adopted by his wives and family. Younger still is William Pik, the Kawelka's first elected leader and deputy premier of Western Highlands Province, who opts for Ongka's way—but with a twist. Believing that the system of compensation “runs in our [people's] blood” and that compensation, along with Christian brotherhood, is the best way to resolve trouble between the tribes, Pik opens a secret meeting of Kawelka and Mokei leaders with a prayer, emphasizing God as the “Father of us all” and reminding those present that, as the children of God, they should seek an amicable solution in the matter of the killing. After everyone bows their heads in prayer and agreement, the Mokei—much of whose land has been taken up by the town of Hagen—make an unprecedented and, to the Kawelka, unacceptable request for land as part of the death compensation.

The voices and perspectives of Kawelka and Mokei youths are absent from the video, with the exception of one self-proclaimed rascal. Providing an eerie counterpoint to the more mature and community-minded voices of

Ongka, Ru, and Pik, Nikints tells the narrator that he knows he should follow God's way but Satan keeps telling him to steal and kill. Scenes of Nikints and his beer-drinking friends are chilling reminders of the crowds of idle youths seen in every village and town in Papua New Guinea, most partially educated, unemployed, and without clear purpose or understanding of either the old or new ways of life; the new "disconnected bits of the white man's world" are particularly difficult to grasp and fashion into modern socialities and personal identities.

Filmed in 1995 for BBC broadcast, *A Death to Pay For* evokes a sense of things falling apart. Old men's control over younger men is being eroded by the strong appeal of white men's things, especially money and beer. Unhappy wives—like Mande, one of Ru's several wives—are turning more and more to the church—rather than to their husbands or fathers—for solace and direction in their domestic conflicts. In Mande's case, the church affords her a sense of being "inside the fence made for me by God" and of no longer needing to express her jealousy by constantly fighting with Ru and his other wives. In one of the more affecting scenes in the video, Ongka's favorite daughter, Yara, tells her father—whom she obviously respects and loves—that she resents him greatly for not sending her to school and keeping her back in the village where, she believes, she has missed out on a better life. Yara implicates God in her suppressed life, saying that if God had made her a man she could have carried on in Ongka's tradition of power. As it is, she laments, Ongka's considerable political skills and powers of speech will die with him and she and her children will be left without a strong protector.

Meanwhile, foreign missionaries and others preach the world's end in the year 2000 and the Kawelka must come to terms with yet another, more serious, threat. It is in their reactions to the imminent destruction of their way of life, however, that we the viewers see glimmers of hope for the video's protagonists. Ongka, practical to the end, is baptized in the Christian faith. "Look," he says, "I'm going to die and I won't come back. If I keep to my bad ways, like stealing and having loose sex, I won't go to Heaven. So I'll leave all these things behind me . . . my soul will go to a good place [and] God, the one they speak about, will put me on his right-hand side." When the millennium comes, Ongka hopes he is issued a loudspeaker so he can tell his people what to do. It is with bemused self-satisfaction that he explains his decision to join the Catholic Church—versus the Lutheran Church—because the Catholics do not charge you anything to take Holy Communion. Rebuked for doing "Satan's work," Ru laughs about how he convinced local missionaries that his involvement in traditional cult rituals was purely for the sake of the "tourists," capitalist enterprises such as tourism apparently fitting into the category of "God's work" and not likely to

prevent Ru from going to Heaven when the end comes. Yara, less sanguine than the male leaders, is indignant that she and her innocent children might suffer from a fate that she—because she is a woman, who never went to school—is unable to read about in the Bible. Unable to decide for herself whether or not the end is really coming, Yara refuses to heap ashes on herself or to believe she and her children deserve such a fate.

Readers who teach courses in Pacific and Melanesian cultures will want to consider using *A Death to Pay For* in classes on contemporary life in Papua New Guinea. As background, students might first view the still excellent video *The Kawelka: Ongka's Big Moka* (Nairn 1990). Andrew Strathern's published translations of Ongka's (1979) and Ru's (1993) autobiographies and Strathern's classic *The Rope of Moka* (1971) are also valuable resources on Melanesian big-men and ceremonial exchange. Because the video deals with complex issues, Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart have put together a booklet—*A Death to Pay For: Individual Voices* (1998; distributed with the video)—intended to provide more in-depth interview texts that supply a fuller picture of the characters depicted in the video and the issues that are discussed. For a wider understanding of the ways Christian evangelism, consumer capitalism, and (to a certain extent) criminal activities are incorporated by Papua New Guinean youth into new socialities and increasingly self-centered personal identities, students might also benefit from reading Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington's recent accounts on Tolai (1993) and Chambri (1996) teenagers. And Ongka's decision to "tie" his daughter down in the village will make greater sense to college-age students if they know more about the high rates of domestic violence and other dangers facing urban women as well as more on the political and economic inequality of Papua New Guinean women in general. Possible references include Holly Wardlow's article on Papua New Guinean women's reactions to the Turkish video *Bobby Teardrops* (1996) and its portrayal of a neglected wife, Pamela Rosi and Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi's accounts of love and marriage among the educated elite in Port Moresby (1993), and Zimmer-Tamakoshi's article on the difficulties facing female politicians and leaders of women's organizations in contemporary Papua New Guinea (1993). Another video that demonstrates the chaos involved in capitalist development—in this case, mining—is John Davis's *Mountains of Gold: The People of Porgera* (1993).

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