

a Cinema Guild release



2020 / USA / 78 minutes / DCP
English and Hubula with English subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

An immersive marvel of sonic ethnography, Expedition Content draws on audio recordings made by recent college graduate and Standard Oil heir Michael Rockefeller as part of the so-called Harvard-Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea in 1961 to study the indigenous Hubula (also known as Dani) people.

In their nearly imageless film, Karel and Kusumaryati document the strange encounter between the expedition and the Hubula people. The work explores and upends the power dynamics between anthropologist and subject, between image and sound, and turns the whole ethnographic project on its head.

DIRECTOR BIOS

Ernst KAREL works with sound, including electroacoustic music, experimental nonfiction sound works for multichannel installation and performance, image-sound collaboration, and post-production sound for nonfiction film. Lately, he works around the practice of actuality/location recording and composing with those recordings, with recent projects also taking up archival audio. At the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, he collaborated on sound for a number of films and developed and taught a practice-based course in 'sonic ethnography.'



Veronika KUSUMARYATI is a political and media anthropologist working in West Papua, a self-identifying term referring to Papua and West Papua provinces of Indonesia. Her scholarship engages with the theories and historiography of colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality. She holds a doctoral degree from the department of anthropology at Harvard with a secondary field in Film and Visual Studies. She is an affiliate of the Sensory Ethnography Lab and currently a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown University.

SUPPLEMENT

On the Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea, 1961

The Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea was a large-scale anthropological expedition carried out by American anthropologists and artists in 1961. It was a three-year undertaking that was largely funded by private donations, including the Rockefeller family, with the support of the Dutch colonial government, and took place among the Hubula (also well-known as the Dani) of the Baliem Valley in Netherlands New Guinea from April to August 1961, two years before the territory was transferred from the Netherlands to Indonesia. The Harvard Peabody Expedition is exemplary not only because it was influential in shaping the direction of American anthropology, but also because, to a large extent, it shaped the American understanding of Papuans and American foreign policy toward the region until today—through their influence on American academics and American publics. This is due to two factors. First, while using a mode of scientific knowledge production that was popular in the first half of the 20th century, the Harvard Peabody Expedition embarked on a new direction of anthropological research in the 1960s through the intensive use of audiovisual technology. As a result, the Harvard Peabody Expedition became one of the most well-documented studies of a single area in the world and its influence reached a wider audience, outside the confines of academia. The expedition produced Robert Gardner's feature-length film *Dead Birds* (1964), Peter Matthiessen's nonfiction book *Under the Mountain Wall* (1962), two doctoral dissertations by Karl G. Heider and Jan Broekhuijse, and two books of photographs, *Gardens of War* (1968) edited by Robert Gardner and Karl G. Heider, and Michael Rockefeller's *New Guinea Photographs, 1961* (2006), as well as an archive of 37 hours of Michael Rockefeller's audio recordings of the Hubula world.

Secondly, the controversial disappearance of Michael Clark Rockefeller (1938-1961) in New Guinea, three months after this expedition took place. Michael Rockefeller was the youngest child of Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller and a fourth-generation member of the Rockefeller family. The young Rockefeller joined the expedition as a sound recordist and still photographer. After the Baliem Valley, he went to study and gather artifacts from the Asmat in the southern part of New Guinea where he disappeared in 1961. His disappearance has been subject to many popular accounts (Machlin 2001, Hoffman 2014, and Morgan 2014), embedded in anthropological myths about fieldwork, and countless accounts about Papuan cannibalism. Was he, as one story has it, killed and eaten by the Asmat?

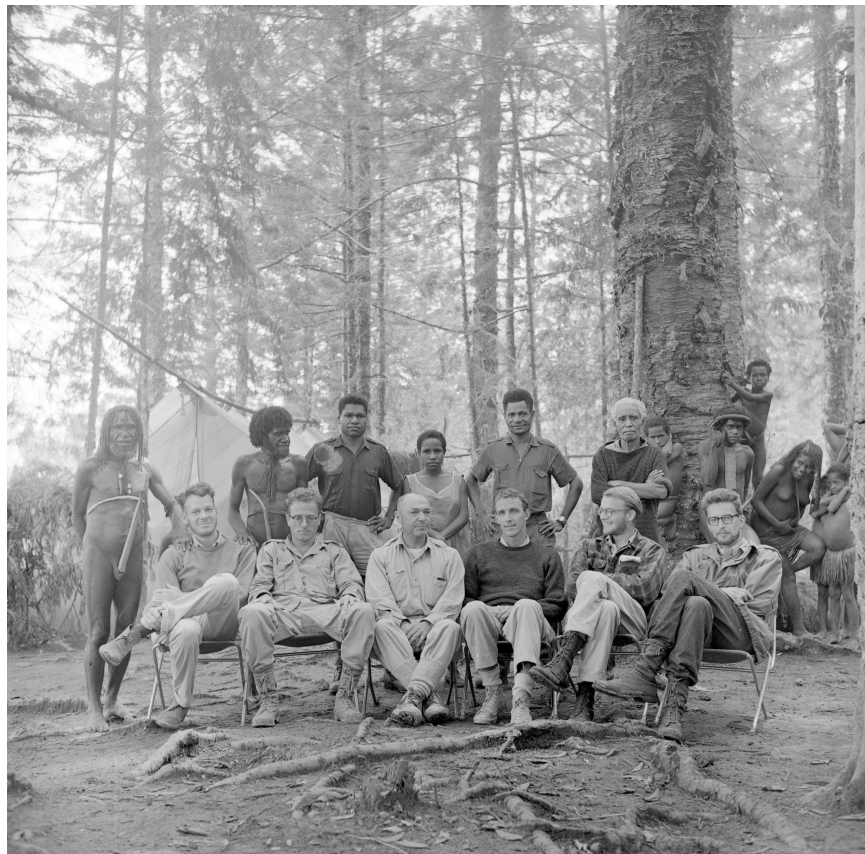
Both the Harvard Peabody Expedition and the disappearance of the young Rockefeller took place when the territory was entangled in a monumental political dispute that would determine the fate and history of New Guinea. An international negotiation on the political status of New Guinea had taken place since 1949. In 1962, the United States underwrote the New York agreement, in which the Dutch were forced to transfer the Netherlands New Guinea to the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA). UNTEA transferred its administrative functions to Indonesia on May 1, 1963, as part of the larger wave of postwar decolonization occurring across the crumbling European empires of this period. As part of the agreement, the Indonesian government conducted the Act of Free Choice in 1969, in which all Papuan adults would be given the chance to cast their vote and decide their political future; as a part of

Indonesia, or as an independent state. But instead of holding a free and fair referendum, the Indonesian government handpicked approximately 1,025 tribal leaders, in violation of the requirements set out in the agreement, and intimidated them to vote for Indonesia (Lagerberg 1979, Osbourne 1985, Drooglever 2009, Kirksey 2012). Despite its controversial process, international communities recognized the status of the region as part of Indonesia. From then on, the indigenous Papuans have been fighting against what they perceive as an Indonesian occupation of their territory.

The Beginnings of Expedition Content

The Rockefeller family recently donated the archive of Michael Rockefeller's audio recordings in West Papua to the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which have since been digitized at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music. Presumably intended mainly to be of use in the making of what became Robert Gardner's film *Dead Birds*, which constituted a landmark work of ethnographic cinema, the recordings represent an astonishing variety of aspects of Hubula culture, including quotidian activities, ceremonies, warfare, and music and other performances of historical and aesthetic importance. The materials themselves consist of 123 tapes, or about 37 hours of recordings made by Michael Rockefeller from April to August 1961. *Expedition Content* is created as part of a larger project to revisit the archives. We are devising ways to share the access of the archive with the Hubula people of West Papua.

-Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati



FILMOGRAPHY

ERNST KAREL

As Director

Ah humanity! (2015, 23 min)

Ernst Karel, Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

World Premiere, New York Film Festival, 2015

European Premiere, CPH:DOX 2015

(then reconfigured as an installation-only work)

Single Stream (2014, 23 min)

Pawel Wojtasik, Toby Kim Lee, and Ernst Karel

Preview screening, 2014 Whitney Biennial, March 2014

World Premiere, Ann Arbor Film Festival, March 2014

European Premiere, Festival del film Locarno, August 2014

Latin American Premiere, Festival Internacional de Cine de Valdivia, October 2014

Sound Credits

Come Here (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2020), location recording, sound design, and mix

A Shape of Things to Come (JP Sniadecki and Lisa Malloy, 2020), sound design and mix

Stray (Elizabeth Lo, 2020), sound design and mix

Phases of Matter (Deniz Tortum, 2020), sound design and mix

Nhà cây (The Tree House) (Trương Minh Quỳ, 2019, 84 min), re-recording mix

Krabi, 2562 (Anocha Suwichakornpong and Ben Rivers, 2019, 94 min), location recording and sound design

The Hottest August (Brett Story, 2019, 95 min), sound design

Every Pulse of the Heart is Work (Pawel Wojtasik, 2019, 86 min), sound edit and mix

Combat Obscura (Miles Lagoze, 2018, 70 min), sound edit and mix

Enceindre (Luke Fowler, 2018, 20 min 41 sec), re-recording mix

Milford Graves Full Mantis (Jake Meginsky and Neil Young, 2018, 91 min), re-recording mix

Everyday's the Seventies (Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 2018, 56 min), sound mix, single-channel video and four-channel audio installation

Kalaripayattu: When the Body Becomes All Eyes (Anaal Shah, 2017, 28 min), sound edit and mix

Electro-Pythagorus: A Portrait of Martin Bartlett (Luke Fowler, 2017, 45 min), sound edit and mix

Linefork (Jeff Silva and Vic Rawlings, 2016, 98 min), sound edit and mix

The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers (Ben Rivers, 2015, 100 min), rerecording mix

What Means Something (Ben Rivers, 2015, 67 min), sound edit and mix

Detour de Force (Rebecca Baron, 2014, 29 min), music, sound edit, and mix

The Iron Ministry (JP Sniadecki, 2014, 83 min), sound design and mix

Into the Hinterlands (Julia Yezbick, 2014, 40 min), sound mix

Young Jigme (Cuilan Liu, 2014, 83 min), sound edit and mix

Manakamana (Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, 2013, 118 min), sound edit and mix

Gurukulam (Jillian Elizabeth and Neil Dalal, 2013, 109 min), sound edit and mix

2 Sons of Catalonia: Joseph Lluís Sert & Joan Miro (Robert Gardner, 2013, 30 min), sound edit and mix

Yumen (Huang Xiang, Xu Ruotao, and JP Sniadecki, 2013, 65 min), re-recording mix

Leviathan (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012, 87 min), sound composition and mix

People's Park (Libbie D. Cohn and JP Sniadecki, 2012, 78 min), sound design and mix

Capital (Maxim Pozdorovkin and Joe Bender, 2010, 56 min), sound edit and mix

blue mantle (Rebecca Meyers, 2010, 16mm, 35 min), sound edit, and mix

Foreign Parts (JP Sniadecki and Véréna Paravel, 2010, 82 min), sound edit and mix
On Broadway (Aryo Danusiri, 2010, 62 min), sound mix

Sweetgrass (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009, 115 min), sound edit and mix

Terrace of the Sea (Diana Allan, 2009, 52 min), sound edit and mix

Double Tide (Sharon Lockhart, 2009, 99 min), *Exit* (Sharon Lockhart, 2008, 41 min), and *Lunch Break* (Sharon Lockhart, 2008, 83 min), location recording

Lossless #2, Lossless #3, and Lossless #5 (Rebecca Baron and Doug Goodwin, 2008, 20 min), sound design

VERONIKA KUSUMARYATI

Who are We, Comrades? (documentary, director), in production

Si Titik (with the collective Lab Laba-Laba, multimedia installation, writer), Orde Baru Ok.Video-Indonesia Media Arts Festival 2015.

Iqra (2013, director, 13 min), The New York Megapolis Audio Festival.

Death in Jakarta (2006, producer & co-writer, 12 min), 2009 Jakarta International Film Festival, 2007 Tampere Film Festival Finland, 2009 Oberhausen International Short Film Festival.