The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory
Volume 2, Issue 2, 2021
Sound, Colonialism, and Power
www.mast-journal.org
MAST

Expedition Content and the Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea, 1961

Veronika Kusumaryati
Georgetown University

Ernst Karel
UC Berkeley

Expedition Content is a feature-length augmented sound work composed for the space of the cinema. The piece, which occasionally uses the digital cinema projector in addition to multichannel sound, is composed exclusively from the audio archives of the 1961 Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea, the name of which implicates the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard in the ongoing colonial history of West Papua.[1] Robert Gardner organized the expedition, primarily to make a film: the result, *Dead Birds*, is often considered a landmark of ethnographic filmmaking.

Funded and supported by the Dutch government, the expedition took place at a critical historical moment for the Hubula people of the Baliem Valley:[2] just a few years earlier,

[1] West Papua is a self-identifying term referring to Indonesia's easternmost and marginal provinces of Papua and West Papua. It occupies the western half of New Guinea Island. The Dutch colonized West Papua (thus "Netherlands New Guinea") from 1895 to 1962. The British, German, and Australians colonized the eastern part, which is now the independent state of Papua New Guinea. See Drooglever.

[2] Other Papuan tribes referred to the group living in the Baliem Valley as "Dani," a name that was also taken up by expedition members. This group now prefers to be called the "Hubula," which means "people from the valley."

American Christian missionaries and Dutch colonial officers took over Hubula territories and slowly "pacified" the population. No longer free to determine their own future, the Hubula began to become Dutch subjects. In the Kurulu area where filming took place, the colonial government and missionaries agreed to wait until the expedition was complete to enter. Soon after, in 1963, Indonesia took over the region and has occupied it ever since under harsh military rule that is tantamount to a campaign of genocide.

The peculiar moment of the expedition can be situated within a multiplicity of historical trajectories, all of which center around colonialism: of extractivism, the oppression and genocide that started during the Dutch period but intensified under Indonesian rule with the help of the US as an imperial power, the already archaic form of the anthropological expedition, and new modes of engaging with media in the development of approaches to visual anthropology and ethnographic film. How do the expedition's sound archives speak to its colonial and imperial contexts?

Listening to the recordings provides an opportunity to reflect on this important question, precisely because of the limits of audibility set by the audio archives themselves. Relationships are sonified through the microphone, connected by cable to a Nagra III tape recorder powered by D-cell batteries, and held in the hand of young Harvard graduate Michael Rockefeller, heir to the Standard Oil fortune. Listening to *Expedition Content* conjures more than colonial power relations, but by including in the composition those moments where the microphone was turned on the expedition members themselves—labeled in the archival record as "expedition content"—the work foregrounds for the listener the structures that enabled the piece to come into being. Here we elaborate on some of those structures, which are invoked and evoked through the experience of listening to the edited tapes.

The Expedition

As Robert Gardner later described it, the goal of the expedition was to carry out "a comprehensive study of a single community of Neolithic warrior farmers" (Gardner and Heider xv). The fantasy of stone age culture was important for the Dutch, who were under international pressure to decolonize their last colony. The fact that American anthropologists readily adopted this designation evidences Dutch success in persuading the US to be involved in its colonial project, and perhaps a shared ideology between these colonial and imperial actors. Jan Broekhuiyse, a young Dutch anthropologist who had already studied the Hubula intensively, was assigned by the government to act as a kind of chaperone for the expedition. He later wrote that "the Dutch government had a great interest in showing to the world the backward position of the New Guinea indigenous population" (1). The purpose was clear: to create an impression that Indigenous Papuans were not ready for self-determination, thus requiring Dutch patronage to be civilized and modern. In that context, the Dutch Adviser for Population Affairs Victor de Bruyn was given broad latitude to find American filmmakers suited to the task. He approached Gardner, who, eager for a project through which he could establish himself as a filmmaker, readily agreed to participate (Gardner and Warren 12–13).

Gardner's grandiose statement, in which he positioned the expedition for the historical record, recapitulates the arrogant delusion—widespread amongst anthropologists at the time—that a "comprehensive study" was possible. (Never mind the fact that Gardner's statement imagines a "single" community). Gardner was clearly inspired by salvage anthropology, thinking that Hubula cultures would disappear without the white men documenting them. This delusion was perhaps emboldened by the experimental audiovisual methods used for the expedition. This study would be not just textual but also visible and audible.

Anthropological expeditions had been a popular mode of scientific production since the early twentieth century, but in the late 1950s, they declined in popularity as an increasingly institutionalized discipline established the romantic figure of a lone anthropologist doing fieldwork. At Harvard, however, some anthropological expeditions continued to be carried out, including the notable example of the Marshall family's expeditions to the Kalahari starting in the early 1950s that produced a series of influential ethnographic films on the Ju/'hoansi. The Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea also followed in the footsteps of earlier anthropologists in Oceania who intensively used audiovisual technology for anthropological research.

In addition to his own filming, Gardner also assembled a team to cover still photography, audio, and two modes of writing: novelistic nonfiction and conventional ethnographic prose. In addition to *Dead Birds* (1964), products of the expedition include Peter Matthiessen's novel *Under the Mountain Wall* (1962), two books of photographs, and doctoral dissertations by anthropologists Karl Heider and Broekhuiyse, both members of the expedition team. Underscoring the colonial nature of the venture, the members of the expedition themselves were closely tied to brutal forms of international capitalism and represented great wealth and institutional support.[3] For example, while Gardner and John Marshall (whose own family wealth came from the military contractor Raytheon, co-founded by his father) were editing what became *The Hunters* and founding the Film Study Center in the basement of the Peabody Museum, Gardner's brother George Peabody Gardner served as chairman of the notorious United Fruit Company, on whose behalf the CIA deposed the democratically elected

[3] In addition to government and private sources, the expedition also received funding from the Peabody Museum, the Norman Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

government of Guatemala and installed a pro-business military dictatorship in 1954.[4] (Speaking of the CIA, in the 1950s, Matthiessen had co-founded *The Paris Review* in part as a cover for his main work as a CIA agent keeping an eye on leftist writers such as James Baldwin).

Rockefeller, the audio recordist, had family history in the area: with Dutch partner Shell, Standard Oil had drilled in West Papua since 1935. He had wanted to travel to West Papua to extract art objects from the Asmat group for the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, newly opened by his father Nelson and for which he was named as trustee.[5] He approached Gardner, who later quipped that he "sensed a source of funding" (Gardner and Warren 18).[6] Indeed the Rockefeller Foundation supported the expedition, using Standard Oil money that also later positioned the elder Rockefeller to become Governor of New York and later Vice President of the United States. Michael's special training in both photography and audio recording for the expedition thus continued his family's extractivism in West Papua. Eliot Elisofon, a *Life* magazine photographer who would later have the title of "research associate in Primitive Art" at the Peabody Museum, led the expedition photography. Broekhuiyse and Heider joined the crew as resident anthropologists.[7]

---

[4] The Gardners belong to the same family that funded the Peabody Museum in 1866.

[5] The museum aimed "to foster the understanding and enjoyment of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the pre-Columbian Americas" (*Primitive Art Masterworks: An Exhibition* 9). The racist term "primitive art" was commonly associated with tribal and non-industrial societies of Africa and Oceania. See Torgovnick.

[6] See also Robert Gardner's letter to John Otis (Jo) Brew, then director of Peabody Museum, from May 15, 1960.

[7] Heider would publish several volumes on the Hubula, none of which were ever made available in Hubula or Indonesian languages (see Heider, *The Dugum Dani* [1970]; Heider, *The Dani of West Irian*). Broekhuiyse, in a remarkable text published shortly before his death in 2020, accused Gardner and Matthiessen of appropriating his research as their own without credit.

Listening through the Archives

Setting aside the substantial filmic and photographic record of the survey, its audio tapes provide a different way of entering into the encounter of the expedition without the imposition of the visual. *Expedition Content* likewise allows listeners to engage with the materiality of the tapes, with minimal words and visual interventions to guide the mind. The listener is left alone with the microphone and tape machine as a point of sonic encounter between the Hubula, Rockefeller, and the others on the expedition team.

Rockefeller's primary task was to acquire and catalogue sounds, an impulse reflected in his employment of taxonomic categories when organizing the tapes, such as "sounds of nature," "ceremonial sounds," and "occupational sounds." It is also evident in the controlled situations he created, for example, by paying people to perform vocal and instrumental music in one of the expedition's tents. Yet the 123 audio tapes reveal far more than what Rockefeller *thought* he was recording, in terms of the relationships that emerged through the ethnographic encounters.

The subjective experience of listening to the digitized analogue tapes far exceeds the actuality of the initial encounter. Together with any imagined visual referent we hear the grain of the tape, the recorder switching on and off, the wind on the microphone, and the handling of the cables. Although Rockefeller ostensibly recorded sound to accompany Gardner's film, in practice his work became somewhat autonomous: because Gardner's Arri camera itself was so loud, recordings made in its proximity would have been worthless. Instead, Rockefeller and his microphone sought out diverse sonic encounters, "collecting" sounds, extracting songs, and venturing into the sonic world of the Hubula. His audio recordings reveal a vast Hubula universe, to the extent that it intersected with the radius of the microphone and associated

apparatus. They are not bound by the visual, by the excessive display of racialized bodies that characterized *Dead Birds* and its colonial gaze (Fanon; Griffiths). This does not mean, however, that Rockefeller's microphone was devoid of power. Contrary to Gardner's film, which removes any presence of the expedition members, *Expedition Content* makes their presence explicit and audible: their vocal inflections, accents, and songs point not only to their class origin but also to the brutal history of American slavery, sexism, and racism against Black peoples contained within the history of their voices. In one scene, a woman and child ask Rockefeller to sing a song. He is caught off-guard—"me? I sing? Me? Me?"—but then starts to sing the first song that apparently came to mind: "Blue Tail Fly," a slavery-era blackface minstrel tune.[8]

An extended scene that may lead listeners to reevaluate what they've heard up to that point renders a secretly recorded birthday party for Matthiesen and Rockefeller. We hear various references to New York as the center of the expedition members' cultural world. For example, Matthiesen, affecting an accent that he associates with Black jazz musicians, shares with the others that white musicians Gerry Mulligan and David Brubeck "are just nowhere," and that "the new cats are Thelonious [Monk], Cannonball [Adderly], Oscar [Peterson], and Charlie Mingus." Later, continuing in what seems to be a crude imitation of African American vernacular, Rockefeller tells a racist joke about "Annie Lou up in Harlem." When the conversation turns to the Hubula people who are heard laughing and talking in the background, anti-Black hostility is expressed in a joking tone. Anthropological projects like this expedition seemed unable to overcome their imperial origin.

[8] First popular in the 1840s, "Jimmy Crack Corn (Blue Tail Fly)" regained popularity during the revival of American folk music in the 1950s.

The Subaltern Can Speak

Expedition Content includes Indigenous Hubula discourse about the white visitors. In a moment that comes near the end of the composition, Tukum—who plays the central character of the young boy "Pua" in *Dead Birds*—looks at a photograph as he says:

> *This is a man*
>
> *This one too, that one is white*
>
> *Wearing glasses*
>
> *The eyes, the eyes, the eyes, the eyes too*
>
> *Aji, be calm. Sit still.*
>
> *There is nothing in this part*
>
> *The big man is here*
>
> *This is the same*
>
> *This is the big man here*
>
> *One more, here!*
>
> *Look, another one*
>
> *He's holding a gun*
>
> *Ah a gun?*
>
> *That one is not*
>
> *Look at this one*
>
> *The one in front looks very arrogant.*

Beyond speech and song, the recordings also document the more-than-human world of bees, cicadas, and water, and the transforming Hubula world with the arrival of DC-3 airplanes and radio transmissions. Included in the composition is also a layer of institutional preservation of

the colonial record in the form of the voices of archivists transferring and cataloguing the tapes at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music.[9] Missing from the recordings are the sounds, noted by Gardner in his journal, of occasional gunshots from visiting colonial officers, who had agreed not to interfere with filming but would transform life in the area soon after the expedition's end.

Veronika Kusumaryati and Hubula anthropologist Nicolaus Lokobal began to translate Rockefeller's tapes in 2015. When Lokobal passed away in 2017, Korneles Siep, a Hubula musician, continued the work. The sonic world reflected in the archival tapes radically diverged from Siep's more contemporary experience of West Papua; his nostalgia and trauma shaped many facets of the composition. *Expedition Content* directors Kusumaryati and Ernst Karel, both non-Black, were highly conscious that listening to the imperial archive in order to develop an institutional critique of visual anthropology, Harvard, or the Film Study Center ran the risk of re-enacting the colonial project itself, in asking the Hubula people to listen to a document of their pacification. Indeed, a screening of *Expedition Content* for a Papuan audience raised more questions than it answered. Young Papuans asked why Michael and the expedition team came in the first place. "What is so interesting about our lives, about our cultures? What makes them come? Is it our land? Our rich natural resources?" one audience member asked. Indeed, the crack has opened, but the horizon of decolonization is not anywhere near.

[9] The archives also include documentation of the tapes, including a chronological list, a tape journal, and a tape index organized by genre.

Works Cited

Broekhuiyse, Johan Theodorus. *De Harvard-Peabody Expeditie. Naar de Dani van de Baliem vallei.* Self-published, 2020.

Drooglever, P. J. *An Act of Free Choice: Decolonisation and the Right to Self-determination in West Papua*. Oneworld, 2009.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.

Gardner, Robert, director. *Dead Birds*. 1964. Film Study Center, 2004.

---. "Letter to John Otis Brew," 15 May 1960. Box 2, Folder: N.G. 60's Misc Correspondence (Missionaries, etc), B Letters, 1960 May 15-1961 Feb 10, *Robert Gardner Collection, 1950–2008*, Harvard Film Archive.

Gardner, Robert, and Charles Warren. *Making Dead Birds: Chronicle of a Film.* Peabody Museum Press, 2007.

Gardner, Robert, and Karl G. Heider. G*ardens of War: Life and Death in the New Guinea Stone Age.* Deutsch, 1969.

Griffiths, Alison. *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, & Turn-of-the-century Visual Culture.* Columbia UP, 2002.

Heider, Karl G. *The Dani of West Irian: An Ethnographic Companion to the Film Dead Birds*. Warner Modular Publication, 1972.

---. *The Dugum Dani: A Papuan Culture in the West New Guinea Highlands*, 1966. Harvard University, PhD dissertation.

---. *The Dugum Dani: A Papuan Culture in the Highlands of West New Guinea*. 1970. Aldine Transaction, 2006.

Matthiessen, Peter. *Under the Mountain Wall*. Penguin, 1987.

Primitive Art Masterworks: An Exhibition. Jan. 1975–Aug. 1976, Museum of Primitive Art, New York. American Federation of Arts, 1974.

Rockefeller, Michael Clark, and Kevin Bubriski. *Michael Rockefeller: New Guinea Photographs, 1961*. Peabody Museum Press, 2006.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*. U of Chicago P, 1990.

Veronika Kusumaryati is a political and media anthropologist working on the issues of colonialism in West Papua, a self-identifying term referring to Indonesia's provinces of Papua and West Papua. She holds a PhD in anthropology and film and visual studies from Harvard University. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.
Email: vk293@georgetown.edu

Ernst Karel works in the area of reality-based audio, including sound recording, electroacoustic music, experimental nonfiction sound works for multichannel installation and performance, image-sound collaboration, and postproduction sound for nonfiction film, with an emphasis on observational cinema. Current and past institutional affiliations include the Sensory Ethnography Lab and Film Study Center at Harvard University, the Center for Experimental Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Department of Film and Media at the University of California, Berkeley.
Email: ekarel@berkeley.edu