

ON THE MAKING OF DEAD BIRDS Robert Gardner, Film Maker

In the nearly ten years that have passed since I was engaged upon the task of making *Dead Birds*, I have wished many times that I had had the foresight and perseverance to have kept a journal of its progression toward completion. At this writing, dates are indefinite and my memory of the debates, hesitations and agonies involved in the decisions I reached has dimmed. Though I remember easily and vividly the task itself, I cannot recall the exact circumstances, the detailed and quite specific choices which were constantly weighed. So I must, for lack of the chronicle I failed to keep, try to disclose through reflection part of this film as biography.

Certain events and even dates are known and I recount them to provide a framework for what follows. The plan for an ethnographic film study in the Highlands of New Guinea (now West Irian) emerged during the winter of 1959. The Film Study Center had produced *The Hunters* in 1957 and subsequent efforts to complete other films from the Bushmen footage, then in the Center's hands, were frustrated by complex personal and institutional problems. Happily these difficulties have been resolved and Bushmen films are being produced. The thinking which conceived the New Guinea project was very much concerned with such matters as that it be in a non-hunting/gathering society, that it be in an area which as far as possible was free of religious, governmental or, even, ethnographic influences, and that it provide an opportunity for collaborative effort.

I was called by the Director of the Pacific Science Board in Washington who, in turn, had been approached by the Head of the Netherlands New Guinea Native Affairs Department. He told me that the Dutch Government wanted an ethnographic study made in West New Guinea before their own development and pacification programs had irretrievably altered traditional culture in the remote and still uncontacted areas. Their motives were astonishingly uncomplicated. They saw the inevitability of change either through their own efforts, then being criticized quite unfairly by anti-colonial protagonists in the U. N., or by some subsequent administration of the territory. The Dutch were also generous, having once decided that an ethnographic film project was what they wanted, and they provided approximately \$25,000 for our use.

Once agreement was reached that the Film Study Center would organize and conduct such a mission, I was busy assembling people and equipment during the spring and summer of 1960. There were two vitally interested and effective people involved from the beginning. They were roommates and seniors in Harvard College who had a passion for photography and a curiosity about the world, Samuel Putnam and Michael Rockefeller. These two worked and trained for the time they were to spend so illustriously in the Highlands, Putnam as a still photographer and Rockefeller as both still photographer and

sound recordist. Two others, Karl Heider and Peter Matthiessen agreed to come. Heider was still in graduate school at Harvard but had not quite decided on his thesis topic. Matthiessen was a contemporary and a friend who had already established himself as a writer and naturalist. Heider and Matthiessen were indispensable to our Expedition—Heider with his ethnographic responsibility and Matthiessen as a literate and humanizing leaven.

I remember very well the days and weeks spent trying to solve a problem central to my own concerns, in New Guinea I knew, or at least I was convinced, that I would be in a place too remote from electricity to charge camera batteries. I had decided to use a 16mm Arriflex and was not going to accept any other. I had not yet been to where we eventually worked. In fact my plan was to seek a place where few if any non-natives had ever gone. Thus my expectations of remoteness compelled me to think in terms of several days walk to the nearest radio, air strip or electric power. In response to this presumed eventuality, I had to find a disposable battery with sufficient capacity and voltage stability to run a fairly large amount of film through the camera. For days I simulated shooting situations by running and stopping the camera in a great variety of on-and-off combinations. Eventually I was satisfied that a certain alkaline dry cell, then experimental with its manufacturer, would do. They supplied me with what I estimated I would need and there were only minor problems encountered in the field due to a few imperfect cells. I had not heard of this system ever being used nor has any one tried it, so far as I know, since. I suppose that film makers faced with similar conditions prefer to carry a small generator which can provide recharging for permanent cells and also current for radios, lights and so forth. In 1961 I had a purist's attitude toward such things and did not want a radio for two-way contact, artificial illumination, or the smell and noise of a gasoline generator. I feel this way today and, though I have never again used disposable dry cells, I have never taken a generator into the field.

Many other technical and logistical problems had to be solved. If, for example, we were to be several days' walk from a mission or government airstrip, there would be a major transportation problem. I knew that it was sometimes possible to get carriers from the less remote villages but they could be expected to carry only a limited amount and only certain shapes. Thus the essential paraphernalia of an undertaking such as I envisaged had to be designed into and around boxes of special sizes and construction. Such, then, were the sort of things with which I was concerned at the same time that I tried to plan conceptually for six to eight months of creative activity. This I found more difficult than any logistics. Only after reaching our eventual locality was it clear, however, how often futile the conceptual planning was destined to be. I had tried to construct a sort of mental diorama of our destination. I took for this purpose every scrap of information from every source that I could find. I spent hours at the Christian and Missionary Alliance

Headquarters in New York reading the extraordinary bulletins written for home consumption by their evangelistic field missionaries. At the American Museum of Natural History, I looked through all of the Archbold Expedition photographs taken in 1938 when their amphibious plane discovered the Balim Valley and landed on the River near the present-day government station. I corresponded with still living members of that Expedition, talked at length with anyone who had been to the Valley for any reason, and listened dutifully to bad tape recordings of a dialect of Grand Valley Dani collected by a linguist-missionary.

These and numerous other speculations, half-truths and pure phantasies were soon woven into a remarkably convincing vision of what lay in store.

I left for Hollandia in January 1961, timing my arrival by air with the shipment months earlier by sea of all our baggage. I was so intent upon finding a remote and fully traditional society that my mind was still open to the possibility of working anywhere in West New Guinea. Part of the reason for not committing myself was that I wanted to see the people and the place where we would all be staking so much in time and energy. The mental picture concocted from my research was worrying if not substantial. I was apprehensive about even the possibility of working with a group of uncontacted Grand Valley Dani. The Archbold papers and especially the missionary bulletins were full of references to the perfidy, cruelty and intractability of these people. I wondered how we could establish an harmonious relation, so vital to all our intentions, if what these scientists and missionaries reported was even half true.

My problem, of course, was that I lacked context for evaluating these reports. I now realize that the missionaries exaggerated for effect, the effect of appealing to their parishioners for donations. The Archbold people, being naturalists, botanists and zoologists, had curiosity but no special sympathy for the human populations they encountered. It should also be pointed out that their main work went on in an adjacent area, not in the Grand Valley itself. Soon after arriving in Hollandia, I made arrangements to visit the two areas which most interested me as possible localities for our work, the southern Asmat coast and the Grand Valley of the Balim.

A friend from Holland, Adrian Gerbrands, had recently come to do a study of primitive art in the Asmat and he was to be my host in this extraordinary place for three weeks. Much of my time in the Asmat was spent in traveling from village to village by dugout. Gerbrands was surveying the art styles of this culture which gave me an opportunity to see more than one ordinarily might.

It is an enormous pity that no major film has been made of these people. In 1961 all the elements of tribal life were fully functioning though the first signs of change were already apparent. Although there was cannibalism, it was on a much reduced and exceptional basis. There were also

occasional remote instances of raiding which was the traditional prelude to cannibalism. There certainly was vigorous and consummate evidence of a highly skilled and thoroughly integrated art style.

Gerbrands and I talked at length about the possibility of my working in the Asmat. He had been there long enough to know it well and I remember his warning that the people of the Asmat were secretive, covert and suspicious. He was having difficulties even in his own relatively limited and focused inquiry. Furthermore the purist in me recoiled at the highly visible and frequent visored cap, Heineken Beer T-shirt and the cast-off police clothing which was so prized by the Asmat men. Though I could not reach a definite decision, I left the Asmat feeling that it was unlikely I would return. That I did return had nothing to do with working there.

At the beginning of February I went into the Highlands. In Wamena, the government post in mid-Balim Valley, I met Jan Broekhuijse who had been detached from his post as patrol officer in a neighboring valley to assist us as an interpreter and ethnographer. Broekhuijse and I began our survey by simply borrowing a boat from the government station and traveling to various places along the Baum River. He was aware of my misgivings about working with the Dani, and a few experiences of his own seemed to support some of what the missionaries had written. However, he was adamant that the job could be done, that in some areas the Dani culture was superbly detached from gospel preachers and government agents, and that we should begin immediately.

The first thing to do was to find a suitable group. I had the government's permission to work in an unpatrolled area. In fact, the only condition to accepting their invitation was that we would be entirely unsupervised. There was an area in the northeastern sector of the Valley which was known to be quite uninfluenced. We went there and found, after some days, the place which I quickly saw was all that I had hoped. It was completely Dani and such in all ways as to satisfy my most outrageous requirements of purity.

During these first days, the set of preconceptions with which I had labored so long were rapidly displaced by an entirely different view of the Dani world. From the time we arrived, in what Heider so aptly calls a neighborhood, the people we lived with never posed the slightest threat to our belongings or ourselves. Broekhuijse was correct and I have never regretted the difficult decision not to work in the Asmat.

Filming was to begin, according to my initial plans, when the Dani had grown reasonably accustomed to our shocking presence. However, within a few days of my return with other Expedition members and much of our baggage and before we had even made reasonable living arrangements, I awoke one morning to the realization that a ceremonial war was in preparation. Though I was later to awake on the average of once every 8 or 10 days to the same realization, my thought on this particular morning was

that I had come a very long way and that if I didn't take a camera out to the battlefield I might never have the chance again. All was extraordinary confusion on that particular day. I remember feeling very badly about asking everyone but Broekhuijse to stay near the villages. I was uneasy and shy about permitting too many incredulous eyes to fasten on the events which were unfolding. Again, my assumptions were faulty, not, perhaps, in the context of my own scruples but certainly in those of the people we had come to know. Dani war, I discovered, was above all an occasion for display, for savage boasting and for lethal pleasures. Our attendance at the wars of the Dugum Neighborhood was never a factor which significantly affected these events. It would have been less comprehensible if we had stayed away.

I doubt if there is a single foot of the films I shot that astounding day of my first view of Dani warfare to be seen in Dead Birds. But then there are nearly fifteen feet not included for each one that is. That is approximately the ratio of film shot to film ultimately incorporated in Dead Birds. It is a respectable balance, tending toward parsimony perhaps.

After certain early and often sensational happenings such as the wars and a funeral for a dead warrior, less dramatic elements of Dani existence began to emerge and slowly to be discerned as a pattern. As agriculturalists, both men and women do long and difficult work in their gardens. Most of the cultivation is done by women and I suspect that their hours are longest. But men, except for the oldest and most prosperous, expend vast energies in preparing new gardens and in other heavy labor. I soon began work on the agricultural theme and spent many days in certain gardens. It was a deliberate choice, made before I had started any work, to select certain individuals and concentrate my attention on their activities. There was both risk and promise in such a strategy. I thought by adopting it I could convey a greater sense of character, even personality, by developing the life situation and particular circumstances of a few individuals. I worried, however, that those I chose might, in the middle of my efforts, move away, get sick or become uninteresting.

I started by choosing two principals, a man in his early thirties and a boy of about eleven or twelve. The man is called Weyak and he fulfilled all my hopes and expectations. Even now, if I see him in the film or a photograph, I feel great fondness and a sense of rightness that he and I conspired in the way we did. The boy with whom I began was immediately appealing and bright but I soon realized that there was something too sleek and perfect about his manner. Fortunately, I realized this before much time had passed and I chose, instead, another child of about the same age named Pua and he survived, to my continued delight, into the film. Pun was not an obvious choice to carry the weight of significance I entrusted to him. He was quite awkward, vulnerable and moody. I should point out that, with not only Weyak and Pua but with all of the Dani I filmed, my job was made much easier because no one knew

what I was doing. My camera was no more or less interesting or threatening than my belt buckle or sunglasses. It was part of the strange costume which I always wore and that it made a noise was a matter of complete indifference. I might have been holding a large insect which occasionally murmured as I put it to my eye. Such innocence worked, of course, to my advantage, and I kept as strictly as possible to the rule that no photographs be shown to anyone. Toward the end of our stay, I would sometimes ask the Dani to look through my camera so that they would at least understand that it was a way for me to see more clearly what they looked like and did. But, the fact that I was making a visual record of their behavior was not, until the very end, comprehended.

In the first weeks, during which we had an opportunity to get an overall feeling for the Dani, I had to select emphases and themes for more concentrated attention. Quite early I decided to give greater emphasis to men than to women. We were sometimes three, and at other times as many as six, quite large and healthy males. I felt that our acceptance in the Dani Neighborhood depended to a large extent on our posing as little threat as possible to the sometimes tenuous Dani image of himself as a man. If we were to be excessively concerned with the women's domain, our relations with men would surely have been strained. Furthermore, Dani life is, to a large extent, inspired and controlled by men. By choosing to emphasize their roles, I felt closer to the mainspring of their culture and far more confident of maintaining our good relations with the whole community.

I have written that I wanted to portray through a few individuals the larger view of Dani life, at least as I saw it. The themes and motifs I invented or abstracted, as well as the obviously important activities and events which simply transpired, in my view had to be related back or through the experiences of Pun and Weyak. They, I hoped and believed, would become central figures in the playing out of the key moments and critical affairs of all Dani. It would have been ridiculous to suppose that such moments or affairs could be important without involving women in some way. Gardening, pig-keeping, salt-gathering, raiding, and frontier-guarding are important dimensions of Dani life. Eating, sleeping, talking, playing and fighting are important dimensions of all human lives. All of these and many other matters of both a particular and general nature were continually filmed. What I did was to be constantly with Pua and Weyak so as to be able to film their involvement. I was fortunate that they were typical in their responses and yet individualistic in their behavior.

Once the basic pattern of Dani life became clearer in my own mind and when I felt I had achieved some success in filming Pun and Weyak, I began to think more about the significance and meaning of it all, both to them and to me.

Until now, there has been some mystification concerning my intent. I did not set out in 1961 to make a film excluding my own feelings and judgments; the

opposite is more nearly true. I seized the opportunity of speaking to certain fundamental issues in human life. The Dani were then less important to me than those issues, In fact, the Dani, except for a few individuals such as Pun, Weyak and Wal~, were important to me only because they provided such clear evidence upon which a judgment about, or at least certain reflections on, matters of some human urgency could arise. My responsibility was as much to my own situation as a thinking person as to the Dani as also thinking and behaving people. I never thought this reflective or value oriented approach was inconsistent either with my training as a social scientist or my goals as the author of a film. I felt this was especially true as long as I was diligent in gathering the evidence. That is, my first responsibility, both to my own purposes and to the Dani, was to document with as much discernment as possible the most telling and important aspects of their life. Only when this had been done was I free to try and determine the significance of their behavior for the audience which might see my work.

Though the objective I now have elaborated was a matter of constant concern while I was actually filming, the process by which I could articulate it was more related to editing than photography.

I returned from New Guinea in September 1961 and, except for a sudden and hapless journey back to the Asmat in November in search of Michael Rockefeller, I was exclusively engaged for a year in editing, writing and preparing the sound tracks for Dead Birds. It is, perhaps, of interest to say a little about this important and complex activity.

As many people know, filmmaking is most often a team effort. A screenwriter, director, producer, assistants of all kinds—an array of talent acts in prescribed roles and a small army of technicians take sound, position lights, focus cameras, etc. Professional editors assemble in continuity the scenes which tell the story already written, usually with the supervision of a director.

A film such as Dead Birds is unusual in the way in which it was made. Though I had Michael Rockefeller as a conscientious and competent sound recordist and though Karl Heider would from time to time shoulder some of the physical burden I carried, the task of making the film fell on me. This, in my opinion, is the way it should be, at least in efforts of this kind, though Jean Rouch, who makes ethnographic films in Africa, never edits his own work but has developed a system of supervising trusted helpers who present him with continuities which he then can accept or reject.

The great disadvantage of single authorship in film making is, first, that it requires a horrifying commitment of time. I doubt that a major ethnographic film can be made by one person in less than two years (including the time taken for shooting). Second, there is a distinct hazard that a person who has lived the film experience as the cameraman/author will not have sufficient detachment from

the filmed material when he becomes the author/editor or author/writer. I think this is especially true for young inexperienced filmmakers and I have in the past as well as more recently tried to help as editor for some less experienced filmmakers.

Despite these two quite substantial drawbacks, I am convinced that being photographer, editor and writer is the only way to achieve the most coherent and sensitive results.

I edited Dead Birds in the basement of the Peabody Museum at Harvard. I had not heard of a Steenbeck or any other of the now indispensable editing tables in common use by editors. Nor did I have much use for Moviola since the shooting I had done was not with a synchronized camera. I used four and sometimes five Bell & Howell viewers on as many tables arranged so that I could shift quickly from one image or sequence to another. I also had a projector and the film, as it went together, would be constantly taken off the rewinds and screened. This was indispensable because the viewers were so small and also because once the scale was increased to at least life-size, and preferably beyond that, it was possible to see, really for the first time, what the image contained.

Finally a word about the choice of Dead Birds as a title. I knew before I left New Guinea that I would use it. In fact, this title and especially the implications that it contained for me had a significant effect on what I saw and therefore what I filmed. In the opening sequence of the film I try to explain that the Dani identify themselves with birds. This does not happen to the exclusion of all other devices or symbols, but it is a dominant motif in both their mythic and mundane lives. Dead Birds is a translation from the Dani term for weapons, ornaments and other articles captured in warfare. They represent, magically, victims on the other side. In fact they sometimes are referred to not as "Sue Warek" (dead birds) but "Ap Warek~t (dead men). It is appropriate also to remember that Dani men take ardent advantage of the extraordinary variety of birds that dwell in or near their Valley. A Dani is a plumed warrior in his most desirous state. What I have done is to acknowledge this indubitable fact and be glad for its wry, perhaps ironic, implications. I saw the Dani people, feathered and fluttering men and women, as enjoying the fate of all men and women. They dressed their lives with plumage, but faced as certain death as the rest of us drabber souls. The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate.

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