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**Gardner, Robert**  
**2013 *Dead Birds Re-encountered. Watertown, MA: [Documentary Educational Resources](#).***

Notes: DVD and streaming video, 45 minutes

**Reviewed 5 Oct 2015 by:**  
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**Medium:** *Film/Video*

**Subject:** *Gardner, Robert*  
**Keywords:** *Dani (Indonesian society)*  
*Visual Anthropology*

**ABSTRACT:** In 1989 Robert Gardner revisited some of the main characters from his 1963 documentary *Dead Birds*. He brought photographs from the 1961 research trip and a video copy of the film that played he played on a portable television. This film records some of the changes that have happened to the Dani subjects of the film, their reactions to seeing the film and 28 year old photographs, and the honest emotions felt between Pom (Robert Gardner) and these Baliem Valley Dani men.

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**R**obert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963) was an important film in that it was one of the first films to incorporate an anthropological subject into a narrative account that was told in the subject's own cultural terms. In many ways it helped to found the ethnographic film genre (along with the work of Jean Rouch and John Marshall) by showing what was an enclosed, lived culture and not an encounter between the filmmaker and the filmed. Many have also criticized *Dead Birds* for modeling itself after a wildlife documentary style. With the long shot of the bird in flight at the beginning, the constructed narrative that takes liberties with the sequence of events, and the lack of reflexivity one could see where this naturalistic description comes from. Where *Dead Birds* emerges as an important anthropological documentary is that the camera and filmmaker adapt to the subject's social field, not following the line of documentary productions of films like *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty

1922) that adapted cultural performance and behavior to demands of the camera.

Gardner's revisit centers around two of the main characters from *Dead Birds*. Weyak was a warrior in the film and now is an elder. Pua was a boy in the film and is now a grown man and father. Amid the emotional reunions of these two men with Gardner are discussions of how things have changed in the last thirty years. A lengthy interview with Weyak finds him talking about the ways in which the ban on warfare by the Indonesian authorities has reduced the number of killings. The reduction in killings has had the pleasant result of the disappearance of the angry ghosts which used to attack at night. Weyak can now travel to places at night and not be afraid. He also discusses how in the past his desire was for another wife, but now it is money and clothes that he desires. He would like to see access from his village to the rest of Papua by road but has no desire to see wet rice agriculture enter the area.

Pua and his village now get some economic benefit from visiting tourists. In the film there is a sequence where some European tourists visit, paying to see an exotic simulation of Dani cultural behavior. Pua and his comrades dress up in their finest Dani feathers. The tourists gather together a large sum of money to pay to see a 'smoked mummy.' There is a bit of humor when one of the tourists models a penis gourd for his fellow travelers. I don't find this sequence to be especially mocking. For the most part the Europeans seem well behaved. Cultural performances such as this have become the only way that these cultural traditions survive in the global economic rush for Papuan resources.

Pua has a son who is about Pua's age during the filming of *Dead Birds*, and there is a charming scene where they study a picture book from that 1961 research trip. Pua points out people whom they both know, people who are fathers of people that the boy knows, and occasionally sees himself in the photographs. Gardner also takes Pua over the valley by helicopter so that he can see the landscape from above.

The film ends with Weyak and Pua, along with some other elderly Dani, watching *Dead Birds* on a portable television. As the film starts they seem amused, but it is the battle sequences that are of exciting interest to them. Several Indonesian security officers appear midway through the scene, their presence never commented on but serving as a reminder of the Indonesian colonial presence in all aspects of Papuan life now.

This subject provides important supplemental material to *Dead Birds* and should be packaged in a DVD or Blu-ray release of the film. The Criterion Collection release of *Man of Aran* (Flaherty 1934) featured a subject much like this. The fact that it was recorded in 1989 but laid fallow until 2013 is regrettable, but such unfortunate things happen in the world of anthropological documentary.

A viewing of *Dead Birds Re-encountered* stands in necessary relation to a viewing of the original. Instructors would need to show both, and with the issues of the 1963 film's slow pace, lengthy running time, and numerous criticisms (both valid and imagined) I would imagine that most would opt for something more self contained and relevant to today's anthropological landscape. For ethnographic film courses it would be highly recommended, especially since *Dead Birds* demonstrates ethnographic praxis circa 1961 (the concept of the "ethnographic present" especially), while *Dead Birds Re-encountered* demonstrates some of the theoretical positions of visual anthropology circa 1989 (especially the critiques of Jay Ruby about reflexivity).

#### References

Flaherty, Robert J. 1922 *Nanook of the North*. Criterion Collection.

---- 1934 *Man of Aran*. Criterion Collection.

Gardner, Robert 1963 *Dead Birds*.