

Bond University
Research Repository



Edgy Ethnographic Film about Death and Religion: On Behalf of the Living

Jowsey, Tanisha

Published in:
Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology

DOI:
[10.1080/14442213.2024.2390196](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2024.2390196)

Licence:
CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

Recommended citation(APA):
Jowsey, T. (in press). Edgy Ethnographic Film about Death and Religion: On Behalf of the Living. *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2024.2390196>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.



Edgy Ethnographic Film about Death and Religion: *On Behalf of the Living*

Tanisha Jowsey

To cite this article: Tanisha Jowsey (27 Aug 2024): Edgy Ethnographic Film about Death and Religion: *On Behalf of the Living*, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2024.2390196

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2024.2390196>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Aug 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 220



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

MULTIMEDIA REVIEW COLUMN

Edgy Ethnographic Film about Death and Religion: *On Behalf of the Living*

Tanisha Jowsey 

On Behalf of the Living

TON OTTO, CHRISTIAN SUHR, AND GARY KILDEA (directors, film makers)
Moesgaard Film, Denmark

Duration: 105 min, 2023, in Tok Pisin, Dutch, Danish, and English, with English subtitles

The full film is available through Documentary Educational Resources (der.org)



Figure 1. Sick man receives prayers from *On Behalf of the Living* [1.06.22mins].

If you want to see a brilliant example of shifting epistemologies, South Pacific ethnographic film, and critical reflexive inquiry, then this is the film for you. In this review I will first orient readers to the central narratives of this film and then explore how the technical film choices made conjure ethnographic discourse concerning representation.

* TAPJA Multimedia Reviews contributor. Email: tjowsey@bond.edu.au

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

On Behalf of the Living is an ethnographic documentary about two Western academics entering into critical reflections and dialogue about their own efforts to reconcile spiritual and religious beliefs with familial ties; and people on a remote Papua New Guinea island who struggle to reconcile age-old Indigenous customs and traditions with modern church teachings. The protagonist is Ton Otto, a Dutch anthropologist who has dedicated much of his life to seeking understanding of Papua New Guinean ways of life. Ton was adopted into a local family and the recent death of his adopted father, Ngat, required that he manage the funeral and customary affairs (this was captured in Otto's, Christian Suhr's, and Steffen Dalsgaard's film *Ngat is Dead: Studying Mortuary Traditions*, which received the main award in 2008 at the Jean Rouch International Film Festival in Paris). Ton seeks to make contact with Ngat's spirit. *On Behalf of the Living* explores humanity's enduring fascination with the afterlife. The film weaves together three narrative threads: footage of Ton's interactions with his birth family in Maastricht, Holland, where daily discussions encompass faith, Catholicism, and eternity; the main storyline set on Baluan Island, documenting Ton's reunion with his adoptive family and their entanglement in complex spiritual and personal disputes; and a series of intimate dialogues between Ton and Christian Suhr (film maker), where they rigorously challenge each other's perspectives on their ethnographic film experiment and the broader social scientific endeavour. This third strand presents critical insights that frame the narrative. The film offers a humble, deeply personal, and genuine inquiry that is relevant to all of us.

The film begins with a Catholic funeral. No explanation of who has died is offered. The next scene is Ton lamenting with his adopted sisters on Baluan. No explanation

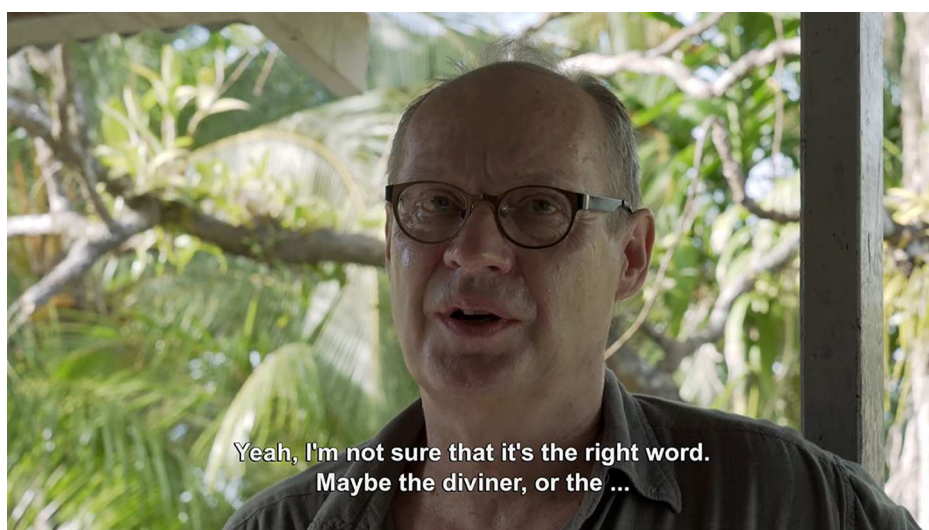


Figure 2. The right word from *On Behalf of the Living* [45.45mins].

of who they lament is offered. The third scene (and all of this within the first 90 seconds of the film) brings us to Ton's birth family. His mother gives a young female family member jewellery, then shows a small wooden figure of a woman to the camera. Passed down from Ton's mother's grandparents, the figure is said to have mystical powers of protection for boat people. Yet, Ton's parents are Catholic. His father Kees has served his local community and Church for fifty years. Ton and Kees discuss Ton's intentions to return to Papua New Guinea and seek to connect with Ngat's spirit. Kees respects Ton's ongoing spiritual curiosity. This opening scene sets up the audience with a central theme in the film of how people navigate, with respect, seemingly conflicting epistemologies concerned with mortality in their daily lives. What strikes me about this beginning of the film is how gently it frames this navigation.

The juxtaposition of different epistemologies is again brought to light on the island of Baluan where many inhabitants practise Christianity. Some villagers practise both Christianity and, at times, practise according to traditional customs, and this can cause tension or conflict. An example is when the villager Abel dies [52.00] and at his Christian funeral a villager says his spirit is watching the funeral (although Christianity holds that the spirit of a deceased person moves on). Then a pig is prepared for food to share according to traditional customs. Yet the pastor says that, according to the Bible [54.30], pigs are unclean and should not be eaten. A villager says there are traditional customs—eating pig, covering the body in dirt—that 'whether you follow custom strictly or not, as long as you have some feeling for it or understanding, you must take part' [54.50]. Christian Suhr later remarks that although he is accustomed to the experience of navigating contrasting yet overlapping world views, the experience remains 'a bit chaotic in your head' [1.00.31].

Now, apologies for this spoiler, but it was not until the final scene of the film—the Catholic funeral—that I realised it was Ton's father Kees who had died and whose funeral opens the film. I did not feel a penny drop. I felt a bomb explode. It threw my whole perception of the film into chaos. At [1.41.46] Kees is on the phone, happy, saying he had a little problem but is now well. 'Old soldiers never die', he says smiling. There is one second of black screen. Then Kees's casket and funeral. As Kubler-Ross and Kessler describe, when unexpected death occurs we feel shock, even denial (2005). Kubler-Ross explains people who are dying give us clues that this is happening and they are easy to miss, so we feel shock or denial anyway (2005).

I was shocked.

The film opens with Kees's funeral then moves back in time to Ton and Kees discussing Ton's deep hope to connect with his deceased Island father. The remainder of the film is predominantly set in Papua New Guinea with focus on navigating epistemologies in that context; only to end with Kees's funeral. A flood of questions rushed into my mind. Why did Ton not discuss his father's death? Was it too soon, too raw? Was it because Ton, Christian, and Gary agreed the focus should remain on the Island context? Has Ton sought to connect with Kees's spirit or does he believe his father is in heaven?

I needed time to digest this. Two weeks later, I wrote the first draft of this review and sent it off for feedback from the TAPJA Board. The following week I had just finished teaching a class to medical students in Australia about types of grief and complicated grief when I received a phone call informing me a close friend had died suddenly. Three days later our family pet died suddenly. The next day I received feedback on the review, with provocations to mention the *death of his real father* and address squarely *those places in the film, where epistemologies meet and overlap*. Cautiously, with heightened awareness of my own vulnerable grief status, I watched the film again and began a rewrite of this review.

That the film begins and ends with Kees's funeral makes poignant the relevance of overlapping—even competing—epistemologies concerning mortality to all of us, whether we are social scientists or otherwise. We are fragile creatures, and nothing draws this into focus more swiftly than the death of a loved one. Existential conversations about competing epistemologies make people feel vulnerable because their identity may be called into question. That Ton and Christian navigate this with care throughout the film is inspirational.

Issues of representation are ever present and pose unending ethnographic challenges. Multimedia reviews in anthropology are brought to life with an image or two. It therefore stands that the selection of these images is of utmost import. In reviews of films, I usually select a poignant moment that captures the energy of a core element of the film. In this review, I wondered whether to capture the scenes of people speaking in tongues, undertaking rituals, or crying in grief. Similarly, Christian, an established filmmaker and associate professor of visual anthropology, shares with Ton his hope that the film will include 'some dramatic scenes' [25.37mins]. But when I considered which scenes to capture, my first impulse was to provide an image of Asap (Ton's sister) discussing her deceased father's spirit [11.23mins]. Asap says 'I've not seen him. It's more of a feeling that I have'. She discusses how she experiences her deceased father's spirit as present. Asap feels a chill. A change in the air. She does not see her father's spirit but the experience is that he is at times near. The subject matter is rich. The visual component is simple—a closeup shot of Asap talking. I searched for the 'dramatic scenes' Christian had hoped for. [Figure 1](#) shows one such scene, beautifully framed and lit, of an Island man receiving prayers [1.06.22mins]. From my view, it is personal, intimate, and centrally concerned with all three narrative threads of the film.

Seeking balance, I selected Ton for [Figure 2](#). The scene is in stark contrast to the dramatic scene of [Figure 1](#). [Figure 2](#) depicts Ton as he and Christian discuss how to represent a person who may not want to be included in the film, and finding the right word to represent this person's knowledge/skill/wisdom concerning death and religion and spirituality. They agree to call him 'wise man'. From my view, this conversation is rich with meaning such as a combined effort to do justice to the film's participants and nonparticipants. This references issues that have long been debated in anthropology around how we represent the people with whom we research and seek to understand (see, for example, the essay by Geertz (1974) on

the scandalous truths of Malinowski's diary or Fabian's (2014) work from the 1980s, and how we achieve representation through visual means (Banks and Morphy 1997; MacDougall 1978; Pink 2011)). Indeed, recently this conversation has turned specifically to social media as ethnographic fodder (Brekelmans 2024; Caliandro 2018).

The discussion between Ton and Christian also beautifully captures the social science academic endeavour—to scientifically and accurately convey life through careful selection of words to describe the issue. Sixty minutes into the film Christian and Ton are again discussing how they struggle to reconcile multiple world views, which distils into a focus on representation; the private moments that as film makers they feel they cannot or should not film. The visual components of these conversations are fairly simple—portrait closeup shots of Christian or Ton while they grapple with complex philosophical and ethical issues. I found the juxtaposition between the simple visuals with complex discourse compelling. Yet, as this review demonstrates, I also felt pulled as a film maker towards the dramatic scenes that documentary audiences crave. This tension will likely resonate with experienced film makers and anthropologists alike. Gary Kildea brings perfection to the weaving of these three narratives: the tempo and choice of footage to top and tail this film's narrative are flawless.

On behalf of the Living is beautiful, real, and relevant. A masterpiece.

I recommend this film for those interested in: Papua New Guinea, religious studies, death rituals, inheritance, island customs, visual anthropology, and/or ethnographic film.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to Borut Telban for his kind feedback on drafts of this review. I would also like to thank Ton for his bravery and generosity in sharing his experience with the world. Thank you also to Christian and Gary for taking the journey and holding this space.

ORCID

Tanisha Jowsey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1499-9225>

References

- Banks, M., and H. Morphy 1997. *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brekelmans, A. 2024. "TikTok and the New Public Ethnographer." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 25 (2): 208–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2024.2314335>
- Caliandro, A. 2018. "Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47 (5): 551–578.

- Fabian, J. 2014. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Geertz, C. 1974. "From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28 (1): 26–45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3822971>
- Kubler-Ross, E., and D. Kessler. 2005. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- MacDougall, D. 1978. "Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1): 405–425. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.07.100178.002201>
- Pink, S. 2011. "Images, Senses and Applications: Engaging Visual Anthropology." *Visual Anthropology* 24 (5): 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2011.604611>