

1

00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:15,577

This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture.

2

00:00:15,577 --> 00:00:20,103

The producer's purpose is to suggest some possible explanations but not necessarily

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00:00:20,103 --> 00:00:27,392

the only ones to the mysteries we will examine.

4

00:00:27,392 --> 00:00:32,199

Among the Asmott people of New Guinea, there exists a way of life that has remained unchanged

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00:00:32,199 --> 00:00:36,444

since the Stone Age.

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00:00:36,444 --> 00:00:45,095

In 1961, it drew the attention of a restless young man named Michael Rockefeller.

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00:00:45,095 --> 00:00:50,542

For the primitive Asmott tribes, life is a continual interaction of ghosts, spirits,

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00:00:50,542 --> 00:00:52,825

and magic.

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00:00:52,825 --> 00:00:56,230

Tribal warfare is commonplace and expected.

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00:00:56,230 --> 00:00:59,634

Life must be met with revenge.

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00:00:59,634 --> 00:01:08,766

Among these fierce aboriginal men, Michael Rockefeller traveled to study and learn.

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00:01:08,766 --> 00:01:21,542

In their midst, he disappeared and was never seen again.

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00:01:21,542 --> 00:01:25,147

He was a young man from the University of New York, June 1960.

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00:01:25,147 --> 00:01:33,357

For Governor and Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, it was a special emotional moment.

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00:01:33,357 --> 00:01:38,404

Their youngest son, Michael, had graduated with honors.

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00:01:38,404 --> 00:01:43,490

Ahead of him lay a life filled with promise and great opportunity.

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00:01:43,490 --> 00:01:48,377

At 22, Michael Rockefeller was the most outgoing and restless of the Governor's three sons

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00:01:48,377 --> 00:01:50,059

and two daughters.

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00:01:50,419 --> 00:01:53,623

Michael had traveled with his family and friends, and within six months, he was half a world

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00:01:53,623 --> 00:01:58,590

away in the remote highlands of Dutch New Guinea.

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00:01:58,590 --> 00:02:03,436

Michael had joined an anthropological expedition to study and record a Stone Age tribe called

22

00:02:03,436 --> 00:02:05,158

the Dany.

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00:02:05,158 --> 00:02:15,491

Sensitive and enthusiastic, he took special pleasure in his work.

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00:02:15,491 --> 00:02:21,820

For six months, Michael served as the expedition's sound man and still photographer.

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00:02:21,820 --> 00:02:26,826

When his work was over, he was drawn to another part of New Guinea to a people called the

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00:02:26,826 --> 00:02:34,876

Osmot.

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00:02:34,876 --> 00:02:39,843

Along the coast and in the winding tidal rivers of southern New Guinea, the primitive Osmot

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00:02:39,843 --> 00:02:46,131

tribes lived as they had since primeval times.

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00:02:46,131 --> 00:02:50,937

Michael Rockefeller traveled throughout the region, fascinated by the Osmot culture and

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00:02:50,937 --> 00:02:53,661

way of life.

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00:02:53,661 --> 00:02:58,507

In his journal, Rockefeller wrote, the Osmot is equal to my wildest dreams.

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00:02:58,507 --> 00:03:05,916

It is a land of great winding rivers, jungle and mud, literally nothing else.

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00:03:05,916 --> 00:03:12,244

The people have lived for centuries on little besides the pulp of the sego palm and fish.

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00:03:12,244 --> 00:03:17,171

Some remote areas are still headhunting.

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00:03:17,171 --> 00:03:29,707

A keen observer and gifted photographer, Michael carefully documented Osmot life.

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00:03:29,707 --> 00:03:46,809

In the Osmot people, Michael sensed the nobility that he admired and compassionately recorded.

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00:03:46,809 --> 00:03:53,698

The word Osmot means tree people and indeed Osmot culture depends almost totally on trees

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00:03:53,698 --> 00:04:00,026

for food, shelter, for their canoes and for their art.

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00:04:00,026 --> 00:04:04,752

The Osmot even believed themselves to be descended from trees.

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00:04:04,752 --> 00:04:09,838

Their mythology tells of a great magician who wandered their uninhabited land.

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00:04:09,838 --> 00:04:14,204

Out of loneliness, he carved human figures from mangrove wood.

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00:04:14,204 --> 00:04:18,049

He beat softly on a drum and brought the figures to life.

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00:04:18,169 --> 00:04:24,818

Thus the Osmot came to be.

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00:04:24,818 --> 00:04:28,903

The Osmots still believe that their spirits reside in trees.

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00:04:28,903 --> 00:04:37,794

The felling of a mangrove tree begins an ancient ritual that intermingles art and violence.

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00:04:37,794 --> 00:04:43,762

Before the cut mangrove trunk can enter the village, Osmot women pelt it with mud, exercising

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00:04:43,762 --> 00:04:49,570

any evil spirits that may still live inside.

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00:04:49,570 --> 00:05:02,146

Once the mangrove is cleansed of demons, the intricate carving begins.

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00:05:02,146 --> 00:05:06,992

Shaped into the head of dead ancestors and kinsmen, the carving becomes a vital link

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00:05:06,992 --> 00:05:10,917

between the material and spiritual worlds.

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00:05:11,918 --> 00:05:16,044

For the Osmot, natural death does not exist.

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00:05:16,044 --> 00:05:20,770

Only evil spirits and enemies account for the passing of life.

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00:05:20,770 --> 00:05:29,461

The finished carving becomes a pledge to the dead that their spirits will be revenged.

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00:05:29,461 --> 00:05:34,748

The beauty of Osmot art completely captivated Michael Rockefeller.

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00:05:34,748 --> 00:05:36,910

In his journal, Rockefeller wrote,

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00:05:36,910 --> 00:05:40,996

the key to my fascination with the Osmot is the wood carving.

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00:05:40,996 --> 00:05:47,844

The sculpture which the people here produce is some of the most extraordinary work in the primitive world.

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00:05:47,844 --> 00:05:59,580

Full of youthful enthusiasm, Michael Rockefeller began collecting Osmot art.

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00:05:59,700 --> 00:06:05,267

As he journeyed from village to village, Michael observed the subtle details of Osmot life.

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00:06:05,267 --> 00:06:09,512

He wrote, the rowers placed little effort behind their strokes,

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00:06:09,512 --> 00:06:18,684

allowing the outflowing tide to carry the prowess easily along.

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00:06:18,684 --> 00:06:28,417

For weeks, Michael traveled through Osmot territory, often accompanied by missionaries and anthropologists.

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00:06:29,858 --> 00:06:34,384

Gradually, he began to amass a wide collection of carvings.

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00:06:34,384 --> 00:06:42,154

He dreamed of an exhibit that would pay tribute to the Osmot's amazing creativity.

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00:06:42,154 --> 00:06:51,126

On November 18, 1961, Michael Rockefeller embarked on a native catamaran for a village up the coast.

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00:06:51,126 --> 00:06:57,334

With him was Dutch anthropologist Rene Wassing and two native guides.

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00:06:57,334 --> 00:07:04,623

The purpose of the trip was to pick up carvings for which Michael already had bartered.

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00:07:04,623 --> 00:07:09,269

The makeshift catamaran was powered by only a single outboard motor.

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00:07:09,269 --> 00:07:13,915

Michael had been warned of dangerous unpredictable currents.

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00:07:13,915 --> 00:07:25,570

At the mouth of the Islanden River, a massive tidal surge suddenly drowned the motor and capsized the boat.

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00:07:25,570 --> 00:07:27,332

The natives swam for help.

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00:07:27,332 --> 00:07:33,060

Rockefeller and Wassing clung to the boat, hopelessly adrift.

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00:07:33,060 --> 00:07:39,148

After a night in the water, fearing the natives had failed, Michael decided to go for help himself.

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00:07:39,148 --> 00:07:46,998

Using two empty gasoline cans for extra buoyancy, he swam for shore.

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00:07:46,998 --> 00:07:54,167

Michael Rockefeller and Rene Wassing didn't know it, but their native guides had made it back to land.

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00:07:54,247 --> 00:08:03,619

The closest village was only 11 miles away, yet in the thick jungle and deep mud of the Osmot Coast, the trek for help took nearly a day.

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00:08:03,619 --> 00:08:16,355

When Dutch authorities finally learned of the accident, a full-scale search was launched immediately.

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00:08:16,355 --> 00:08:23,685

Searchers combed over coastal rivers and seemingly endless spans of dense jungle shoreline.

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00:08:23,765 --> 00:08:26,488

The region below was hostile and forbidding.

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00:08:26,488 --> 00:08:31,335

The coastline was a muddy swamp with estuaries where crocodiles prowled.

81

00:08:31,335 --> 00:08:40,346

Beyond lay spongy tangles of sego palms and mangroves, alive with poisonous snakes, scorpions and swarms of mosquitoes.

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00:08:40,346 --> 00:08:46,074

The Osmot had named their home the land of lapping death.

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00:08:46,074 --> 00:08:48,397

Suddenly, a miracle.

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00:08:48,397 --> 00:08:56,367

A flying boat had found Rene Wassing, still clinging to the capsized catamaran more than 20 miles out to sea.

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00:08:56,367 --> 00:09:01,133

Stunned and exhausted, Wassing told reporters of the ordeal.

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00:09:01,133 --> 00:09:06,179

He had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Michael from attempting the swim to shore.

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00:09:06,179 --> 00:09:09,944

Michael's last words were, I think I can make it.

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00:09:09,944 --> 00:09:19,957

Now the massive search efforts concentrated on Michael.

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00:09:19,957 --> 00:09:29,970

The news that his son was lost had taken three days to reach Governor Rockefeller.

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00:09:29,970 --> 00:09:35,978

Stunned and disoriented, he tried his best to deal with an endless onslaught of questions.

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00:09:35,978 --> 00:09:37,980

I'm headed out there.

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00:09:37,980 --> 00:09:47,993

Hopefully they'll find him before we get there, but to be there when they do find him, so if there's anything I can do, I will.

93

00:09:47,993 --> 00:09:55,002

In New Guinea, the news was not good. No trace of Michael had yet been found.

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00:09:55,002 --> 00:10:01,010

For the native Osmot, the spectacle of the search was awesome and overwhelming.

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00:10:01,010 --> 00:10:04,014

They had never seen anything like it.

96

00:10:06,016 --> 00:10:09,020

Several more days of searching yielded nothing.

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00:10:09,020 --> 00:10:16,029

A pale and haggard father had almost given up hope.

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00:10:16,029 --> 00:10:24,040

Then, the first clue, the red gasoline can that Michael used for extra buoyancy was found at sea.

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00:10:24,040 --> 00:10:32,050

It was strong evidence that Michael had drowned, but at the same time it offered a faint glimmer of hope.

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00:10:32,050 --> 00:10:41,061

5,000 natives began searching up and down the New Guinea coast, looking for any other trace of Michael.

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00:10:41,061 --> 00:10:47,069

Nothing was found.

102

00:10:47,069 --> 00:10:53,077

After nearly two weeks, the search for Michael Rockefeller was ended.

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00:10:53,077 --> 00:10:59,085

For an agonized father returning home, the official conclusion seemed unavoidable.

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00:10:59,085 --> 00:11:04,091

Michael Rockefeller had drowned at sea.

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00:11:04,091 --> 00:11:15,105

Yet it was not long before speculation began that perhaps somewhere in the jungle, Michael might still be alive.

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00:11:15,105 --> 00:11:23,115

New York City, 1968

107

00:11:23,115 --> 00:11:31,126

Seven years after Michael Rockefeller's disappearance, one man was led to begin a personal search for the missing Rockefeller.

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00:11:31,126 --> 00:11:39,136

Milt Maclin, a writer and magazine editor, was met in his office by a secretive man who would call himself only Donahue.

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00:11:39,136 --> 00:11:52,153

Donahue told Maclin that several months before, on a tiny island called Kanapu, he had seen and talked with Michael Rockefeller.

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00:11:52,153 --> 00:11:59,162

Intrigued with the story, Maclin made plans to go to New Guinea.

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00:11:59,162 --> 00:12:09,175

Maclin's information from Donahue was sketchy, but he had decided to follow the difficult route.

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00:12:09,175 --> 00:12:20,189

According to Donahue's story, Rockefeller was picked up by a native war party and taken by canoe on a thousand mile journey to the Trobriand Islands.

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00:12:20,189 --> 00:12:35,208

As Maclin made his way through the jungle, he began to understand Michael's attraction to its primitive beauty.

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00:12:35,208 --> 00:12:41,216

After several days' travel, Maclin reached a major village of the Trobriands.

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00:12:41,216 --> 00:12:48,225

A local chief knew of Kanapu Island and described its general location.

116

00:12:48,225 --> 00:12:58,238

It was a long journey by native standards, but at last, Maclin's destination seemed within reach.

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00:12:58,238 --> 00:13:05,247

By hired boat, Maclin sailed for Kanapu.

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00:13:05,247 --> 00:13:12,256

Even on the best local charts, it was but a speck.

119

00:13:12,256 --> 00:13:22,269

Finally, the island appeared, like a vision from a storybook.

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00:13:22,269 --> 00:13:36,287

After a long and tiring journey, Milt Maclin approached his destination with hopeful expectation.

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00:13:36,287 --> 00:13:42,294

The island was a paradise, a beautiful tropical refuge.

122

00:13:42,294 --> 00:13:52,307

It was also an eerie place. There were few signs of life.

123

00:13:52,307 --> 00:14:01,319

A careful search led finally to a makeshift shelter.

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00:14:01,319 --> 00:14:08,328

The hut was abandoned. There was no sign of Michael Rockefeller.

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00:14:08,328 --> 00:14:18,341

Discouraged and disappointed, Milt Maclin gave up his Kanapu search.

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00:14:18,341 --> 00:14:26,351

The fate of Michael Rockefeller remained a mystery. Yet, from Maclin, the unsuccessful search had raised many questions.

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00:14:26,351 --> 00:14:34,361

Was the Donahue story simply a cruel hoax, or did it bear some element of truth?

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00:14:34,361 --> 00:14:38,366

Milt Maclin's determined search did not end on Kanapu Island.

129

00:14:38,366 --> 00:14:46,377

For two more months, he traveled throughout New Guinea, looking for evidence that might prove conclusively what happened to Michael Rockefeller.

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00:14:46,377 --> 00:14:56,390

Maclin traced down endless leads, but his final personal conclusion was based on information from a Dutch missionary, Father Cornelius van Kessel.

131

00:14:56,390 --> 00:15:04,400

Van Kessel had heard rumors from natives that Rockefeller was captured and killed near the Osmot village of Oates-Janep.

132

00:15:04,400 --> 00:15:10,408

A war chief named Ajam was mentioned in the rumors as the man who might be responsible.

133

00:15:10,408 --> 00:15:18,418

Recently, the chief of Os-Janep was interviewed. He recalled the search for Michael Rockefeller.

134

00:15:18,418 --> 00:15:26,428

There were many airplanes and boats. We were afraid and blocked our river with trees.

135

00:15:26,428 --> 00:15:35,440

Our enemies in the other villages all say that we killed him. They want us to get into trouble.

136

00:15:35,440 --> 00:15:45,453

I am the chief. If we killed him, I would know.

137

00:15:45,453 --> 00:15:50,459

The full and true story of Michael Rockefeller's disappearance may never be known.

138

00:15:50,459 --> 00:15:57,468

If the answer lies among the Osmot, a nearly impenetrable cultural curtain prevents a final solution.

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00:15:57,468 --> 00:16:06,480

Yet in the life of the Osmot, the age-old writes that once preceded tribal violence can still be witnessed.

140

00:16:06,480 --> 00:16:18,495

After the mangrove ancestor poles are carved, an elaborate ceremony begins in honor of the dead.

141

00:16:18,495 --> 00:16:29,509

In the minds of the Osmot, life, art, magic and death are inseparably interwoven, each continually affecting the other.

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00:16:29,509 --> 00:16:36,518

Members of neighboring villages are ritually adopted by the celebrating tribe.

143

00:16:36,518 --> 00:16:42,526

Traditionally, however, they are the first to be killed when an intertribal feud arises.

144

00:16:42,526 --> 00:16:53,540

This is an accepted part in an ancient cycle of warfare and revenge.

145

00:16:53,540 --> 00:17:04,554

The ancestor ceremony climaxes when the poles are returned outside.

146

00:17:13,566 --> 00:17:21,576

In mock battle, the entire village dances around the symbolic poles.

147

00:17:21,576 --> 00:17:29,587

Only a generation ago, the ceremony would have led to a revenge attack on a rival tribe.

148

00:17:29,587 --> 00:17:37,597

But headhunting has been outlawed. An age-old way of Osmot life has been brought to an end.

149

00:17:42,603 --> 00:17:49,612

In his journal, Michael Rockefeller wrote,

150

00:17:49,612 --> 00:17:55,620

the Osmot is filled with a kind of tragedy. They were a ferocious headhunting people,

151

00:17:55,620 --> 00:18:00,626

but now many villages are beginning to doubt the worth of their own culture.

152

00:18:00,626 --> 00:18:07,635

They crave things Western, even though these doubtful symbols of another world hide a proud form

153

00:18:07,635 --> 00:18:12,642

and replace a far finer, if less concealing form of dress.

154

00:18:21,654 --> 00:18:27,661

Perhaps Michael Rockefeller's dedication to the Osmot was part of a larger personal quest

155

00:18:27,661 --> 00:18:33,669

for self-understanding and universal values which could guide him through life.

156

00:18:33,669 --> 00:18:38,675

I'd like to just say a word about Michael himself.

157

00:18:38,675 --> 00:18:51,692

Ever since he was little, he's been very aware of people, their feelings, their thoughts.

158

00:18:51,692 --> 00:19:00,704

He's a person who has always loved people and been loved by people.

159

00:19:00,704 --> 00:19:15,723

He had a tremendous enthusiasm and drive, loved life, has always loved beauty in people,

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00:19:15,723 --> 00:19:20,729

beauty in nature and beauty in art, whether it's painting or sculpture.

161

00:19:20,729 --> 00:19:25,736

And has been quite an artist himself.

162

00:19:25,736 --> 00:19:31,744

I think it's fair to say that he was never happier than he has been.

163

00:19:31,744 --> 00:19:36,750

Out there, Michael had one of the most exciting experiences of his life.

164

00:19:41,756 --> 00:19:45,762

The mystery of Michael Rockefeller's disappearance may never be solved,

165

00:19:45,762 --> 00:19:51,769

but his passion and spirit will live on in his pictorial record of the Osmot.

166

00:19:56,776 --> 00:20:06,789

Before Michael Rockefeller traveled to New Guinea, he spoke of doing something romantic and adventurous

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00:20:06,789 --> 00:20:11,795

at a time when frontiers in the real sense of the word were disappearing.

168

00:20:11,795 --> 00:20:19,805

Today, his tragic loss is underscored by the accelerating demise of the Osmot people and their culture.

169

00:20:25,813 --> 00:20:32,822

The Osmot is a place where the world is filled with the spirit of the Osmot.

170

00:20:32,822 --> 00:20:40,832

The Osmot is a place where the world is filled with the spirit of the Osmot.

171

00:20:40,832 --> 00:20:44,838

While in New Guinea, Michael Rockefeller wrote,

172

00:20:44,838 --> 00:20:49,844

the West thinks in terms of bringing advance and opportunity to such a place.

173

00:20:49,844 --> 00:20:55,852

In actuality, we bring a cultural bankruptcy which will last for many years.

174

00:20:58,856 --> 00:21:06,866

Tenuously, the Osmot still hold on, among the last representatives of the beginning of humanity.

175

00:21:19,883 --> 00:21:26,892

Coming up next, 20th Century with Mike Wallace reports on the California Night Stalker and other serial killers.

176

00:21:26,892 --> 00:21:31,898

Then, Weapons at War looks at the evolution of bombs, rockets and missiles.

177

00:21:31,898 --> 00:21:35,903

And log on at [veterans.com](http://veterans.com), a new website brought to you by the History Channel.

178

00:21:35,903 --> 00:21:40,910

Veterans.com, a place where veterans, their families and others can connect, share stories,

179

00:21:40,910 --> 00:21:44,915

and pass on the legacies of all American veterans.

180

00:21:49,921 --> 00:21:51,924

Thank you.