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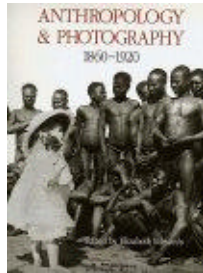
## Anthropology & Photography 1860 -1920

edited by Elizabeth Edwards

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992

(in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, London)

Paperback, 275 pages, \$27.50



### [Michal Heron](#)

*The very immediacy and realism of the photograph sets it apart from all other mechanisms through which we have access to the past.*

— Elizabeth Edwards from her foreword

It would be difficult to find a stronger image of colonialism than that portrayed by the cover photograph of [Anthropology & Photography 1860 - 1920](#). Facing a group of African men is a tiny English girl-child in bonnet and Victorian dress complete with lace and flounces (though she is in bare feet). She is watching a group of men and boys clad in loincloths. Even from her low vantage point, her tiny frame carries in its stance all the benevolent condescension and righteous superiority of British colonial power. Several of the men — particularly one crouched at the right — gaze back with truly unreadable expressions, perhaps of wonder at this apparition, as if she were an alien, a rare new species, or a bird with bizarre plumage quite unsuited for the climate. Looking at their faces one wants to find in them an emotional response to this small, strange being. But in their stoic expressions one cannot read much more than puzzlement.

This photograph is one of many in the book that captivate us and invite speculation about the power of photography, its accuracy as a scientific tool, and the political ramifications of its use. Indeed, [Anthropology & Photography 1860 - 1920](#) is a serious anthropological work, described in the forward as "source criticism," in which over 150 photographs (primarily from the archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute) are examined by anthropologist contributors through a series of essays.

Readers of this book will find an extraordinary richness of information and visual stimulation blending historical and political ideas with aesthetic impact. Although the book is rich with scholarly information, its most engaging aspect is the photography. Having read Elizabeth Edwards's introduction (well worth reading, unlike many introductions), a layperson might approach this work by "reading" the photographs: studying them and then searching the text for the photo references, backing into the scholarly text when a photo compels, as it surely will, for the photography sets loose strong aesthetic, intellectual, and political responses and raises a number of intriguing questions.

Does a photograph represent an objective reality? The issue of objectivity versus subjectivity in a photograph has been with us for decades. The apparent reality of a photograph is a tantalizing notion, but photography of peoples and cultures rarely, if ever, has represented an objective reality and often reveals as much about the photographer as it does the culture. Certainly, photographic equipment is capable of faithfully rendering accurate details such as the texture of an animal hide, the design of leaves on a tree, or the patterns on an insect's wing. Representations of these can be accepted as having a high degree of scientific fidelity. When it comes to

people, similar details will be accurate: designs on jewelry or clothing, the shape of tattoos, and styles of cookware. But cultural reality is often illusory. A photographer manipulates a scene, whether consciously or not, merely by what is included or excluded within the frame of the picture. Other choices which can alter a scene are the angle used, the focal length of the lens, what is in focus or not, and even how the subjects have been coached, placed, or staged to create an image.

On page 160 of Edwards's book, photographs of the same subject by different photographers offer a fascinating contrast, juxtaposing the efforts of one photographer at accurate portrayal with a scene of unabashed romanticism by the second. The top photo, "Two Women Grooming" by H. Dauncey, shows Papuan women seated on the ground in a village setting, one delousing the other. The background is busy and somewhat distracting, but in the women's posture and expressions of concentration, Dauncey comes very close to capturing an authentic moment of action. The bottom photograph by F. W. Barton, also titled "Two Women Grooming," is a lovely photograph, and, at first glance, much more pleasing to view. The women are seated in the middle of a field with a gentle, soft out-of-focus background. But after a moment you wonder why they are doing this daily chore in the middle of nowhere; their slightly self-conscious smiles hint that they are aware they are on-stage. Romantic beauty at the expense of accuracy somehow leaves a slight saccharine after-taste.

Another Barton photo on the next page is even more seductive in its beauty. The exquisite image "Motu Girl Paddling a Canoe" uses dramatic side lighting to bring into relief the tattoos on the girl's stomach; dancing glints of light and lush reflections in the water add to the appeal. What cuts through the romanticism of the lighting and saves the photograph from banality is the direct, almost fierce gaze of the young girl. Her eyes seem to say: *I am doing as this white man directs but I am my own person nonetheless. See me.*

A central issue in *Anthropology and Photography* is the relationship between politics and power. The concept of "otherness" is key here. Many of the photographs raise the question whether these Victorian photographers had the right to exploit their vision of the "other." In them, we encounter a mindset that, as noted earlier, tells in some cases more about the taker of the photograph than about the taken subject.

Regarding colonial domination and the relationship between the Europeans and those they colonized, Elizabeth Edwards points out that:

Underwriting [European] appropriation of most of the non-European globe and structuring responses to it was a set of assumptions concerning the superiority of the white man and the duties and rights this superiority bestowed.

At an individual level, this relationship was often tempered with a genuine desire for sympathetic understanding of people in human terms. Such intentions were inevitably challenged by the intellectual difficulties of such an endeavor. The unequal relationship was sustained through a controlling knowledge which appropriated the reality of other cultures into an ordered structure. Photography was in many ways symbolic of this relationship.

There is an especially eerie example of colonial power imagery in the photograph on page 119, "Dancing at the King's Dinner, Andaman Islands" by R. Boreham. The dancers are in the upper left quarter of the picture. In the right front of the photo, taking up easily half the frame, are two empty canvas sling chairs, representing the colonials who had been sitting there perhaps moments before. The photographer, knowingly or not, makes an evocative statement about European domination. Even when it is represented only by empty chairs, its aura is palpable.

Assumptions of racial, cultural, and moral superiority add power to the

equipment in a photographer's hand. These Victorian explorers seem to have had the sense that it was acceptable to intrude with a camera (*intrusion* is our concept, not theirs) and that they had the right to collect images as they did big-game trophies for consumption back home in London or Munich. They do not seem to have questioned whether it was appropriate for them to analyze and pass judgment on the validity of another culture.

Click [here](#) to view a sampling of anthropological photos from the 1912 *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*.

These attitudes certainly did not originate with the Victorians or even with anthropologists. Consider the methods of missionaries who, with their condescension and lack of respect for indigenous cultures, opened the door to all manner of indecencies from imperialism to the most heinous abuse, the slave trade. Though the Victorians were not unique in their practice of objectifying native peoples, they are the group whose photographs are the subject of this book, and therefore it is to them that this book encourages us to compare and contrast ourselves. Today, issues similar to the ones raised by *Anthropology and Photography* face photographers who must make instantaneous decisions about when it is ethically or morally acceptable to take a photo and when it is not.

In the more than ten years that my writer companion, Bob Richards, and I worked on a series of documentary photographs of Native American Indian groups, I needed to confront issues such as how the photographer's subjective choice of what and how to shoot a subject influence the validity and historical reality of the resulting photograph. I had to reflect on my preconceived notions about a subject culture that might affect my photography.

When I first had the opportunity to photograph Native Americans, my goal was to be open to the human particularity of the subject, to neither objectify the exotic nor to make some romanticized claim of universality. Doing research to prepare for the first assignment, I discovered that the existing photography of Native Americans mostly fell into two general categories. Either it was sickly sentimental — "noble savages" photographed as works of art, still lifes (what I came to call the "bowl of fruit" approach) — or it was an expose of downtrodden natives, living in poverty, stripped of their dignity by a rapacious European-American majority. This was guilt-trip photography. While there are elements of veracity in either approach to the problem of representing a cultural group, they are equally exploitive and de-humanizing to the people portrayed. My aim was to photograph — to the degree possible, without imposing my view — daily life as it unfolded before the camera without manipulation. That's a tall order but a worthwhile effort.

Working on a children's book together — our first and richly satisfying experience photographing the Chewiwi Family in Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico — led us to doing documentary work with other groups, Navajo, Sioux, and Seminole. In that later photography I came to terms with the questionable morality of intrusion, which I call the greed factor in photography. I was forced to admit to the aspect of aggression inherent in the medium. Even the language of photography is aggressive. We "take" a photo, "capture" a moment, "shoot" a picture.

This came home to me when I overstepped the implicit contract with some Navajo people who had agreed to be photographed and I pursued an image, "my" image, at the expense of the subject's peace of mind — as happened on the day when I virtually stalked young Margaret Whitehorse around a peach orchard trying to get her in the perfect light. Suddenly she stopped, wheeled, looked at me beseechingly, and said "enough." We were friends, but I had broken that contract and become a photographer stalking her prey. The pursuit attitude is common to the photographers we term *paparazzi*, but we documentary photographers and even photojournalists like to maintain the illusion that we are free of that base behavior.

The ethical dilemma that I encountered in my relationship with Margaret

Whitehorse has been a continuing argument in the contemporary photographic community. There are photojournalists who claim the right and duty to record all information for the good of society, exercising their valuable First Amendment rights as we depend upon them to do. Their contribution is valuable and their boldness gives the general public access to photographic insights which might otherwise be lost. But to some of them no intrusion is offensive if it yields a strong image.

Though these journalists might scoff at my reticence to push beyond a subject's sensibilities in order to capture a special moment, it is for each of us to set the boundaries of her work according to her own ethical standards and, when feasible, with the agreement of the subject. There will always be moments when a decision to shoot is made without consulting a subject — when the photographer makes a split-second judgment based on a visceral response.

Such an occasion came up for me when, after several weeks of working with a family there, Bob and I were invited to attend a funeral on the Rosebud Sioux land in South Dakota. I had been taking photographs at a discreet distance when the family and casket turned and headed toward me. Right in front of me the aged mother, supported by her sons, broke down in grief, making a strong, evocative image. My camera had been to my eye, but I dropped it instantly, without conscious thought. I simply stood quietly until the mother and her sons had passed. Had I been asked hypothetically I couldn't have predicted how I might have responded to that moment. While I "lost" a strong image, I don't think the value of that image to society-at-large outweighed the value of maintaining a sense of decency and leaving a grieving family with their dignity. My acquisitive need for a handsome photograph pitted against their privacy? Hardly a First Amendment issue!

In other cases there are dramatic, now world-famous photos, which arguably "had" to be taken, photographs without which we would lose an understanding of events otherwise beyond our ken. The Vietnam-War-era photo of a naked girl running from napalm is one; the photograph of the Kent State student crying out her anguish over the body of her slain friend is another. But these are photographs in the journalistic arena, not documentary or anthropological coverage of a cultural group where much more control over how we shoot is possible.

In documentary and anthropological photography it is particularly important to pose the question whether the subject benefits from the photograph. Having one's culture understood by society-at-large is of arguable value; though it can be accepted as a benefit, particularly by some of the younger people in a tribal group, it may still strike subjects as self-serving because they recognize that a photograph is of greatest value to the photographer. With many of the older people we met, we found that a trade or barter philosophy pertained.

Navajo James Whitehorse was appreciative when we drove him from his *hogan* home place on the top of Haskenninni Mesa to a trading post, fifty miles out of our way, where he could collect his winter's wool money. He showed his gratitude by directing us without explanation to drive another ten miles down a dirt track to a *hogan* where, after a hurried conference in Navajo with the head of the household, he announced, "Michal should come quickly and photograph a woman weaving." He knew that photographs of that scene were of value to me, so he offered it with the generous sense of balance that we encountered so often among the Navajo.

As photographers we make our ethical decisions and live by the results. If we do not consider the subject's sensibility or our responsibility to preserve a balance of power between the photographer and the photographed, our attitudes are little different from those of the Victorian photographers who were so sublimely comfortable in their right to dominate other cultures and to intrude with cameras as an adjunct of that domination — to "take" the photos along with the minerals and land.

*Anthropology and Photography* presents some fascinating images which

profoundly touch and hurt the viewer. They force us, whether or not we are photographers, to acknowledge our intrusive Western aggressiveness. Yet there are other photos in the book which show such astonishing beauty, such elegance, that they can only have resulted from a peaceful relationship between the subject and the camera. Such photographs display a photographer's openness — a willingness to establish a respectful mutual relationship with a subject. Such a relationship can go a long way to offset the acquisitive nature of photography.

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Pennella, Rosanne, ["Photographs from New Guinea."](#) *Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books*, Vol. 1, No. 2, November 2000 - February 2001.

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