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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Marr, Carolyn J.

Publication Date

1996-06-01

DOI

10.17953

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Marking Oneself: Use of Photographs by Native Americans of the Southern Northwest Coast

CAROLYN J. MARR

Photography has been in existence for approximately 130 years on the southern Northwest Coast. During this time, thousands of images of Native Americans have been produced, many of which are preserved in regional archives. These photographs were made by both professionals and amateurs who approached their subjects with a variety of motivations. The question of how the subjects responded to having their pictures taken is an important one that this author has explored in a previous paper.¹ In brief summary, responses varied considerably according to circumstances. One early twentieth-century historian traveling along the Washington coast described positive reactions by an individual of high rank posing for his camera.² The historian concluded that the subject felt his social position could be enhanced by a permanent likeness, especially if it included an object symbolizing his status. Other written sources describe reluctance and even aversion to being in front of the camera, especially among members of earlier generations.³ According to one contemporary source, many "old timers" still feel "nervous" about being photographed.⁴

One way to comprehend the differences in responses is to examine the situation in terms of social control. Although the

Carolyn J. Marr is a photographs librarian at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, Washington.

technology itself is neutral, the manner in which it is used is imbued with issues of power. Thus, a person who, of his or her own volition, chooses to be photographed has in some degree exercised control over the situation. A greater level of control is shown by the selection of clothing or objects that carry cultural meaning for the subject. Art historian Victoria Wyatt has studied the portraits made of native peoples by the commercial studio of Winter and Pond in Juneau, Alaska, and has demonstrated that in some cases the subjects chose to wear woven blankets or head-dresses because these items carried social prestige and cultural meaning.⁵ At the opposite end of the spectrum is the degrading situation where a subject appears to have been placed in front of the lens unwillingly. If one can extrapolate from the expressions and body postures recorded in some photographs, there has definitely been exploitation of native subjects by photographers in the past. Since most photographers were white males, they



PHOTO 1. We have only circumstantial evidence for interpreting this photograph. The owner of the album in which it appears was a civil engineer who worked on various projects on the Olympic Peninsula circa 1908–1910. There are several images in the album showing the same Native American woman and two children with three different white men, suggesting a racist joke being set up by the photographer. The woman is quite obviously avoiding the camera. Courtesy of Museum of History and Industry, Seattle. No. 90.71.

frequently picked Indian women as the targets of their racial jokes.

In this paper, I will focus not so much on the responses of the people being photographed as on how the resulting images came to be regarded and used by the Native Americans themselves. Underlying the discussion is still the issue of power and control, but in this case I wish to show how a group can exercise control by defining how images are used. The cultures included within the southern Northwest Coast are the Salishan- and Wakashan-speaking peoples of western Washington State and southwestern British Columbia.

Photography did not reach the southern Northwest Coast until the late 1850s and early 1860s. The first photographer to set up a studio in the fledgling town of Seattle arrived in 1864. To the north, in the trading center of Victoria, photographers were busy producing studio portraits as early as 1862, including *carte de visites* of Native Americans.⁶ In the more remote areas, itinerant photographers traveled from settlement to settlement, setting up temporary studios and making pictures for a price. These early portraits were usually daguerreotypes or the less costly tintypes.

When these nineteenth-century subjects sat for their likenesses, how did they refer to the image and the action in their own languages? By studying linguistics, we might gain some insight into how the new technology was initially regarded. In Lushootseed, the language of the Puget Sound Salish, the word for *photograph* is *ǰalacut*. The root *ǰal* means "mark, decorate; write,"⁷ and the suffix *-cut* signifies "myself, yourself, himself, itself, themselves." The word suggests that a photograph is a depiction that the subject has had made of himself. Both writing and photography are introduced elements that are related linguistically to the words for design or decoration. A basketry design is *ǰalalač*, for example. An *s* added to the beginning of the word *ǰalacut* makes it a noun, whereas without the *s* it is a verb. The same word is used for both still and motion pictures.

In the Makah language, part of the Wakashan family that extends from the northwestern corner of Washington State to the southwestern coast of Vancouver Island, the word for *photograph* is *č'ataqλc'u*, which translates "finished design" or "finished picture," the word for *picture* meaning "a drawing that is enclosed." The Makah word for *camera* is made by adding a suffix signifying "thing that is used for" to the word for *photograph*.⁸ Makah has an extensive vocabulary for many aspects of photographic technol-

ogy and apparatus, including *negative* ("thing you can see through," which is also used for *window*), *developing chemicals* (the same word is used for *poison*), *lens* ("thing you peek through"), *dark-room*, *flashbulb*, etc. The presence of at least two Makah photographers on the reservation during the early years of the twentieth century, along with the persistence of the native language, explains the large quantity of terms.

To the north of the Makah and Puget Sound Salish, the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands used a term for *camera* that means "copying people," related linguistically to their term for *mask*.⁹ Haida carvers traditionally made portrait masks, some of which bear a striking resemblance to their subjects. The presence of a portrait mask tradition among the Haida meant that photography found a precedent in carving. On the southern Northwest Coast, representational masks were not intended to be portraits. Makah humanoid masks made for dance ceremonials are heavily stylized and do not represent a particular individual.¹⁰ The Musqueam of the lower Fraser River made carvings that were said to be renditions of famous ancestors, but the depiction is very abstract.¹¹ Much of Coast Salish carving was inspired by the concept of an individual's guardian spirit power. Guardian spirit figures were carved on house posts and represented the spirit powers of the owner. These objects were sacred and had to be protected from outsiders. The Upper Skagit prohibited photographers from taking pictures of their houses for fear that a carved post might be included.¹² Given the religious context of carved figures among the peoples of the southern Northwest Coast, photography was related in vocabulary to the secular arts of basketry and picture-making rather than to woodcarving.

The words created by the speakers of these native languages for photography relate the new phenomenon to a previous tradition, a design, as in a design woven into a basket for the Puget Sound Salish or, in the case of the Haida, to a three-dimensional carving tradition. In both situations, the depiction of an individual is of primary significance. The concept of photograph is synonymous with portrait. Another example comes from Chinook jargon, the trade language used by groups throughout the Northwest Coast to communicate with each other and with non-Indians, in which the term for *photograph* translates as "*face picture*."¹³ The idea of a landscape view is not referenced within these terminologies. Of course, the earliest photographs seen would have been portraits, probably daguerreotypes, as mentioned earlier. But more impor-



PHOTO 2. Anthropologist Homer G. Barnett observed several Cowichan potlatches at which participants used photographs of deceased individuals. At this naming ceremony taking place near Duncan, B.C. in 1913, a framed photograph of a woman is being held up while the young boy and girl receive their names. The portrait probably represents the person whose name the girl is receiving. Photograph by W.A. Newcombe; courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum. No. PN 1499.

tant than the chronology is the fact that photography becomes integrated into native cultures precisely because it can produce a representation of a person.

The first widespread usage of photographs recorded by ethnographers was in commemorative ceremonies. In 1913, Homer G. Barnett observed a commemorative potlatch among the Cowichan of Vancouver Island and described how figures made from cloth representing the deceased had been replaced by photographs.¹⁴ When photographs were used, "they were wrapped up in a mountain goat wool blanket, which added a sacred element and perhaps protected the visitors from spiritual powers until the appropriate moment when the photograph was unwrapped and displayed." At this time, the host announced the names of those people being honored and began to sing the "cry song." Mountain goat wool has the dual role of indicating the sacred nature of the ceremony and shielding the people from

spiritual forces, as seen also in the clothing and accouterments used by the Salish during many religious occasions. At the Cowichan memorial potlatch, a distribution of property followed the unwrapping of the image, and the men who had held up and displayed the picture were paid a double blanket each for their work.

At another potlatch held by the Cowichan and described by Barnett, a photograph was taken by Reverend Tate, an amateur photographer with an interest in native customs. The occasion was a naming ceremony for a boy and a girl. Both are dressed in mountain goat wool and stand inside a canoe. Next to them a man holds up a framed photograph of a woman, presumably the individual who owned the name being bestowed upon the girl. The ceremony validates the transfer of this name, a form of property valued by the Salish, from one individual to another. As in the commemorative potlatch, the photograph is being used to portray the deceased, giving a tangible representation of that participant in the ceremony.

The use of photographs in commemorative potlatches continues to this day. In 1987, a ceremony took place at the Swinomish Reservation for Fred Cayou, Sr., who had passed away four years previously.¹⁵ One thousand people gathered to sing Cayou's *seyowen* song one last time, and then sent it to join him in the spirit world. The singers carried pictures of Cayou around the smokehouse while chanting in slow procession. There were two images: Cayou the handsome soldier in an army uniform, and Cayou the Indian painted on a drum. The new initiates of the smokehouse religion were not permitted to gaze at the pictures, because they were considered too fragile in spirit. According to a participant, "The person who has died might take their power from them. . . . They are not strong enough to hang onto it." Here again we see that the community is shielding the vulnerable from imagery that is instilled with symbolic power, as in the Cowichan ceremony when the photographs were kept wrapped up until the proper preparations had been made.

The association of photography with funeral customs occurs in many cultures, including nineteenth-century Victorian society. In the Salish example, the photograph takes on an identity of its own in its ritual imitation of life. The image of an individual has a certain power by virtue of its close representation of that person's being. The dual imagery used in the Swinomish ceremony is particularly intriguing. The soldier image symbolized one aspect

of the person's identity, while the painting on the drum represented another side.

Another ceremonial use of photographs took place in 1989 when a mother hosted a give-away service to honor her deceased son at the Indian Shaker Church on the Muckleshoot Reservation.¹⁶ With money that she had saved for more than a year, the mother purchased blankets, cups, dish towels, toys, and framed pictures of her son's closest friends to distribute to the guests. This gesture symbolized the giving away of her grief. As part of the service she also passed around a photograph of her son, "so that the guests could better remember him." Here the photographs were chosen because of their close identification with the deceased and, in this instance, with his close acquaintances.

The taking of photographs at ceremonial occasions, whether with a still camera or a camcorder, is strictly regulated among Native American groups today. There are genuine concerns about protecting a family's rights to inherited songs and dances, similar to what we might consider copyright infringement. In addition, the prohibition of unwanted photography is a way to preserve the sacredness of certain occasions, much like the wishes of the Upper Skagit to protect their guardian spirit house posts from being photographed by outsiders.

The persistent prohibition of photography during rituals explains the paucity of documentary images. Only a handful of photographs of these events exists. One example serves to illustrate how the subjects being photographed controlled an otherwise negative situation. In 1920, a series of photographs was taken by an anthropologist of a Snoqualmie Spirit Canoe Ceremony. In one picture, four men demonstrate an important segment of the ceremony known as "lifting up the daylight." They are using boards that were carved and painted on commission from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York. The boards were made two-thirds of their normal size. The men posed for the photographs because the money from the sale of the boards was to be used to pay for legal work for the Snoqualmie tribe.¹⁷

The Spirit Canoe Ceremony traditionally was performed at night for the retrieval of souls that had been lost or stolen and had gone to the underworld. It was a healing ceremony, for when the lost soul was retrieved, usually after several nights, the person recovered from his or her illness. In analyzing the series of photographs, one should know that the men demonstrating the



PHOTO 3. These Snoqualmie men are demonstrating one segment of the Puget Sound Salish Spirit Canoe Ceremony, a ritual for traveling to the land of the dead to retrieve lost or stolen souls. If this had been an actual ceremony, it would not have been performed outdoors or in the summer. The demonstrators are posing for the benefit of an anthropologist who commissioned the making of the carved and painted boards. Photograph by Douglas Leechman, courtesy of Thomas Burke Museum, Seattle.

ceremony were not practicing shamans who would have been performing the ceremony. Rather, they were devout members of the Indian Shaker Church, a religion that combines native healing practices with Christian beliefs. An accompanying set of photographs taken by the same photographer shows the four men, this time together with their families, taking the characteristic Shaker pose with upraised right hand. In point of fact, the pose for the anthropologist was done in response to an agreement to demonstrate how the objects being purchased for a museum collection would have been used. It was not a real ceremony but a replication, lacking both a purpose—the healing of the sick—and a context, having taken place during the day in a nonsacred place.

The group portrait with the Shaker pose was probably agreed to by the subjects because they wished to show allegiance to their new religion. Other images from various parts of the region document the Shaker faith, but not their ceremonies. It is evident from the deliberate posing in these group portraits that the subjects wish to represent themselves as members of the Indian Shaker Church.

In addition to the broad category of ceremonial use, the second area in which photographs play an important role is kinship documentation. The growing popularity of photographs among tribal groups can be seen in pictures taken at trade fairs. At the Tulalip Indian Fair of 1916, for example, framed portraits are displayed along with handmade blankets, baskets, and quilts.



PHOTO 4. The individuals in this photograph include the men demonstrating the Spirit Canoe Ceremony in the previous image. Here they show upraised hands in a pose adopted by members of the Indian Shaker Church. Taken on the same day, this image may have been their way of expressing their true religious convictions. Photograph by Douglas Leechman, courtesy of Thomas Burke Museum, Seattle.



PHOTO 5. At an Indian Fair held at Tulalip, Washington, framed photographs are displayed along with an assortment of handcrafted items: cedar root baskets, a cattail mat, knotted socks and quilts. Photograph by Ferdinand Brady, courtesy of Museum of History and Industry. No. 88.11.15.

Photographs of relatives are highly treasured today as in the past. Many Indian homes contain large displays of framed pictures covering the walls and furniture. As a photo archivist, I receive many requests from individuals searching for pictures of their relatives, and I believe the value placed on family photographs is related to the teachings of the elders. As one Snohomish woman related, her grandmother spent many hours explaining to her who her ancestors were, repeating their names in the native language over and over again so the child would remember. The grandmother explained that in later years people would ask who her ancestors were, and it was important that she have this knowledge. With the introduction of photography, a visual element was added to this preservation of genealogy. A newspaper reporter doing a story on the descendants of

Chief Seattle in the 1950s recorded a scene of descendants Amelia Sneatlum and her daughter holding a portrait of their ancestor.

One photographer at the turn of the century exploited the cultural value placed on kinship knowledge by telling potential subjects,



PHOTO 6. Two descendants of Chief Seattle, Amelia Sneatlum and her daughter Marie, hold up a portrait of their famous relative. This photograph was taken by a journalist visiting the family at Tulalip and visibly demonstrates the power of imagery in making kinship connections. Photograph by Ernst Bertelson, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Washington Library. No. NA 1626.

By and by when all my tilikums have [gone] to join the Great Saghalie in the sky, then little children will come to me and ask . . . "You know my grandmother? What did she look like?" I say "come in" and show picture of their grandmother. Then they know how grandmother look.¹⁸

This line may have worked on some folks, and a token payment further convinced the more reluctant. Of course, what the photographer really wanted was to get a picture that would sell in the local souvenir galleries, but he found it more convenient to explain his purpose in terms of preserving family images.

The taking of salable Indian pictures was an activity akin to collecting Indian artifacts. Both the objects and the images were removed from their cultural context and displayed as curios by Euro-Americans. Like the artifact collector, the photographer sought the old, the untainted. The same photographer quoted above wanted to get a picture of an old woman, barefoot, digging clams on the shore, and he was perplexed when she asked to be photographed in her best Sunday dress in front of her house, sitting in a chair next to her husband. She consented to being photographed as a clam digger only if she could also be photographed in the manner in which she wished to present herself. To most photographers, one Indian easily could be substituted for another; their true identities meant little to the curio collector. This attitude resulted in a large number of unidentified portraits in archives today. For the Native American, the identity of the subject is key, and the hundreds of unidentified people are a sad reminder of how their ancestors were treated.

In recent years many tribal groups have made concerted efforts to recover images taken of them and their ancestors in the past. Numerous worthwhile projects have been undertaken to collect and document photographs. Libraries, archives, and historical societies have been contacted and private collections searched. Since technology allows for many types of duplication of photographs, it has been possible for the tribes to amass photographic collections. The crucial step is obtaining identification and other information about the photographs from elders who remember the historical context. Cooperation between the tribes and public institutions has been beneficial to both parties, since the information gathered during these projects adds greatly to the value of the photographs.

In 1981 I was introduced to a remarkable set of photographs taken of the Makah by one of the Indian agents at Neah Bay, Samuel G. Morse. Because of this man's skill with the camera and

his presence there over a span of time, this collection represents a fairly complete documentary for the tribe at the turn of the century. The resulting exhibit and book were produced by the Makah Cultural and Research Center and the Washington State Historical Society as a cooperative venture.¹⁹

In 1992 I attended a memorial dinner at Neah Bay given for a photographer who had made several documentary films about the Makah and whose pictures illustrate several books.²⁰ Many attendees expressed gratitude for this gentleman and his work. One woman said that the film showing her departed relatives is a priceless treasure. A young man expressed wonder at how the photographer could take pictures of their ordinary, everyday lives and "make them look beautiful." These people who possess a strong and ancient oral tradition now have an extraordinary appreciation for the visual record as well.

Kwagiutl photographer David Neel's publications are examples of how photographic imagery can be used by Native Americans to preserve and interpret their own histories. Neel's intention has been to counteract images of the "vanishing Indian," taken by non-Indian photographers of the past, with his own documents of a proud and surviving race. His portraits, which show leaders in ceremonial regalia as well as everyday clothes, point out the many facets of their lives. By including statements made by his subjects, Neel emphasizes the collaborative nature of the project, wherein both photographer and subject have been given a realm of expression. No doubt in the years to come we will see an increasing use of photography among native groups—both interpretive displays of historical photographs and thoughtful works by contemporary photographers.

NOTES

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