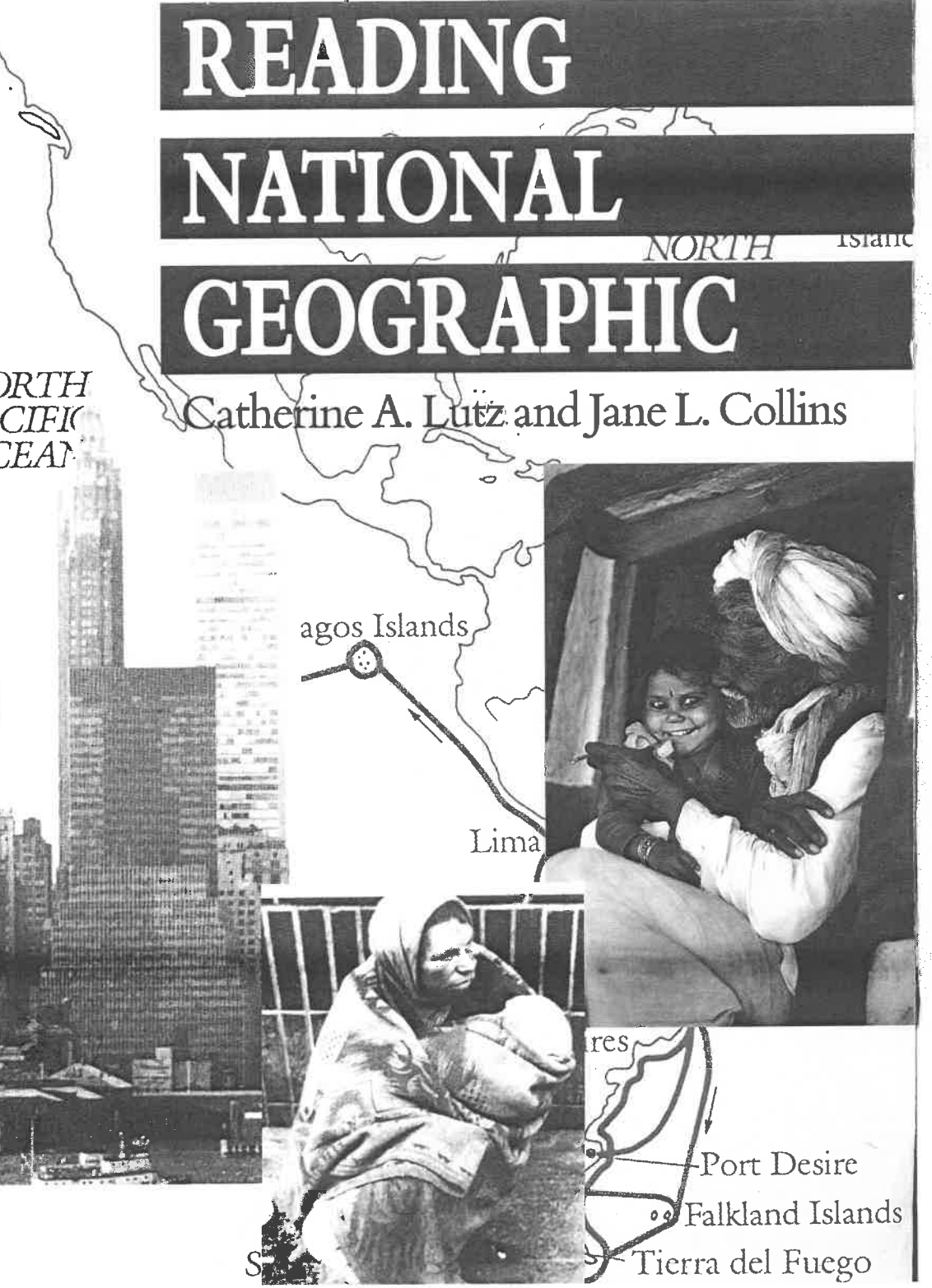
READING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins



For its millions of readers, the *National Geographic* has long been a window to the world of exotic peoples and places. In this fascinating account of an American institution, Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins explore the possibility that the magazine, in purporting to teach us about distant cultures, actually tells us much more about our own.

Lutz and Collins take us inside the National Geographic Society to investigate how its photographers, editors, and designers select images and text to produce representations of Third World cultures. Through interviews with the editors, they describe the process as one of negotiating standards of "balance" and "objectivity," informational content and visual beauty. Then, in a close reading of some six hundred photographs, they examine issues of race, gender, privilege, progress, and modernity through an analysis of the way such things as color, pose, framing, and vantage point are used in representations of non-Western peoples. Finally, through extensive interviews with readers, the authors assess how the cultural narratives of the magazine are received and interpreted, and identify a tension between the desire to know about other peoples and their ways and the wish to validate middle-class American values.

The result is a complex portrait of an institution and its role in promoting a kind of conservative humanism that acknowledges universal values and celebrates diversity while it allows readers to relegate non-Western peoples to an earlier stage of progress. We see the magazine and the Society as a key middlebrow arbiter of taste, wealth, and power in America, and we get a telling glimpse into middle-class American culture and all the wishes, assumptions, and fears it brings to bear on our armchair explorations of the world.

"This is an original and ambitious book, written with a combination of courage and theoretical sophistication. It takes anthropology into areas where the field needs to go."—Elizabeth Traube, Wesleyan University

"It is creative, engaged books like this one, which link theory to practice and the academy to national, racial, and sexual politics, that restore one's faith in the human sciences."—Lucien Taylor, Editor, *Visual Anthropology Review*

CATHERINE A. LUTZ, associate professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of *Unnatural Emotions*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.
JANE L. COLLINS is associate professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin.

READING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

Four

A World Brightly Different: Photographic Conventions 1950–1986

To make an exact image is to insure against disappearance, to cannibalize life until it is safely and permanently a specular image, a ghost.

(Haraway 1984/85:42)

The result of the production practices and institutional history just described is a rich and voluminous corpus of magazine issues and photographs. Even decades-old issues of the magazine have a significant continuing life. Millions of copies are archived in public libraries, and millions more inhabit the bookshelves and attics of private homes. Current copies are scattered liberally across America's coffee tables and doctors' waiting rooms. This corpus has, then, both historical significance and contemporary impact. To understand it, we begin with an analysis of the surface content of the photos. We ask how people in other lands have been depicted, what they have been photographed doing, and how the photo has been composed. The goals of this exploration are to describe the genre, to glean some clues as to the models of difference held by the producers of the magazine, and to relate both of these aspects to historical sociocultural processes and changes of the postwar period.

In the next four chapters, we look at photographs as they relate to each other (that is, the set of *National Geo-*

graphic magazines of the period) and to their historical and social context (the United States since 1950). We develop our own critical sense of the photograph as an artifact that can be analyzed with some reference to—but not reducible to—its makers' institutional context, constraints, intentions, and unconscious motives on the one hand, or, on the other, its readers' construction of meaning. In reading the photographs in this way, we have drawn on the insights of the social historians and theoreticians of images, including especially Benjamin (1985), Gaines (1988), Geary (1988), Graham-Brown (1988), Modleski (1988), Sekula (1981), Shapiro (1988), Sontag (1977), Tagg (1988), Traube (1989), and Williamson (1978).[1] These scholars have drawn our attention to the many ways in which photographs signify—through formal elements such as color, composition, and vantage point; through narrative structure, including what is internal to the shot and what results from setting photographs in a sequence; through specific items in photo and caption that relate directly to cultural ideas and phenomena outside the picture; through their position in a cultural hierarchy that includes art, television, and consumer goods; and through their ability to assume or ignore, to evoke or discount, their readers' social experience and values.

In addition to this kind of analysis of individual *Geographic* photographs, we took a large set from the period 1950 through 1986 and systematically asked a series of questions about each. We chose this period because we wanted to trace effects of the decolonization process and the Vietnam War. Another consideration was that only after World War II did a large number of people contribute to each issue. Photographs before the war reflect individual as much as truly institutional behavior.

Our method consisted of randomly sampling one photograph from each of the 594 articles featuring non-Western people published in that period.[2] Each photo was coded independently by two people for twenty-

1. It is perhaps not surprising that much of the most insightful work on the relationship between images and society has been done in the two areas of advertising (among others, Ewen 1988; Goffman 1979; Williamson 1978) and "documentary" photography. In this latter area, the bulk of the work done has been on early documentary photos in the U.S. and Europe (Moeller 1989; Tagg 1988; Trachtenberg 1989) and of tribal peoples (Geary 1988; Green 1984; Graham-Brown 1988; Lyman 1982).

2. "Non-Western" countries were defined as all areas outside of North America and Europe (the latter including Greece and Turkey). While Canada, Alaska, and the Soviet Union were generally excluded from our consideration, we did include articles on indigenous people of these areas. Articles on native peoples in the United States were not included because they constitute a very special group of people for magazine producers and readers alike. In taking our sample, we used only photographs in which a person was visible (more than a dot in a distant landscape).

3. The coders were ourselves and a graduate student in anthropology. Extensive preliminary coding led to revision and expansion of initial versions of the code sheet. After a final code sheet was decided upon, initial agreement between coders occurred for 86 percent of all decisions. Discussion between coders was subsequently used to resolve disagreements. The photographic features coded are described in Appendix A.

two characteristics (see Appendix A), many of which will be described and analyzed in the following chapters.[3] Although at first blush it might appear counterproductive to reduce the rich material in any photograph to a small number of codes, quantification does not preclude or substitute for qualitative analysis of the pictures. It does allow, however, discovery of patterns that are too subtle to be visible on casual inspection and protection against an unconscious search through the magazine for only those which confirm one's initial sense of what the photos say or do.

An important set of themes runs through all *National Geographic* renderings of the non-Euramerican world. The people of the third and fourth worlds are portrayed as *exotic;* they are *idealized;* they are *naturalized* and taken out of all but a single historical narrative; and they are *sexualized.* Several of these themes wax and wane in importance through the postwar period, but none is ever absent. While each region, country, or ethnic group has received some distinctive treatment, the magazine's global orientation means that readers may be likely to see all regions, even those occasionally not so depicted, as exotic, ideal, and so on. Together these themes establish *National Geographic*'s style of coverage, and they have, over the course of a century, helped to set an important cornerstone of its readers' definitions of the world. By looking more closely at some of these features of the photos, we can begin to see how the process of world definition is achieved.

An Exotic World

The eye of *National Geographic,* like the eye of anthropology, looks for cultural difference. It is continually drawn to people in brightly colored, "different" dress, engaged in initially strange-seeming rituals or inexplicable behavior. This exoticism involves the creation of an other who is

strange but—at least as important—beautiful. At other times and in other media outlets, the exoticism of other people has been framed visually and verbally as less beautiful and more absurdly or derisively different. Movies, television news, and other postwar cultural artifacts have frequently trafficked in revolting ethnic difference. Take, for example, the evil penumbra painted around the eventually self-immolating Arabs in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" or the pathos and ugliness communicated by news images of Latin American poverty or Ethiopia's starvation (see also Postone and Traube 1986). These kinds of ugliness are relatively rare in the *National Geographic*.

The exotic other is by definition attractive, albeit in a special, threefold sense. When the camera looks for the unusual, it ensures a reader whose attention is riveted by the intriguing scene. It draws attention, at least implicitly, to things that define "us" in our unmarked and usual state of humanness, that is, as people who dress and act in "standard" ways. It also creates a distance that the magazine may or may not have attempted to bridge in other ways. The distance is a product of making the pictured person a kind of spectacle, the latter defined as something that both demands attention and "offers an imagistic surface of the world as a strategy of containment against any depth of involvement with that world" (Polan 1986b:63). One of the effects of the emphasis on spectacle is to discredit the significance of the foreign, even to create a sense of its fictitiousness.

A World of Ritual. No single feature renders the third world exotic more forcefully than the magazine's focus on ritual. Nearly one-fifth of all photographs with non-Westerners in them feature people engaged in or preparing for a ritual—ritual being defined in the narrow sense of sacred and formally organized group behavior. These pictures are among the most dramatic in the magazine, often chosen by the editors to spread across two pages in brilliant polychrome. A director in the photography department explained that all photographers naturally gravitate to ritual events because color and action make for intrinsically more interesting material. The interest also derives from cultural themes and helps reproduce them. The non-Westerner comes to be portrayed as a ritual performer, embedded (perhaps some would read encrusted) in tradition and living in a sacred (some would say superstitious) world. This is an emphasis that *National Geographic* has shared with earlier photography of the non-Western world, whose focus on ritual "reflected the assumption

of Boas's generation that ritual contained distilled history and cultural wisdom, that it was the most conservative and thus the most meaningful remnant of culture" (Banta and Hinsley 1986:106). In other instances, this focus on non-Western ritual can be consistent with a view of the other as superstitious or irrational and might be responsible for contempt for the native mind (Drinnon 1980:442). *National Geographic* appears not to have taken this perspective, at least in the postwar period and in relation to the world's "great religions."

Much of the text accompanying pictures of ritual in the *National Geographic* makes explicit reference to an area's rituals and religion(s) as part of a long, ancient tradition. So the caption to a 1962 photograph of a New Guinea marriage feast notes that "tribal life still lies locked in millenniums-old patterns." Context for a Tibetan shaman at prayer in a 1977 photo is provided by a caption which asserts that "the ancient Tibetan way of life . . . combines animism with the teachings of Buddha." The magazine tends to downplay a ritual's contemporary actuality and the historical changes that preceded its current form, although religious syncretism is often highlighted as a special kind of contrast narrative. Fascination with ritual stems from the sense that it is a key to the past and a sign of the trip through time taken by the photographer and writer. Anthropology has made parallel connections between past time and other people (Fabian 1983; Price 1989). Two primary features of exoticism—living close to the sacred or supernatural and living with the past—are actually combined in many of these pictures. By presenting the ritual as a feature of custom or tradition, these pictures can also have, for many readers, the unintended effect of flattening the emotional life of the people depicted. This is because the ritual procession can be seen as a routine that people follow rather than as an expression of individual and group faith. The funeral becomes a moment of cultural display (of special paraphernalia or dress, as well as custom more generally) rather than a moment of grief (Rosaldo 1989).

Indexical Dress. In more than half of the photographs in the sample set, the non-Westerner is shown in indigenous dress, tribal fashion, and/or ritual costume. The *National Geographic* searches out native clothing in its most elaborate form. The Indian woman is often dressed not simply in an everyday sari, but in a gold-embroidered one, and she is festooned with jewelry. A Tibetan couple in the July 1955 issue stand, arms down, in a full-front portrait with little in the background or

The narrative structure of photographs is often organized around an undiluted display of indigenous dress, which indexes exotic cultural difference, as in this 1954 photo of a Masai woman. (Photo: W. Robert Moore, © National Geographic Society)

their gestures to distract from their bright silk and brocade outfits. A photograph such as that of a Masai woman (1954) is cropped so as to narrate a story about native styles of dress.

Exotic dress alone often stands for an entire alien life-style, locale, or mind-set. This is true not only of the *National Geographic* but of other Western photographic work on the third world as well. Local costume suggests something about the social stability and timelessness of the people depicted (Graham-Brown 1988), and in a story drawing attention to the social transformation of a people, changes from native to western-

style dress are often highlighted by photographs that set locals in the two styles of dress in explicit contrast. A photo from the January 1983 *Geographic* shows young South American Indians dancing, some in native skirts and loincloths, some in jeans and T-shirts. A central story of the picture, told by way of dress, is of an encounter or passage between an exotic cultural pattern and a familiar one. The Western observer is likely to see Western dress as saying something about the mind-set of the person wearing those clothes. The man in Western dress can be understood as desiring social change, material progress, and Westernization in other spheres. Exotic dress can stand for a premodern attitude, Western dress for a forward-looking Western orientation.

The highlighting of native dress contributes not only to a view of others as different, but also to their framing as picturesque and erotic, beautiful and sexually alluring (Graham-Brown 1988:118). The orange silks and fur-trimmed shirts of the local elite wrap whole peoples in an imagined sensuality and luxurious beauty. Because differences in dress can easily be interpreted as questions of style and because they draw attention away from such matters as conflict of interest, they make the entire notion of difference among people easily digestible (Bolton 1990:269). Difference becomes assimilable to the idea of taste, and, like that concept, allows the renaming of poverty as "bad taste" and unlike values as matters of consumer choice.

The focus on native dress in *National Geographic* shows some fluctuations during the postwar period, dropping slowly over two decades to 44 percent of the total in 1970. A sudden reversal of this trend put the figure at 63 percent in the early seventies, but that increase was again steadily eroded through the next fifteen years. It is not until the mid-eighties that the proportion of native dress found in photographs reached the lower levels of the late sixties. The editors of the magazine now face a substantial challenge in how they will deal with the theme of exoticism as differences in dress play less and less into defining cultural difference and as more and more tourists have already seen the dress and the festivals that have done the work of painting an exotic other.

The Role of Color Photography. Contemporary *National Geographic* photographs display vibrant, striking colors. Advanced printing techniques now allow ink to be laid down in such a way that color virtually hovers above the glossy page. Giving the magazine its allure and self-definition, color has distinctive qualities both for those who take the

pictures and those who read them. Polan (1986a) contrasts the glamorous and wish-fulfilling qualities of color with the mundane factuality suggested by black and white. Advertising photos have, since the 1950s, almost always been made in color, while news photography has until recently almost always been reproduced in black and white. Through these practices, color has become the language of consumption and plenty, black and white the conduit of facts, often spare or oppressive. Color is the vehicle of spectacle, black and white of the depth of facts behind the screen. Accordingly, for journalists and some artists, color photography came to be seen as "frivolous and shallow," black and white, with its focus on light and shape, as "more artistic and creative" (Bryan 1987:295).

On the whole, however, color photography has been perfectly suited to the *National Geographic* project of presenting an exotically peopled world. While photographs of animals, geological formations, and American and European subjects are also, of course, presented in color, color in relation to people in exotic places can and does lend different potential meaning to a photograph. The color of an orange shirt on an American man can be absorbed as a visual pleasure in itself, while orange-colored robes on a Buddhist monk might become "saffron" in caption or in the reader's imagination, thereby underlining cultural difference.

Some photos continued to appear in black and white into the period we are examining, particularly through 1960,[4] and it is instructive to note what subjects the editors have tended to portray in black and white when its use was declining. A significant number of these pictures show the Western narrator of the article, often explorer or anthropologist. It is almost as though the black-and-white photo says, "This is a person of a distinct type, standing to his 'colored' brethren as the factual black and white does to the fantasy, multicolor shot." Here, more clearly than elsewhere, the Western observer or explorer is portrayed as scientist, whose presence needs to be reported but whose appearance need not be examined in detail. Rarely treated in black and white are the ritual, the spectacle par excellence; and the portrait, a study of personality, the "colorful" individual.[5] Declining use can also mean that a black-and-white photo is likely to be interpreted as an old photo by contemporary readers.

4. Of the 568 sample pictures containing non-Westerners, 65 are in black and white.

5. Ritual tends to be depicted in color ($x^2 = 3.008$, df = 1, p = .083); only three of fifty portraits are shown in black and white.

Idealizations: From Noble Savage to a Middle-class World

The American Museum of Natural History bears striking similarities to the *National Geographic* magazine (on the former, see Haraway 1984/85). Both began as scientific institutions in the last third of the nineteenth century, with the aim of collecting natural artifacts from around the world and making them available to a public much wider than an educated or scientific elite. Both made extensive use of photographs, and both were concerned to present nature as highly ordered rather than random, creating, in effect, a world without blemish or handicap. Just as the Museum's dioramas never included old or feeble exemplars of elephants or zebras, so too has *National Geographic* presented, until the late 1970s, photographs that virtually eliminate the ill, the pockmarked, the deformed, or the hungry.

The idealization of the non-Westerner, like the idealization of nature, has its roots in the magazine's explicit editorial policy. More broadly, we can see this beautification of the world's people as linked to a number of themes in American cultural history. The first is the notion that nature represented a spiritual domain in which the ills of civilization could be cured (Nash 1982). Since at least some non-Western people were subsumed under the category natural rather than cultural, their perfection and beauty would be represented. There are in the magazine traces of the nineteenth-century religious scientism in which nature was considered divine. These pieties, once centered in the wilderness concept and now in some kinds of environmentalism, echo Schiller's statement, "Everything that nature achieves is divine" (cited in Monti 1987:80). The ambivalence toward modernity that arose with the new middle class at the turn of the century (Lears 1981) could also be played out in these views of beauty and nature in a simpler, more natural overseas world.

Another factor in idealizing is an anxiety about threats of chaos or decay. An ideal world, free of suffering, does not require work to bring about change. Connectedness and responsibility are downplayed, as the world's peoples become aesthetic objects to appreciate. The act of appreciating them lets the viewer see himself or herself as both humane (because the photographed are still recognized as people) and as cultured (because the photograph is like a museum piece, a work of art). The

beauty of these pictures can also be seen, as Haraway (1984/85) points out for nature photography and taxidermy and as Stewart (1984) points out for the souvenir, as the attempt to simultaneously arrest time and decay and to allay elite and middle-class fears that the wealth of the American twentieth century might be lost.

Finally, in looking for and finding perfection, the *National Geographic* camera may prevent the reader from finding the exotic other *too* different. Motivated by its classic humanism, the *Geographic* has cleaned up the culturally different person in the same way that other photographers have created images of gays and lesbians in America, presenting "clean-cut, shiny-haired, Land's End *citizens with a difference*" (Grover 1990:168). The move to create a beautiful image can stir up new problems, however, for the search for beauty can produce an intensification of the "fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust" (Rose 1986:227) that might accompany much visual experience.

We can now consider some of the techniques by which the magazine achieves its idealization of others.

The Smile. Though *National Geographic* editors see themselves as documenting naturally occurring behavior, the non-Westerners they photograph often acknowledge and turn to the camera. Twenty percent of all pictures have at least one foreground figure looking at the camera, and almost one-third of all photos show one or more people smiling. The smile, like the portrait, follows cultural conventions in defining and depicting the person. The smiling, happy person evokes the goal of the pursuit of happiness, written into the Declaration of Independence. These conventions stand in marked contrast to other ethnopsychologies (Lutz 1988) and other, more serious modes of composing the self for the photograph (King 1985). The smile is a key way of achieving idealization of the other, permitting the projection of the ideal of the happy life.

Portraiture. The portrait often aims to capture the subject at that person's best; because it is posed, it allows for maximum control by both photographer and subject. Moreover, the goal of humanizing the other—giving the reader a sense that these are real people—is furthered when people are photographed as individuals and encountered as readable faces. *National Geographic* staff, recognizing the value of the portrait, makes it a staple of virtually all articles. Nine percent of the photos we

examined show a person close up and often outside of a recognizable context, and this percentage has remained relatively constant.[6] Many of the photographs that *National Geographic* staff have selected as classic examples of photographs of the non-West are portraits. Portraits frequently adorn the walls of editorial offices; they are heavily reproduced in the book *Images of the World* (1981), which was published to define and celebrate *National Geographic* photographers; and they dominate in a centennial article on the magazine's photography (Livingston 1988). Of the twenty photographs in the article, which describes an exhibit in 1988 of *National Geographic* photos at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., thirteen were of people, and nine of those were portraits.

The portrait allows for scrutiny of the person, the search for and depiction of character. It gives the ideology of individualism full play, inviting the belief that the individual is first and foremost a personality whose characteristics can be read from facial expression and gesture. In a related, although seemingly incongruous way, the portrait may also communicate a message of universal brotherhood. Many at the Geographic might agree with Cartier-Bresson's assessment of portraits: "They enable us to trace the sameness of man" (Galassi 1987). They do this by stripping away culture and leaving the universal, individual person.

Benjamin (1985:682) notes that portraits were very popular when the camera was first invented as part of a "cult of remembrance," a kind of ancestor worship. The *National Geographic* portrait may likewise be related to what Rosaldo (1989) calls imperialist nostalgia, that is, mourning the passing of what we ourselves have destroyed. But the *National Geographic* portrait, like all close-ups of only a part of the body, leaves us with a fragment of a person. According to Mulvey, the close-up "gives flatness [and] the quality of a cut-out or icon" (1985:809) to the depicted. This can sometimes be amplified by the namelessness and exoticism of the photographed non-Westerners in past *National Geographics*.

The portrait, then, has potentially paradoxical or different effects on viewers, highlighting the other as a personality, that central feature of the Western self, which yet remains unnamed, unapproachable, and fragmented. The portrait humanizes and yet constantly threatens to be ab-

6. The portrait is a popular form of photography in all genres. The portrait in *National Geographic* is relatively *uncommon* in comparison with family and advertising photos, which prominently feature the face or full-body posed portrait. Further research might reveal whether and how these differences in portrait rates occur by subject and genre.

sorbed into a taxonomic outcome—the mode of much previous photographic work on non-Westerners, which has "presented[ed] them as ethnic types rather than individuals" (Geary 1988:50).

Group Size. When going beyond the portrait, the *National Geographic* still prefers to photograph non-Westerners in small groups. Almost sixty percent of the sample photos show people in intimate groups of one to three persons, twenty-five percent in medium-size groups of four to twelve, and less than seventeen percent in large groups. Although *National Geographic*'s photographic subjects were rarely named until the 1980s (the exceptions were famous figures such as Imelda Marcos or King Hussein), individuals and small groups are nonetheless often depicted in what might be read as rugged individualist stances. An African man is shown working alone plowing a field; a Japanese couple in their fishing boat reel in a heavy net. By contrast, print and television photojournalism often shows large groups engaged in mass protests and the like, limiting small group photos to celebrities or the elite. Individuals or small groups appearing in other photojournalism often come in "human interest" stories, where they may include families undergoing a calamity such as a fire or earthquake.

Gentle Natives and Wars Without Brutalized Bodies. In keeping with the stated policy of showing people at their best, very few *National Geographic* photographs show their subjects engaged in, being victimized by, or in the obvious aftermath of violent encounters. Only four photographs from the entire sample show local people fighting or threatening to fight or giving evidence of previous violence. This does not necessarily indicate that the American audience for these images sees violence or militarism as negative; it may, though, when the violence is perpetrated or threatened by foreigners. Thus, to show *these* people at their best requires a nonaggressive subject. Western photographers in other periods and genres have also hesitated to record militant non-Westerners, as when German photographers hesitated to depict King Njoya of central Africa in uniform during a period of anticolonial tension after 1909 (Geary 1988:53–59). In fully twelve percent of our sample photographs, however, there is some military presence, particularly men in uniform. In these photos, the military is presented as a regular, not unpleasant part of everyday life in the third world, but is rarely seen in internal or

cross-national conflict. The military as an institutional force has been normalized, anger or aggression erased.

The *National Geographic* represses what some other representations of non-Westerners prominently feature—the violent potential of the savage other. Aggressivity could be and has been seen as a sign of regression, a primitive loss of control (Gilman 1985:99). Violent resistance to empire building, American or European, has usually been treated as a personality trait of natives rather than a situational response to the theft of land or other mode of attack (Drinnon 1980). This view of aggression as lack of control has led to non-Westerners being culturally constructed, like women and mental degenerates, as both physically strong and characterologically weak (cf. Taussig 1987). While other cultural venues have portrayed the "violent nature" of the Latin American, Middle Easterner, or Asian through the twentieth century, this is not the *National Geographic* beat.

Its avoidance of depicting violence between persons has not deterred the *National Geographic* from giving extensive coverage to wars, especially those in Korea and Vietnam, and the Cambodian genocide.[7] Korean coverage focuses on American soldiers, with the country treated as an interesting backdrop and Koreans as a group receiving needed American help. As Sontag (1977:18) points out, the audience for Korean war images had not been prepared by other media to see Asians as victims. A significant number of these and other photos in the *Geographic* show GIs feeding, entertaining, or enjoying local children.[8] One photograph in a 1956 article on the U.S. defense of Formosa is cheerfully titled "U.S. Navy gives an ice cream party."

National Geographic's Vietnam war photography has been called innocent by one of its official chroniclers, in contrast to the grimmer standards of *Life* and other publications (Bryan 1987). In fact, the difference is stark. The *Geographic*'s wars are shown through the anxious faces of civilians rather than the corpses of soldiers as published in other media outlets (Moeller 1989). An early article in October 1961 shows little

7. Those articles include, among many others, "The GI and the Kids of Korea" (May 1953), "The Mekong, River of Terror and Hope" (December 1968), "Along Afghanistan's War-Torn Frontier" (June 1985). Issues covering the Vietnam War include June 1955, October 1961, November 1962, September 1964, January 1965, June 1965, September 1965, February 1966, February 1967, April 1968, September 1968, and December 1968.

8. Similar photos can be found in the *National Geographic*'s (and *Life*'s) World War II coverage (e.g., Bryan 1987:248–49).

evidence of the war itself. Only two of its forty-two pictures show soldiers, one of training exercises, the other of a patrol headed through and dwarfed by a magnificently ornate city gate in Hue. Three pictures, on the other hand, focus on beautiful young women, with captions describing one with a "face as radiant as the moon" or generalizing to "the grace and charm of Vietnamese women."

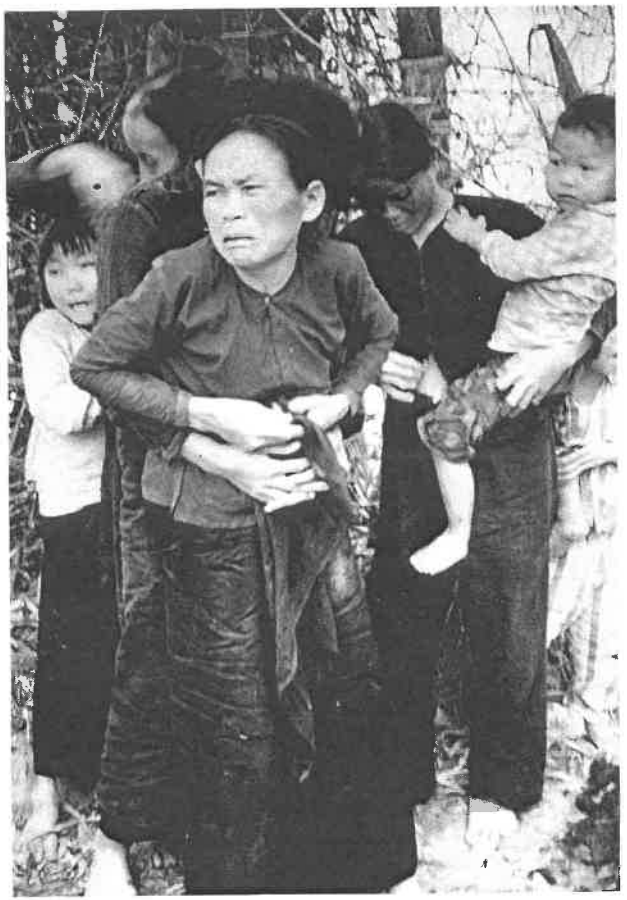
No Vietnam War photograph was ever innocent or apolitical, however, for all images of that country at war, whether graphic or not, emerged out of and circulated in the highly politicized atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The claim of innocence itself involves a politics. As in much other American media coverage, the editorial intent was to support the government's version of the goals and values of the war effort and, in line with the "kindly light" policy, to make the war appear less unpleasant than it was.[9]

All war photography can potentially suggest parallels between gun and camera. It can also make visible atrocities that would otherwise be hidden. The former effect may be seen in a *Life* magazine photo published in 1969 (reprinted in Drinnon 1980:453) showing the anguished faces of a small group of people from My Lai village just before they were murdered. It is captioned in the photographer's words, "Guys were about to shoot these people. I yelled, 'Hold it,' and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard M-16s open up. From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling, but I didn't turn to look."

Such pictures—with their vivid depiction of suffering and their exposure of the passive, even accepting gaze of the photographer—are absent from the *Geographic*'s Vietnam articles. *National Geographic* photographs rarely show wounded civilians or soldiers. A 1966 photograph of a war victim's funeral has a festive air, owing to the bright colors of the clothing and the absence of obvious grief in the crowd. The armed soldiers who defend the casket, a potentially ominous element, stand small, squeezed to the side of the frame (February 1966).

This soft coverage may or may not contradict Wilbur Garrett's claim that his photographs have been "stripping away romantic notions and

9. Moeller (1989) points out, however, that it has sometimes been in the interest of the state to have more rather than less graphic images of war published. Midway through World War II, government censors changed policy to allow photos of wounded or dead American soldiers in order to "help 'harden' the resolve of the public at home" (1989:227). During less popular wars and during losing wars or phases of wars, apparently, both the military and the press tread more carefully, trying to avoid offending the public with death images.



Ronald Haeberle's photograph of My Lai villagers just before their murder, published in *Life* magazine, December 1969. While this photograph is emotionally challenging, it is in some ways infinitely less so than Haeberle's views of the horrific aftermath. In choosing to reproduce this photo rather than those others, we confronted dilemmas similar to those we have detailed for *Geographic* editors—the physical revulsion of seeing slaughtered bodies versus the sense that they tell the central story of war, the fear of having our young children see the image versus the wish to educate them, the desire to give readers more pleasure than painful truth. (Photo: Ron Haeberle, *Life* magazine, © Time Warner, Inc.)

Characteristic of *National Geographic*'s Vietnam War photographs, this image of a funeral from February 1966 bypasses violence and suffering. Bright colors and ceremonial paraphernalia render grief graceful, even picturesque. (Photo: Dickey Chapelle, courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, © National Geographic Society)

exposing war as a horrible, futile depravity" and that they aim to temper, "at least for one generation of readers, the fascination, the excitement, and the glory too often associated with war" (National Geographic Society 1981:317). This rendition ignores, however, the ambiguity of photos (even those of horrifying subjects); given some readers' politics and some historical contexts, most war photos can validate more hatred of and effort against the "enemy." Garrett's comment also ignores the heavily prowar text and captions wrapped around virtually all pictures of American wars in the magazine. In the 1961 "Red Tide" article, for example, captions suggest a subhuman nature in the North Vietnamese through metaphors of "prowling Communists" and "enemy-infested jungle[s]."

And there is no more celebratory set of pictures than those in the September 1968 article showing the resolute, compassionate, and handsome young American men of the Air Rescue unit.

To see the *Geographic* editorial hand at work, one has only to contrast James Nachtwey's images of war published in the magazine (June 1988) with those of his published elsewhere (Nachtwey 1989). Captions also soften the potential impact of his pictures: a line of war captives in Guatemala, whose faces could be read as fearful of state torture, is captioned "Trying on a new life through a government amnesty program, former guerrillas and supporters receive donated clothing at Coban army base, where they will begin indoctrination toward resettlement in government-established villages."

Images of brutalized bodies, a stock-in-trade of much war photography, are missing from *National Geographic*. In Vietnam and Korea, the magazine dealt only through denial with the fact that warfare "is waged on tangible human flesh and inscribed in pain" and agreed with readers on "the living wounded body as the final *untellable* legend" of war (Trachtenberg 1989:118; emphasis added). While wounded bodies proliferate elsewhere in American popular culture, nonfiction family magazines are the last place they will be found. For such pictures to appear in the media, what seems to be required is either the frame of fantasy or adult status in viewers, as well as a certain politics.

When in November 1986 *National Geographic* hesitantly returned to cover the area of the Vietnam War after a hiatus of a decade, it inquired into the MIA question in Laos. Showing the discovery of the wreck of a U.S. jet in the jungle, the local Laotians appear not as enemies, survivors or victims but as helpmates to the U.S. team searching for military remains. One photograph has a U.S. soldier holding up a rusted American handgun, suggesting both the archaeological status of the war rather than its recency and continuing reverberations in, for example, dioxin effects of Agent Orange, and the harmlessness of the American, now standing in civilian clothes amid sun-dappled greenery.

A Middle-Class World. The *National Geographic* has presented a world that is predominantly middle class, in which there is neither much poverty nor great wealth (see figure 4.1). It is a world comfortable to contemplate. Like the absence of violence or illness, these pictures reflect back to Americans their own self-image as a relatively classless society, one in which most citizens define themselves as either working class or

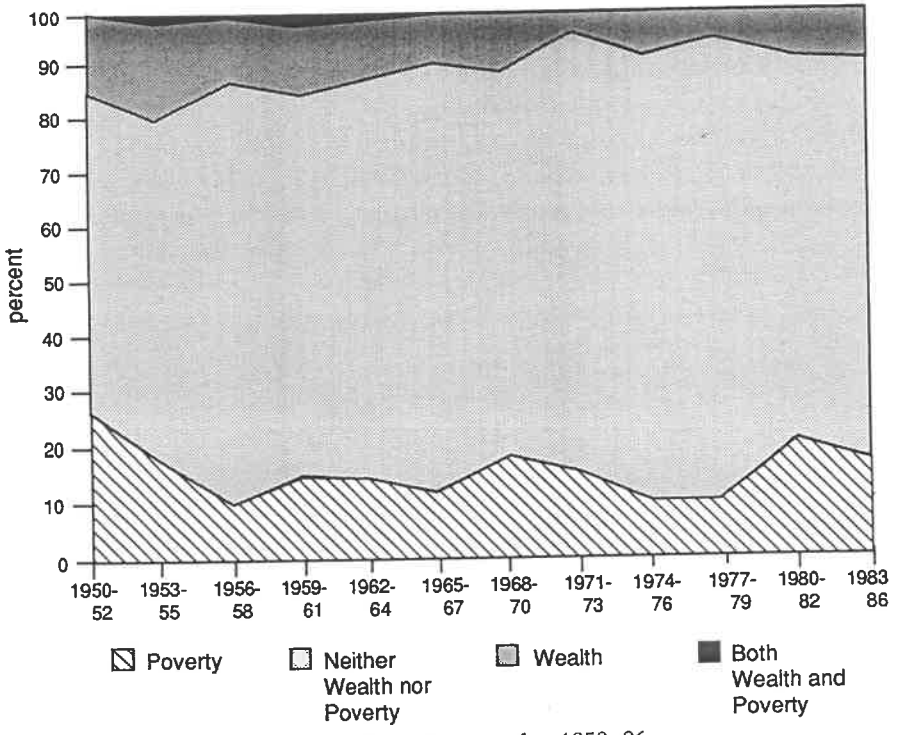


Figure 4.1. Indicators of wealth in photographs, 1950–86

middle class (Davis and Smith 1986:218).[10] At another level, of course, readers know that there are radical gaps between rich and poor in the United States and abroad, and there may be ways that this implicit awareness is addressed by the magazine as well.

There seems to have been a ban on picturing hungry or blemished individuals until the recent past. Exceptions began to appear in the mid-seventies. A 1978 article on smallpox shows its "last victim," a man from Somalia. The picture, small by magazine standards, might show a hint of a smile on the man's lips. Since 1950 a number of articles have focused on famine, including several in 1953, five between 1972 and 1975, and three in the 1980s, but not until a July 1975 article do the first visibly malnourished children show up in our sample of six hundred photos. By the mid-eighties, several articles had focused on hunger or featured some photographic evidence of systemic, non-episodic, hunger.

10. In the NORC-Roper Center 1986 survey, 90 percent of all those surveyed so identified themselves.

In general, a much sharper turn to coverage of human misery has occurred in the 1980s, reflecting the policy divisions and conflicts described in chapter 2. Many of the strong images of poverty are found in articles by James Blair on Haiti and South Africa, Steve Raymer on Bangladesh, and Steve McCurry on several countries. The distress of viewers that is associated with hunger continues to weigh heavily in editorial decision making, as in the downsizing of a photo of Guatemalans eating in a garbage dump.

The *Geographic*'s shunning of the poor, the ill, and the hungry throughout much of the fifties, sixties, and seventies stands in marked contrast to images in other media portraits of the third world, both contemporary and historical. Take, for example, *Life* magazine's published review of photography in the 1980s. Looking at all sources, the editors selected 118 of the "best photographs" of the decade. Of those, one-third were taken in non-Western settings. More than half of these depict death, disease, poverty, and war, often in a graphic and wrenching way, as in the picture of the frozen body of a small girl killed in the Iran-Iraq war, overlaid by the dead body of what must be her mother, or that of a dying Colombian girl chest-deep in landslide mud. The decade's best photos taken in Western settings are much less likely to show dead, diseased, or physically grotesque bodies.

Gilman (1985) presents evidence that all forms of physiognomic difference between themselves and non-Europeans were objects of intense interest to Europeans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both drawings and photos accentuated the differences, from Chinese men's queues to the skin color of Africans, often portraying them as pathologies. For many contemporary Americans, the most familiar image of the non-European commoner is a starving African child. *National Geographic* images have stood in pointed contrast to such pictures, the ideal set against the degenerate other found elsewhere. As in the case of violence, the media present a common cultural pattern of vacillation from angelic to demonic representation of others (Bhabha 1983; Taussig 1987)—from *National Geographic*'s unblemished and sunny middle-class smiles to the television program *Nightline*'s more than four hundred hours of angry, moblike Iranians (often transmitted in black and white or washed-out color) presented through the 1980s.

This duality can be seen in the context of JanMohamed's (1985) useful argument (contra Bhabha [1983]) that the ambivalence of colonial representations does not represent genuine confusion within the colonial mind over the value of the other. Rather, he maintains, "the imperialist is not

fixated on specific images or stereotypes of the Other but rather on the affective benefits proffered by the manichean allegory," which include the ability to create an Other whose goodness and badness seem absolute and not merely social, or so extreme as to be neither human nor historical. Accordingly, "those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making" (1985:68).

A World of Work. In a less obvious way, the magazine's photographs also idealize through focusing on people's industriousness. While other historical and contemporary forms of Western representation of the non-Western world frequently show people at rest or engaged in newsworthy behavior, often violent or episodic, the *National Geographic* favors the view of a world at work (see table 4.1). Of the pictures which clearly suggest that people are either at work or play (that is, excluding portraits, shots of ritual, or ambiguous pictures), two-thirds focus on people working at productive tasks. Correspondingly, 63 percent of all pictures were coded as showing people in an active mode, whether walking, engaged in vigorous recreation, or working. The passive or lazy native favored in much colonialist discourse (Gilman 1985) is seldom in evidence. The pragmatic reasons for this emphasis were pinpointed by an editor who noted that photos of people at work provide information on the economy of a country; they allow for more candid shots, as people are absorbed in their tasks; and the fact that they are in action provides more intrinsically interesting photographic material. Such pragmatic incentives, however, do not cancel out the role of the photographs in broader cultural discourses about the industriousness of the native.

Table 4.1. Activity type of main foreground figure in *National Geographic* photos (non-Westerners only)

	%	N
At work or in work context (includes ritual preparation)	37	204
At rest or leisure activity (includes eating)	19	101
Ritual activity	16	88
Portrait	9	48
Neither clearly work nor play or both work and play	18	99
Not ascertainable	1	5
Total	100	545

The Ideal of Virility. Through *National Geographic*'s eyes, as through the filter of much mass media, the world is mostly male. Nearly two-thirds of all photographs focus chiefly on men, while about one quarter show all or mostly women.[11] While in some cultures there are constraints on the entrance of male photographers into groups of women, it is no doubt also the case that the world of men is seen as of greater interest to readers. The *National Geographic* here follows the androcentric pattern identified in a host of cultural productions, from television serials and school textbooks to movie characters and news accounts. The focus on men, at least in part, emerges from the Western model in which things cultural are masculine and things natural are feminine (Ortner 1974). To search for exotic cultural practices, then, is to search for males. The representation of the tribal person as somewhere between nature and culture makes the issue more complex.

Almost 80 percent of all photographs show all or mostly adults, although pictures of smiling children are a staple of the magazine, with 14 percent of photos focused mainly or exclusively on children. Most commonly, infants are shown in their mother's arms and older children doing chores. Relatively scarce in the *National Geographic* are the elderly, with only 10 percent of the photos including at least one older person and a small fraction of that number foregrounding them.

In many ways, the age structure of the non-Westerners photographed reflects Western cultural attitudes. The invisibility of the elderly in American society, that is, their relative absence from larger households and from media images, accompanies a cultural emphasis on youthful beauty and on productivity defined as the ability to earn wages. The *Geographic*'s treatment of children likewise reflects a cultural set. Its focus on the child alone or in groups of other children is consonant with the sociological reality in which children are not integrated into the adult world of work or leisure and with the cultural belief that the child is a special kind of person rather than a miniature or even protoadult. The romanticizing of childhood is also reflected in their often lyrical photographic treatment, as in the December 1984 shot of two Indonesian girls in the rain, brimming to the edges of both the pages it occupies, with a soft haze of blurred greenery behind them. The girls are huddled warmly

11. The figures are 65 percent focused on men, 24 percent focused on women, while the remainder (11 percent) are pictures with an evenly divided gender ratio. We refer here to the gender of adults in the picture. We do not know whether a pattern of male predominance also occurs in photos of children.

National Geographic's romanticizing of childhood is often reflected in the lyrical photographic treatment of children, as in this December 1984 shot of two Javanese girls in monsoon rains. (Photo: Steve McCurry, Magnum Photos)

against each other and against the rain, their eyes huge as they look out from under a flat basket held gracefully by one of them.

Natural Humans without History

National Geographic has typically focused on those whom Eric Wolf (1982) has called the people without history. Wolf's thesis is that Western culture often presents non-Europeans as having timeless societies and personalities. Only now are they seen as responding to the "onslaught" of civilization or modernization; hitherto all dynamism, change, and agency have been ideologically apportioned to the West. This view of the non-Westerner as unchanging and as more primitive than civilized lends itself to the portrayal of the people without history as also the people of nature. Those without history, seated in the natural rather than the cultural realm, have a morphology rather than a trajectory.

Rosaldo (1989) draws a related but more complex picture when he notes that a kind of tripartite scheme has been in use in which the evolutionary ladder has bottom rungs that are precultural (for example, the

Tasaday or Papuans); more thoroughly cultural middle rungs, beca some historical dynamism is attributed to their societies (India and Japan); and a top occupied by the Western observer, who is presented as postcultural. This latter perspective on American identity is evident in the melting-pot norm that sees immigrants as gradually shedding, perhaps over generations, their cultural veneers on the way to becoming simply modern people. We might say that Americans see themselves as no longer in possession of a culture but as holding on to history through their scientific advancements and their power to influence the evolutionary advance of other peoples to democracy and market economies. The National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington clearly organizes the visitor's experience around these notions in its opening exhibit—portraits of the Tasaday on the left, a floating American astronaut on the right (time, like English text, reads left to right). The magazine's soft evolutionism contrasts, however, with harder types still in use elsewhere, as in a cartoon in the *New York Times* in 1991 showing the devolutionary process as a descent from Clark Gable to ape to Saddam Hussein as snake.

We can now look in more detail at how naturalization and this evolutionary scenario have been achieved through the images.

The Halo of Green. One of the most distinctive features of *National Geographic*'s coverage of the world is its sharp focus on the people of the fourth world as peoples of nature. This was often explicitly the case in the colonial period, as when an April 1953 article on New Guinea interspersed photos of Papuans in elaborate, sometimes feathered dress, with photos of local birds. In more recent years, local people are sometimes portrayed as conservators, holding a special relationship with nature, rather than directly in and of it. In either mode, the magazine's attempt to cover the earth comprehensively may have lent itself to shoring up some preexisting cultural notions about the naturalness of the non-Westerner, many readers already having an answer to the question of what the following articles in a typical issue have in common: "The Planets," "Koko [the gorilla]'s Kitten," "Yosemite—Forever?" and articles on Jamaica and Baghdad (January 1985). Aside from the effect of juxtaposition, the magazine's self-presentation as a scientific journal has drawn on the equation of science with the study of nature rather than of society, which might suggest why people construed as natural so frequently occupy its pages.

In nearly a third of all photos, the non-Westerner is presented against

a background that gives no evidence of social context. This includes pictures in which there is no recognizable background at all, only an aestheticized blur of color produced by a narrow depth of field. It also includes photographs of people against purely natural backgrounds. Such pictures can pass as depictions of the "natural man" of earlier centuries' imaginings about the people beyond Europe and can evoke in readers the nostalgia for an imagined condition of humanity before the industrial revolution and environmental degradation broke the link between humans and nature (MacFarlane 1987).

These pictures of naturalized societies stand in marked contrast to the reverse strategy of anthropomorphism employed in *National Geographic* nature photography. In one series of such pictures, a lioness is described as running a cub "day care center," and a group of chimps is captioned as a "family portrait." Standing more directly at the crossroads of what Haraway (1989) terms the "traffic" between nature and culture is the picture that follows, in which a pair of tawny stallions rear wildly. The caption tells us that the photographer intentionally used the image "to capture the proud spirit of the Spanish men" in his magazine piece on that country (National Geographic Society 1981:334).

National Geographic has focused heavily on people in rural settings (68 percent of the total of sample pictures whose location could be determined). The rural backdrop can serve to tell different kinds of stories, from the jungle fecundity of a sexualized other, to his or her innocence, to the similarity to a Western farmer or frontiersman. Rural photos are more common in certain regions than others, in particular Africa and the Pacific. Regardless of the actual urbanization rate in any world area, these regional differences in pictorial representation are susceptible to characterological interpretations and, even more, to estimates about the degree of civilization of a region.

For the magazine to avert its gaze from the massive urbanization of the planet during the postwar period was standard practice until recently. After 1977, a year marked by the beginnings of change in editorial policy, there is a sudden drop in the number of rural photos presented to just over half of what had been the norm (see figure 4.2). The rural focus had been crucial to erasing a view of class relations within the third world. Increased urban coverage has gone hand in hand with the partial erosion of the picture of a middle-class world painted by the *Geographic*.

There Are Only Two Worlds. Although the magazine focuses on exotic differences, at many points there appear to be only two worlds—

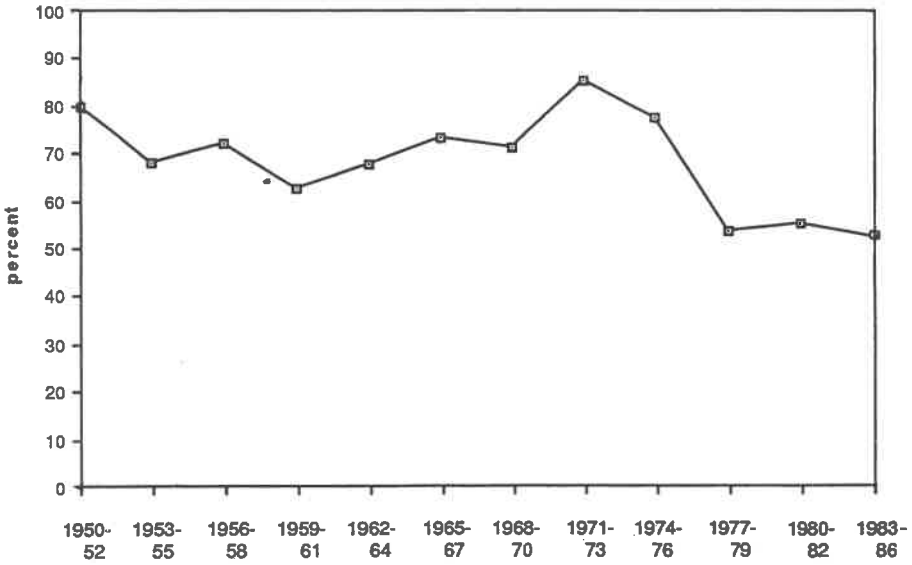


Figure 4.2. Photographs in rural settings, 1950–86

the traditional and the modern; the world before "the West" and its technological and social progress came to "the rest" and the world after. The narrative structure of many images is one of progress or modernization, as demonstrated in the titles of two articles: "Yemen opens the door to progress: American scientists visit this Arabian land at the invitation of its king to improve the health of his people" (1952) and "Progress and Pageantry in Changing Nigeria: Bulldozers and penicillin, science and democracy come to grips with colorful age-old customs in Britain's largest colony" (1956). These celebrations of progress exist side by side with articles suggesting the more nearly equal value of both traditional and modern and holding out a kind of promise of stasis. The caption for a 1965 photo of an Indian woman in nose ring and sari describes her as "Wife of two worlds: Though married in the old tradition, the new Maharani of Rajpipla is a matron of progress. She holds a master's degree in philosophy from Rajasthan University." This framework of balance becomes increasingly common, as when the Apache are said to live, perhaps permanently, in "two worlds" (February 1980).

Why has the *Geographic* focused so relentlessly on photographs and text that set up and explore a contrast between the traditional and the modern, particularly in the post–World War II period? While we will return to this question in more depth later, we can begin here to consider

Photographs contrasting traditional and modern worlds or elements, often showing them coexisting without conflict, were prevalent in the 1960s. (Photo: Jack Fields)

how these pictures play a role in dealing with the changing national identity of the American state in the same period. Increasingly it is correlated with capitalism and contrasted to other economic systems. When *Geographic* photographers and writers talk about their travels as trips through time, the main signpost is often the commodity. When Thomas

Abercrombie describes his decades of work in the Middle East, he writes that

> what makes the Middle East a joy is the time warp. . . . Often I found [people] living out what seemed chapters in the history of mankind. Over dusty tracks or down four-lane expressways, a Land-Rover became my time machine. I drove across the centuries, from Stone Age Bedouin in the sand mountains of Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter to the old walled cities of Oman; then back to the computerized refineries of Algeria's Sahara, the Rolls Royce traffic of Bahrain's financial district, or the boutiques of war-torn Beirut. (National Geographic Society 1981:143)

The center and the commodity stand for the future, the simple periphery for the past, and the contrast builds an American identification of both itself and its market system with the world's future.

Wolf suggests how contrast pictures might have functioned in the context of cold war conflict between the superpowers. He notes that the distinctions between a traditional, developing, and modern world "became intellectual instruments in the prosecution of the Cold War . . . [with] communism a 'disease of modernization' (Rostow 1960)" (E. Wolf 1982:7). The therapeutic goal could then be to push the third world toward the Western model of modernity, even to the point of saturation bombing of the countryside in Vietnam to advance, according to one political scientist, "urbanization and modernization which rapidly brings the country in question out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power" (Huntington 1968 in Drinnon 1980:373). The contrast between traditional and modern also allows readers to model the melting-pot imperative for immigrants to the United States. The traditional immigrant, these contrast pictures say, is not a threat but simply a stage on the way to full Americanization.

Decolonization brought interesting changes in the structure of contrast pictures, something Pratt drew our attention to with her brilliant analysis of landscape descriptions in Western travel literature (1982). Pratt finds that in both colonial and contemporary postcolonial travel accounts the narrator is often looking down on an exotic scene from mountaintop or hotel balcony. This stance and its related stylistics she calls the-monarch-of-all-I-survey scene, giving its narrator the opportunity to examine and evaluate the whole and to thereby assert dominance over it. Pratt dis-

cerns a dramatic change, however, between the colonial and postcolonial travel literature; while both view the landscape from above, the colonial observer glorifies it, seeing a country which is beautiful, rich in resources, and therefore "worth taking." Sir Richard Burton describes his first view of Lake Tanganyika from a hilltop in 1860:

> Nothing, in sooth, could be more picturesque than this first view of the Tanganyika Lake, as it lay in the lap of the mountains, basking in the gorgeous tropical sunshine. Below and beyond a short foreground of rugged and precipitous hillfold, down which the foot-path zigzags painfully, a narrow strip of emerald green, never sere and marvelously fertile, shelves towards a ribbon of glistening yellow sand. (Cited in Pratt 1982:145)

Contrast this with Theroux's 1978 vision of Central America, narrated from his hotel balcony:

> Guatemala City, an extremely horizontal place, is like a city on its back. Its ugliness, which is a threatened look (the low morose houses have earthquake cracks in their facades; the buildings wince at you with bright lines) is ugliest on those streets where, just past the last toppling house, a blue volcano's cone bulges . . . [The volcano's] beauty was undeniable, but it was the beauty of witches. (Cited in Pratt 1982:149)

Rather than the colonial portrait of a cornucopic Eden, here "the task to be accomplished is a negative one of rejection, dissociation, and dismissal" (Pratt 1982:150), the landscape seen as degraded, polluted, used up. Postcolonial writers, who can no longer see themselves as engaged in either civilizing mission or easy appropriation of a country, draw a picture of incongruity, disorder, and ugliness.

A similar, if less dramatic, shift can be observed in *National Geographic* photography. From its inception at the beginning of the colonial era through the 1960s, the editorial commitment to portray the world in a positive light was rarely violated. Decisions to move to a more journalistic and balanced stance occurred in the postcolonial period and have resulted in a new picture of the world which is now both beautiful *and* ugly, ordered *and* disordered.

Two landscapes drawn from the pages of the *Geographic* make Pratt's point. In the first, taken in 1956, a white hiker on the island of Mauritius looks out from a mountaintop over a wide expanse of lush, bright-green forested valley. The sun is out, the landscape looks rich and unspoiled. Come forward to 1982 and a photograph taken from a rooftop in Khartoum, Africa. This is Pratt's postcolonial landscape view, with its muddy, dark colors, its depiction of low urban sprawl, its lack of a focal point. This picture does not celebrate what it sees. In the thirty-year space between the pictures, the white observer, while still at a height, has disappeared, resources have been used up, the sun has gone in.

The Naked Black Woman

Nothing defines the *National Geographic* for most older American readers more than its "naked" women. The widely shared cultural experience of viewing women's bodies in the magazine draws on and acculturates the audience's ideas about race, gender, and sexuality, with the marked subcategory in each case being black, female, and the unrepressed. This volatile trio will be examined in greater detail later. For now, it is enough to point out that the magazine's nudity forms a central part of the image of the non-West that it purveys.[12]

The first inclusion of a bare-breasted woman in the pages of the *Geographic* occurred in 1896, and was accompanied then, as now, by shameless editorial explanation. The pictures, Gilbert Grosvenor said in 1903, were included in the interest of science; to exclude them would have been to give an incomplete or misleading picture of how the people really live. This scientific goal is seen as the sole purpose of the photos, with the National Geographic Society taking, according to one observer, "vehement exception to comments about the sexual attraction or eroticism of the photographs" (Abramson 1986:141). The breast represents both a struggle against "prudery" (Bryan 1987:89) and the pursuit of truth rather than pleasure. The centrality of a race-gender code to decisions about whose breasts to depict cannot be denied, however. With some very recent exceptions (photographed discretely from behind), none of the hundreds of women whose breasts were photographed in the magazine were white-skinned. The struggle against prudery did not lead to documentation of the coming of nude sunbathing to Mediterra-

12. Of the 235 sample photographs containing women, 11 percent showed women in what, to most Western eyes, would be some degree of undress, the great majority showing the breasts. Of the 425 sample photos with men in them, 13 percent showed shirtless men, and less than half of those were also "bottomless" to some degree.

nean beaches, and we recall the case of the photo of a bare-breasted Polynesian woman whose skin tones had been darkened in the production process (Abramson 1985:143). Moreover, genitals are rarely photographed, even where full nudity is customary. In the November 1962 issue a very young Vietnamese girl, bare-bottomed and facing the camera, has had her vulva airbrushed (p. 739).

The imputation of erotic qualities or even sexual license to non-Westerners (particularly women) is one likely result of *National Geographic* presentation of their bodies for close examination. In addition, the nakedness of the *Geographic*'s subjects might be seen as continuous with the nude as a perennial theme in Western "fine arts." While some of these women are posed for surveillance and resemble the mug shot more than the oil canvas, many are rendered through pose and lighting so as to suggest artfulness. In Western cultural rhetoric, women are beautiful objects. Their photographs in the magazine can play a central role in allowing the art of photography to exist silently beneath a scientific agenda and thereby increase readership and further legitimate the *Geographic*'s project as one of both beauty and truth. All of this elaborate structure of signification, however, is built on a foundation of racial and gender subordination: in this context, one must first be black and female to do this kind of symbolic labor.

Conclusion

We have seen how *National Geographic* presents a special view of the "people out there." This view—a world of happy, classless people outside of history but evolving into it, edged with exoticism and sexuality, but knowable to some degree as individuals—is both distinctive in comparison with other mass media representations and continuous with some prevailing cultural themes. The contrast in the magazine between the other as familiar, one of the family of man, and as exotic is played out in sharper relief when the magazine is compared with those media in which the master figures are Libyan terrorists and Iranian mobs, Ethiopian famine victims and Vietnamese communists. These representations, dripping with evil, threat, and hopeless social and economic disorganization, may be given at least part of their force by the background of unperturbed *National Geographic* images which the viewer of nightly TV news has previously seen. These kinds of broader cultural systematics bear further examination.

The *National Geographic* images are continuous, on the other hand,

with a number of themes that have appeared and reappeared over the centuries of contact between West, South, and East. These include themes of the natural man, of societies with no historical dynamism of their own, of the evolutionary ladder of societies with Africa at the bottom rung and Asia at the middle and with all as aspirants for the top—a place equivalent to a modern, Western life style. They are continuous with other long-standing anxieties about the sexuality of the racially different and anxieties that result in a studied looking away from economic exploitation and resulting miseries of poverty and ill health.

This view can be evaluated in a variety of ways—as innocent/kindly/relativistic, as naive/out of touch, as a special kind of neocolonial discourse which ultimately degrades its subjects, or as humanistic/liberal. Ultimately, the evaluation should be based not on the intentions of the magazine's makers but on the consequences of its photographic rhetoric. In what ways do these photos change or reinforce ideas about others held by their readers? How might these photos influence the practices of readers—as voters, neighbors to new immigrants, as white male coworkers with blacks and women, as consumers of products marketed as exotic?

We can now ask how each of these general themes appears when the *Geographic* has looked at any one world area. These regions, which have highly distinctive personalities in American popular culture, each get somewhat distinctive treatment in the magazine's pages.