

Spirit Matters

The Ethics of Photographing Unseen Worlds

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This article addresses the complexities involved in ethnographic photodocumentation of unseen spirit worlds and the subtle energies that, in a shamanistic worldview, animate the material world. In photographing the “not visible,” what choices does the photographer make in visually representing the subject, and in what ways do the act of photography and the image convey and represent authority (of the photographer, spirit, shaman or sacred objects)? Researchers are bound by ethical guidelines, including obligations to acquire informed consent, but what are the challenges of applying these in cultures where the unseen world governs relations in the seen

view that models or mirrors human activity on nature. Shamanism mediates the material and metaphysical worlds. As imperfect mirror images, these two worlds need to be in balance, and they animate and inspire one another. The shaman merges with spirits in shamanic ritual, and thus “remembers” them, giving form to the formless. In return, the shaman and the shaman’s paraphernalia are invested with the power, life force or sentience of spirits (including ancestral shamans). Spirits guide and protect the shaman who needs help to navigate the metaphysical world in search of answers to the problems of the material world. Collapsing the dichotomy between object (material thing) and spirit (intelligent but immaterial being), sacred objects symbolize and

that contradicts the premises on which western science is based: rationality and reality as observable phenomena (Walker 2001). What are the implications of this for ethnographic photography? Since the living are obligated to maintain and renew the connection between the material and spirit worlds, they must demonstrate respect to the spirit world objectively. Documenting such practices, visual anthropologists must take care to adapt and follow traditional protocols of behavior so as not to offend spirits and engender ill-fortune for their research communities.

Connecting People and Spirits

Shamanists talk about objects of power as sacred objects that symbolize and effect the connection between humans and spirits, and through which appeals are made for assistance and guidance. The spirit of a deceased shaman remains in materiality—for example, in his or her drum and dress. Likewise, the spirit of an animal would be invested in, say, a shaman’s headdress made of deer antlers. When material objects are not respected, spiritual authority is compromised and very bad things can happen. In the Darhad Valley of Mongolia, people tell the story of three Hungarian researchers who removed deceased shamans’ drums from their repository without permission, and died soon after.

In ritual, ancestral spirits enter the shaman’s body, causing the shaman to take on their characteristics. Places, too, have owners or masters (human or non-human spirits), with whom shamans communicate to protect those areas. When a shaman dies, the shaman’s toolkit is placed on one of the sacred places such as a mountain or tree in the shaman’s birthplace. “Ongod” often refers to the name of the sacred place where the toolkit was placed or, in Mongolia, to ancestral spirits who were shamans in the human world and convey extraordinary power to a shaman.

Photography Protocols

I once heard of a young American photographer who went to film the mountains in Mongolia. Unaccompanied, he didn’t ask for permission because he didn’t “see anyone around.” Nor did he take any kind of gift to the owners or acknowledge their presence. What he failed to realize was that his photos



Nikolai Oorzhak, Tuvan Shaman. Siberia. Photo courtesy Marilyn Walker



Tuvan shaman/lama performing rain ritual, Tuva. Photo courtesy Marilyn Walker

did not capture an empty landscape but rather the land and its spirits. Photographing animals, too, requires permission. Herders protect their animals through shamanic ritual in the same way that they protect themselves and their homes. Taking a photograph of someone’s horse without permission from the owner is seen as usurpation of authority. It is offensive and potentially dangerous. Dukha reindeer herders are especially protective of baby reindeer, telling me how a photographer had taken a picture of a young animal that died shortly thereafter.

It is clear that a photograph of a shaman merged with a spirit or of a landscape that is “enspirited” renders visible the invisible. But integrating photography into the

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world? Do existing protocols sufficiently enable respectful representation of these multiple layers of meaning? More practically, how can photography effectively convey experiences that are immaterial?

Most of my fieldwork over the last 40 years has been carried out in shamanic cultures in Siberia, Mongolia, Southeast Asia and with the Tibetan Bön. Even where shamans themselves have disappeared or no longer practice, we can still talk about a shamanist world-

embody the connection between humans and spirits and can help guide ancestral spirits to where they are needed. The shaman’s drum, as the “ride” by which the shaman travels to the other world, is the same vehicle by which the spirit travels back to this one.

The material world has been well studied in academic work on shamanism, but the metaphysical world has not. We are, however, seeing a paradigm shift in the academic study of shamanism



Opening the Way ceremony, Siberia. The shamaness V is mediating the world of opposites, in this case two standing stones which are male and female. She is also opening the way between the worlds for those of us who are participating in the ritual. Photo courtesy Marilyn Walker

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public venue. I continued to worry that I lacked sufficient cultural literacy to fully understand how the photographers would interpret the display and wondered if I had indeed received truly informed consent to show their images. As highlighted by anthropologist Sarah Pink (*Doing Ethnography* 2001), "it cannot be assumed that people have consented to...have large images of themselves exhibited in a gallery simply because they have allowed the images to be taken or have responded to the camera." The issue of informed consent must be handled with the utmost care.

Considerations for Future Work

From my experiences developing a photo-voice project into the museum exhibition, I offer considerations for others interested in this methodology. First, it is essential to budget one's time to include sufficient instruction in the language and social organization of one's research community before initiating a collaborative project. Developing closer relationships with community members prior to undertaking such a complex project would have helped me to more directly involve photographers in choosing the exhibition photos and producing other materials, such as supplementary textual commentaries. Maximizing community involvement is, after all, what makes a project truly collaborative. I also recommend devoting significant

effort to supplying participants with project materials (such as exhibit DVDs or copies of photographs), to put ownership and authorship back in their hands.

Understandably, ethical considerations will vary with the research context and scope of each collaborative project. While I feel it was imperative to incorporate the above approaches in my work—in response to questions regarding authorship and informed consent—I also encourage other anthropologists to develop project-specific responses to ethical concerns in their own research, and to share the techniques they develop, so that we might better promote the respect and dignity of all involved in collaborative work. In the end, I found the collaborative aspects of my project to be insightful and rewarding. The Somali Bantu families enjoyed participating and took pride in sharing their families' experiences with the local community. Visitors to the *Somali Lenses* exhibition commented that the photographs and narratives created by the families helped them to better know and relate to the experiences of the Somali Bantu.

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oration with those appearing on camera, fiction can often be more representative of daily life than whatever happens in front of the camera "naturally." More important than which solution works best for any particular filmmaker is the point that all who make and view ethnographic film should be conscious of how dramatic tension is constructed, and how that tension—or the maneuvering necessary to create it—impacts the viewer's experience of the film

and understanding of the people it portrays. This issue will only grow in importance as ethnographic filmmakers seek to establish wider audiences for their work, and eventually develop their own film conventions.

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shamanist schema can at points be puzzling, and leads to much discussion amongst shamanists and shamans. Some shamans permit photographs when the spirit enters them; others do not. Some shamans may sit for a portrait wearing parts of their paraphernalia but not all of it. Some cannot remove shamanic paraphernalia from its storage place to show a photographer until it is the "right" time of the day, month or year. Others may show an item or part of it in explanation but not allow a photo, or may hold up an item of clothing but not wear it in a photograph (so as to avoid offending an ongod). Offerings, such as food, candies and money, are made when requesting both rituals and photos, and it is important that these are offered to spirits; some shamans will not accept anything for themselves.

The shaman's mirror provides some insights into the process of negotiation around photography of spirit matters. In the same way that the physical and spirit worlds are

imperfect reflections of one another, so is the photograph an imperfect reflection of its subject. But it is always imperative to remember—when requesting consent, choosing how to frame an image, or even captioning—that what we see as photographers may not be what the shaman is representing, and may not be what is conveyed to the viewer of the final image. At the end of a visit with the Darhad shaman Maamaa, he handed me a photograph that I assumed at first was of himself in his shaman's dress. As we talked further, I came to understand that it was taken when he was merged with his spirit. He told me to keep it with me, that the photograph was of his ongod (spirit) and that it would protect me wherever I went.

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