Orientalism of the Philippine Photograph: America Discovers the Philippine Islands

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“Lesser Breeds”: America Encounters Filipino Hill Tribes

From 1899-1901, the United States suffered 10,000 casualties and spent $600 million to conquer a Philippine Republic that was stubbornly determined to win its independence. Although there was extensive guerrilla warfare in the lowlands during the Philippine-American War, few Americans had ventured into the rugged mountain spine north of Manila.

By contrast, the years 1900 to 1914 witnessed an intense American fascination with the so-called “Igorots”, or hill tribes, who made up an eighth of the Philippine population in 1903. US colonial officials “discovered” these Philippine tribals through long, little known expeditions into the remote regions of Mountain Province. But photography allowed these colonial pioneers to present the Filipino tribes to a mass American audience.

By its very nature, photography emphasizes physical appearance as it translates reality for an audience. The images shown here illustrate how American photographers pushed such superficialities to their limit by posing subjects in ways that deliberately stressed differences in dress, skin color, and body size. White, tall, and fully clothed Americans posed next to brown, short, and semi-naked Philippine tribals.

Photography even allowed Americans to disassemble the Filipino body and gawk at its parts. Similarly, photography disaggregated the practice of head hunting from its highland cultural context, reducing it to sensational images of skulls that horrified and intrigued American eyes. Such photos ignored the Igorot practice of head hunting to settle social conflict at the level of individual vendetta rather than mass mechanized warfare.

In most photographs of this genre, the Filipino tribals usually appear in poses that make them seem subordinated to Americans. In contrast with masterful, immaculately attired Americans, the tribals are often posed to seem half-naked, timid, and awkward to the point of ignorance. Significantly, elsewhere in this exhibit peoples of these same tribes project a calm confidence and erect bearing when allowed to pose on their own.

Photography & Power: Dressing & Undressing the Filipino

At century’s turn, Americans saw the semi-naked bodies of the Philippine hill tribes in Social Darwinist terms as evidence of Western superiority and Filipino inferiority. Similarly, photographs of tribals dressed in US Constabulary uniforms supposedly proved that Western influence could uplift the “backward” Filipino.
Yet nakedness itself was often a mere construction. Dean Worcester, Secretary of the Interior and arguably the most powerful member of America’s colonial government, deliberately sought nude poses from Philippine women.

For Americans, dress also marked various levels of development within Philippine society. Using dress as an indicator, colonial Americans distinguished between lower and higher tribal types such as the Bagobos, the Moros, and the Visayans, all of whom wore elaborate clothing.

**First Contact: Dazzling Filipino Tribes with Civilization’s Trinkets**

During the decade of first contacts with Filipino highland tribes, Americans delighted in the apparent child-like joy that these people demonstrated when exposed to the trinkets of American civilization.

Among colonial Americans, Interior Secretary Dean Worcester took the greatest delight in introducing remote highlanders to the latest in American domestic technology–cameras, victrolas, and automobiles. Not surprisingly, educated Filipinos responded by reviling Worcester and attacking his hill tribe policies when an opportunity presented.

In the ethnographic field, Americans attempted to impress native groups with displays of technology. Fay-Cooper Cole, who collected material for Chicago’s Field Museum after 1907, described the phonograph as “the best letter of introduction ever used”.

Technology became an exchange currency of sorts as ethnographers bargained with tribal leaders to gain access to inland groups. “The only things we need sent”, wrote Cole to Field Museum Curator George Dorsey, “are Ingersoll watches; they will do more to put one in the good graces of the principal men of a town than five times their value in money.”

**An American “Raj”: The Philippines as Stage for Colonial Grandeur**

Introduced during the late 19th century, photography was limited to the Spanish and Filipino elites who used it as a less formal form of portraiture to record social gatherings and life passages. After 1898, however, American colonials revolutionized the medium, making it a multi-faceted instrument of their dominion over the Philippines–studying the skull shapes of “primitive” minorities against white sheets, entertaining American audiences with images of the exotic, documenting the archipelago’s primitive conditions, and recording their own achievements in culture and concrete.

The popularization of photography in the United States coincided with the conquest of the Philippines, producing a mass American audience for Philippine photographs. The photographic magazines, illustrated books, and stereopticon photo-viewers found in many middle class drawing rooms made Philippine images accessible to millions of Americans. During the first years of occupation, American colonial officials and military officers played to this mass American audience by portraying the grandeur
of the empire. Adopting poses similar to those of the British raj in India, Americans used Filipino servants and tropical plants as backdrops to celebrate their arrival in ranks of the world’s imperial overlords. As commercial photography reduced these images to cliches, the Filipino domestic servant became the most common “prop” on the Philippine colonial stage. Whether an American wife riding in her carriage, officials at rest in their quarters at day’s end, or an American child playing in his yard, all were juxtaposed against expressionless Filipino servants, instruments of and testimony to American power.

In Their Own Image: Filipinos as They Saw Themselves

During the first decade of US colonial rule, there were two kinds of photography in the Philippines—colonial American and Filipino. Portrayed as objects of scientific study or simple curiosity in the American photos, Filipinos were often posed in ways that made them seem depersonalized and culturally inferior. American ethnographic photos showed a naked body or skull shape as an object for study. American government and commercial candid shots intruded into Philippine daily life to show Filipinos in a “natural” state—half-naked, disheveled, bent, squatting, and dirty. In the pornographic shots collected by colonial official Dean Worcester, Filipino tribal women appear erotically naked to indicate ease of sexual access.

When Filipinos could control their appearance before the camera they showed a strikingly different media persona. In formal studio portraits, Filipino women posed immaculately attired in elegant, full length garments with fashion accessories and religious regalia to demonstrate both virtue and refinement. Allowed to pose formally, Igorot hill tribesmen stand ram-rod straight, wearing full length coats and bearing the silver-headed canes that indicate position and prestige.

Despite the medium’s origins as an instrument of colonial control, Filipinos quickly indigenized photography, making it a central element in their own popular culture. In the 1930s, cut-price professionals brought photography to the people by traveling widely to record everyman’s wedding or wake and setting up studios to mass produce photo-postcards of local beauty queens, famous scenes, provincial politicians, and messianic cult leaders. During the Commonwealth era (1935-41), politicians discovered the propaganda value of photography, and began courting the Manila dailies to get their picture in the papers and distributing thousands of photo portraits to voters at election times. In 1904, for example, only two professional photographers advertised their services in Manila, but by 1934 there were sixteen.

Over the succeeding half-century, photography won a special niche in Philippine culture and consciousness. Reflecting the visual orientation of Filipino mass culture, photography has become a part of the daily life of the Philippines. Preserved in bound volumes on a table in salas, or sitting rooms, from provincial towns to Manila’s exclusive enclaves, the life cycle of the Filipino family is recorded in photographs—baptism, primary schooling, family gatherings, high school outings, marriage, social
Filipinos are sensitive to the images that they send and receive through photographs. Showing a sharp media sophistication, Filipinos do not pose passively before the camera, but instead project, quite self-consciously, a certain style or aspect of self. Whether in the daily newspaper or family albums, Filipinos study photo images to discover layers of meaning about the subject’s character and persona. While family papers are often lost, photographs are preserved and handed down from generation to generation.

**In the Ethnographer’s Eye: Dr. Jenks, Colonial Photographer**

Dr. Albert E. Jenks did more to create lasting images of the Philippines and Filipinos than any American scholar of his generation. Educated in economics at the University of Wisconsin (PhD., 1899), Dr. Albert E. Jenks switched to ethnography and enjoyed a rapid rise through US colonial service in the Philippines, creating the ethnic categories for the 1903 Philippine census (the country’s first) and then supervising the phenomenally popular Philippine exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. While serving in the Philippines, Jenks and his wife Maude Huntley, a native of Elroy and a graduate of UW-Madison (BA, 1898), lived in the northern mountains where they did research for his ethnography titled The Bontoc Igorot (Manila, 1905), becoming thereby the first American to publish a major anthropological study of the Philippines.

Throughout his Philippine career, Jenks’s mentor was Dean Conant Worcester (1866-1924), a colonial official whose popular publications on the country’s tribal “primitives” earned him the undying enmity of educated Filipinos. Like Jenks, a colonial career rescued Worcester from the threat of failure. Plucked from a dismal professional future at Michigan where he was a staff bird collector, Worcester soon exerted considerable power in the Philippines as Secretary of the Interior. Neither Jenks the economist nor Worcester the zoologist had any formal training in their chosen field, anthropology. Their forays into Lamarckianism, racial taxonomy and anthropometry were dated even as they wrote.

Despite their lack of formal training in anthropology, these men became influential interpreters of racial theories. In a very concrete way, Jenks participated in the country’s transition from continental to overseas expansion. Moving from one pacified population to another, Jenks did his dissertation on Native Americans of the upper Great Lakes in 1899, and then went on to apply his ethnographic skills to the Bontoc Igorots of Northern Luzon in 1902-1903. Jenks’s Wisconsin doctoral dissertation on “The Wild Rice Gatherers of the Upper Great Lakes” (Madison, 1899) foreshadowed his subsequent work on Philippine tribals by arranging cultures in a hierarchy according to arbitrary, ethnocentric criteria.

Only a few months after his triumphal display of Filipino racial typologies in a human zoo that sprawled across forty-seven acres of suburban St. Louis, Jenks returned to the United States to become professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota in 1905. During his quarter-century as chair of the
Anthropology Department at the University of Minnesota (1915-1938), Jenks came full circle by applying his Philippine research on racial hierarchy at home to study “Indian-White Amalgamation,” sounding the alarm against miscegenation in America.

In 1916, the US government hired Jenks to find the ratios of white-to-Indian blood in a population of Minnesotans to solve a land tenure dispute. Using skull-measuring indexes, Jenks “scientifically” determined the “whiteness” of his various specimens, a dubious exercise in racialist pseudo-science already in disrepute with better trained anthropologists. Just as he went to the Philippines prepared to see the world through a racialist lens, so Jenks had returned to the U.S. to deploy a hardened racialist sensibility for the study of Native Americans.

During his tenure at the University of Minnesota from 1905 to 1938, Professor Jenks used lantern slides of Igorots, the Filipino mountain people that he studied from 1902-1903, in his anthropology lectures. Although these slides project an image of the Igorots as “primitives,” Jenks’s anthropological images are still far more humane and dignified than Worcester’s racist photographs that often lapsed into outright pornography. Upon Jenks’s death in 1953, the Department donated these slides to the University of Minnesota Archives.

Filipinos at the St. Louis World’s Fair, 1904
The Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904, held only five years after our conquest of the Philippines, gave these Islands and their tribes a remarkable level of public exposure in the United States.

At a time when America’s adult population was only 42 million, some 20 million Americans came through the turnstiles of the St. Louis Exposition and many of those crowded into the 47 acres of the Philippine exhibit to see the living tribal villages that were the sensation of this world’s fair. Arrayed in these 47 acres at a cost of over one million dollars, remarkably lavish for that day, were 130 buildings, 70,000 exhibits, and 1,200 Filipino “natives” from every region of the Philippine archipelago. In addition to the live demonstrations of tribal archery, spear warfare, weaving, and ritual dog eating, the Philippine exhibit featured a majestic, two-story “Hall of Photography” filled with stereopticon photographs of the Philippines and its tribal habitats.

The phenomenal success of this exhibit encouraged imitation that continued for decades—touring “wild east” shows of Philippine tribal warriors, photo essays in National Geographic Magazine, major photographic exhibits at Washington’s Smithsonian Institution, and ethnographic expeditions from Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History.

Instead of regarding these exhibitions as repositories of artifacts for objective analysis, we can now examine the museum itself as artifact—as the object of study. By analyzing the juxtaposition of photograph, exposition and ethnography in the first decade of U.S. colonial rule, we can see how these
seemingly disparate cultural elements became arrayed to create an image of the Filipino tribal in the American imagination.

Although the St. Louis Exposition is long gone, its stereoptican photographs are archived in the Library of Congress and the Missouri Historical Society, just as rich collections of colonial photos from this era are located in Chicago’s Field Museum and the University of Michigan Museum.

Perhaps more than any other cultural expression at century’s turn, the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904 expressed the importance a Pacific empire held for Americans at Century’s turn. Dubbed the “Louisiana Purchase Exposition”, the 1904 fair celebrated the centennial of American continental expansion by showcasing it’s latest acquisition—the Philippines.

By far the fair’s largest display, the Philippine exposition boasted 1,200 Filipino “natives” as human exhibits and 70,000 material objects at a cost of over one million dollars. Attracting over a million admissions, the World’s Fair dominated American cultural life to a remarkable degree that no single event could match today.

The “Evolution of the Filipino” from the World’s Fair Bulletin best demonstrates the message being conveyed to Americans at St. Louis. Filipinos were presented as an essentially primitive, but evolving people. Although the Islands as a whole were backward, there were supposed to be differing levels of civilization that ranged from the primitive “Negritos” to “educated, refined” Filipinos of mixed Spanish blood. Through American tutelage, however, the Islands as a whole could advance upward on this Social Darwinist scale of human evolution, reaching a civilized state where they would become ready for independence.

This visual image of Filipino backwardness combines conservative Spencerian ideas of social evolution with the progressive themes of human transformation. This single page images the entire spectrum of Filipino life as perceived by colonial Americans—from the small, dark, and nearly naked Negrito to the light, elaborately attired “Spanish-Filipino Mestizo Family.” With these two extremes one sees the racist thinking underlying Social Darwinism. While short, black Negritos are called the “lowest type of humans in the Islands,” America’s progressive ideals admitted that the lighter skinned Igorot hill tribe was “capable of much higher development.”

Note photography’s utility in portraying and popularizing such elaborate images. Photographs can be cut, pasted, and re-arranged to suit the image maker’s need. One can simultaneously emphasize the ideas of difference and of change by properly ordering the world through photographs.

Furthermore, photography renders the strange, the powerful, some how less frightening and more manageable. According to period records, the Moros, the Muslims of the southern Philippines, “have caused so much trouble in the Mindanao Country.” However, on the photographic page, arrayed against a spectrum of increasingly tame Filipino humanity, the Moros do not appear as “fierce Mohammedan
fighters.” Instead, the Filipinos were depicted as a people who are lowly, but who will grow, through the evolutionary effect of colonial education, increasingly compatible with the American way of life.

Tragically, many of these Philippine tribal specimens were trapped in a strange land for years after the World’s Fair. Enterprising Americans took Philippine groups on the road in “Wild East” shows. As late as 1909, a linguist, Dr. Carl Seidenadel, studied a group of Bontoc Igorot in Chicago who were still awaiting the opportunity to return home.

“White Man’s Burden”: Uplifting Filipinos Through Education and Without Empire: American Views of Filipinos Before Colonial Rule

Colonialism was not merely a form of government. It was an act of dominion over subject peoples that demanded an ingrained sense of superiority on the part of colonial overlords. In such an enterprise, photography, like anthropology, became a potential instrument of colonial control, imposing an unspoken agenda upon every image.

In 1886, a full decade before the US conquest of the Islands, an American photographer took portraits of Manila’s street life. Instead of the disheveled and somewhat degraded look of Filipinos in later colonial images, in these early photos ordinary Filipino street vendors all appear immaculately attired in flowing, clean, head-to-toe garments, some decorated with religious necklaces.

These Filipino subjects exude a natural grace and quiet self-confidence before the camera, an modern technology that does not seem to intimidate. Caught in the act of collecting water at a public pump, for example, a Filipino boy continues his chore, expressing neither curiosity nor concern.

The school house portraits taken after the start of US rule in 1898 are one genre of the new style of colonial photography with a clear political message. Photos of unclothed tribal women and armed tribal warriors offer eloquent evidence of the Philippines’ need for American rule guidance.

In a similar way, these school children posed in group portraits of productive discipline show the responsiveness of Filipinos to American tutelage. There is a clear message here: America is an advanced civilization with the power and culture to uplift the Philippines.

Americans of this era saw the mass public education system as the greatest achievement of their half-century of colonial rule over the Philippine Islands (1898-1946). Through a major school construction program, the US regime brought mandatory elementary education to most Filipinos. Not only did these schools educate, they served America as instruments of social transformation that would uplift the Filipinos to a level of civilization sufficient for self-rule.

Thus, these photos portray what was already becoming a visual cliche in colonial photography–school house as agency for the inculcation of social discipline. In these classroom compositions we can see...
row-upon-row of Filipino children being disciplined through common, purposeful tasks under the watchful gaze of their teachers.

Across the archipelago, US colonial schools, the photos tell us, are imposing the social order, personal discipline and productive skills necessary for nationhood—whether upon Tagalog girls in Manila, tribal girls in the northern Mountain province, or Cebuano boys in the central Visayan.