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Author

Roessel, Monty

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Navajo Photography

MONTY ROESSEL

I would like to begin with a story that I hope will demonstrate how I researched the two books of photography, *Navaho Means People* by Leonard McCombe¹ and *The Enduring Navaho* by Laura Gilpin.²

I remember showing the books to an elderly Navajo woman sitting at a table in a chapter house. She carefully turned each page of the two books. Midway into Laura Gilpin's book, she stopped and said, "I used to sleep on a dirt floor just like that. These pictures seem so old, so far away. If it wasn't for all the silver and turquoise, I would think they were real. Nobody wears their jewelry all the time." I later asked to photograph her and she nodded and then told me, "Wait. Let me go home and put on my jewelry."

I want to discuss photography and the Navajo, in particular, the work of Laura Gilpin and Leonard McCombe. But, before I get into that I think it is important to speak just a little about the Navajo. I want to qualify almost everything I shall write by saying that this is from a Navajo point of view. You may dispute the facts, but you cannot dispute the point of view.

At first glance, we are a very easy tribe to photograph. Everywhere you look there is a striking image. The landscape is rugged and spectacular. The land changes from a desert environment to sandstone mountains and deep canyons. To say it is a beautiful reservation is an understatement. The reservation is the largest in the country, and the government is as full of red tape as any state. Most important, Navajo culture is alive and Navajo history is rich. This is what makes the Navajo people appear easy to photograph.

Monty Roessel (Navajo) is a photographer and journalist in Kayenta, Arizona.

I would guess that the Navajo are the most photographed Indian tribe in America. Just in the past year, there have been three books published about the Navajo. It was one of these books, and a conversation I had with a subject from the book, that caused me to approach this paper on the Navajo a little differently.

I was talking to a friend whose photograph appeared in the book *The Navajo: A Portrait of a Nation*. He was complaining that he did not like the way the picture appeared in the book. I told him not to worry about it, that most people do not even see photography books. He said he liked the way he looked, but he felt that his image was like those he had seen in a museum. "Only dead things are in museums," he said. "I am alive. I am not ready for a museum. I am not an enduring Navajo; I am a real Navajo."

That of course brings me to the main subject. Although I shall discuss Laura Gilpin and Leonard McCombe, I want to look at Navajo photography from a Navajo's point of view, both as subject and as photographer. Some readers may wonder why; I say, why not? Who is to say that an eighty-year-old shepherd knows less than a photography critic? Has the critic ever herded sheep in freezing weather? Has the critic ever had to wait at an Indian Health Service clinic for five hours to see a doctor and then hitchhike thirty miles home in 100-degree heat with a 103-degree fever? The point is, we must first remember that the Navajo are alive. I know that sounds simplistic, but most photographers who photograph Indians do so because they think they might be the last to photograph a dying way of life. Well, the Navajo are not quite ready for an epitaph.

We speak of Indian photography as if the Indians are gone, as if they have no vision of their own image. What I wanted to do was to have Navajo people respond to the two books that have defined, for thousands of people, who the Navajo are. What is the Navajo reaction to these images? I showed the two books to Navajo from my community of Round Rock, Arizona, and then I just sat back and listened to their comments. I wanted real people, using real words, to describe their reaction to the photographs.

Laura Gilpin and Leonard McCombe have influenced almost every photographer who has stepped onto the reservation, and this accumulated imagery has defined who the Navajo are. It only seems right that the Navajo get a chance to judge if this characterization is correct. I wanted to get points of view other than my own, other than that of another photography critic, a shepherd, a weaver, a medicine man.

Gilpin and McCombe were close to their subjects; this is evident by looking at their books. But even before we think about the images, we should think about the titles, which say much about the photographers and the approach they took in photographing the Navajo. *The Enduring Navaho* sounds romantic, respectful, and friendly. *Navaho Means People*, on the other hand, sounds cold, almost matter-of-fact. Laura Gilpin was primarily a portrait photographer, Leonard McCombe a photojournalist, but I am not going to go into the life of Gilpin or McCombe. I am not concerned with who they were, but rather what they did.

In *The Enduring Navaho* Gilpin writes,

It has been my privilege to observe some of the old life and much of the transition to the new. It has been intensely interesting, often heartbreaking, sometimes amusing, and in general has filled me with admiration for these people. Photography is essentially the medium for recording and interpreting such change. . . . My endeavor has been to create a visual image of these people. (p.vii)

McCombe, on the other hand, made his fame with *Life Magazine* when that magazine defined America. *Navajo Means People* was one of a long line of impressive picture stories that McCombe worked on. In the preface of the book, McCombe writes,

This is, I think, the first time the Navaho have been photographed in this manner—to show, without embellishment, the real way of life of a people who live quietly in an old tradition in the midst of the most modern society in the world. I hope this collection of pictures will contribute to a general understanding of Navaho life and will be of specific value to the student of Navaho culture.

Gilpin and McCombe both use a very straightforward documentary style. There is no theatrical lighting or special effects. They are concerned with the people rather than the technique. On a personal note, these two books are part of the reason that I myself got interested in photography.

I first became aware of *The Enduring Navaho* one summer when I was hired to print black-and-white photographs that my father had shot during the 1950s. They were photographs of friends in places where he worked—Navajo people and wagons, kids playing baseball, women weaving, and other pictures. The darkroom

was in the back of a library, and as I waited for the prints to dry I began to look at some of the books. *The Enduring Navaho* was one of them. At first I thought my father had taken the photographs. These pictures had the same feel: They were pictures of friends. This is what strikes me about Gilpin's work—that she photographed her friends. Her compassion and her reverence for a way of life different from her own are evident in many photographs. The sheer force of her involvement is what makes her pictures memorable. They almost seem like a personal diary of places she went, people she met, and things she did.

One of Gilpin's most famous photographs, of a family sitting before the American flag, has been copied again and again by other photographers as they photograph the Navajo. One of the first people to whom I showed the book commented on that picture. I believe this comment says a lot about how Navajo view photography:

That image, for me, is not of that family but rather of my aunt or uncle and their baby. It gives a reference point for stories that have been told to me by my mom or aunt.

When my mom talks about riding a wagon to go to town or something, it is a photograph, maybe taken by this lady [Laura Gilpin] that gives me a picture of a way of life that has changed. It is the photograph that helps me understand my people better and tell my kids what life used to be like.

What strikes me about this comment is that a person born and raised on the Navajo Reservation is dependent on an outsider to show her what it was like to grow up on the reservation before cars or supermarkets. Thus the view is influenced by the personality and beliefs of the photographer. What Laura Gilpin thought was important was, I am sure, not what Navajo people thought was important.

Later I showed the book to a middle-aged man at a Christmas dinner in my community of Round Rock. He said,

I closed the book with more questions than answers. I wanted to know more. Why is she standing so far back at some ceremonies—did she have permission or did she steal the image? How was she able to be so close to the Ye'ii-bi-chei?

Another man said,

Non-Navajos always say we are lazy, that we have no sense of time. Maybe it is the way of photography to always stop

action—but Navajos are not like that. There is no beginning or end—just a continuation.

I had not looked at *Navajo Means People* for a couple of years. My memory was of a book filled with images that are not idealistic, but rather realistic. My memory did not fail me. The lens did not treat the subject sympathetically by focusing only on the upbeat; it focused on the Navajo as if they were characters in a play. McCombe peered onto the stage, drew the curtain back, and, almost invisibly, photographed whatever drama was unfolding before him. He then slipped away with the images before the final curtain.

I am a Navajo. I have lived on the reservation for almost my entire life. I have taken photographs for more than a decade. I admire Leonard McCombe's pictures. After looking at his book, I almost get a sense of stolen images. I do not know whether to feel guilty or honored for having looked at these very private moments. There is a commitment to the image but, unlike Gilpin's work, no emotional attachment. A Navajo man remarked after looking at both books,

In the Navajo [Gilpin's] book, I kept looking to see who the people were. That seemed important. But in the People [McCombe's] book, I wasn't as concerned with who the people were but, instead, what they were doing.

It is in McCombe's objectivity that the full impact of his work can be appreciated. He is not making judgments. His work is not meant to be the last on a dying culture but rather a glimpse into a different way of life. The subject just happens to be the Navajo.

That brings me to the most asked question and the biggest response to McCombe's work: How did he take those pictures? Especially the death of a young child. Everyone to whom I showed the book quickly passed the pictures of the dying child. Most seemed disgusted, few wanted to talk about the image, but everyone wanted to know how he did it. One man remarked, "Who let him, they mustn't be real Navajos. We just don't do that. They must have been paid a lot of money." A woman said, "The Catholic Church must have set it up for him. They're really big in Lukachukai." Remember that Leonard McCombe was famous at this time. When McCombe came to Navajo, it was "*Life goes to Lukachukai.*"

One woman who saw the book said,

Navajos weren't afraid then. They were proud and wanted to share. They didn't think they would ever lose their culture. But today they are afraid that they might lose it. And when you are afraid, you hold it closer to you, you show less people and you become more private. But, photographing the death of a child, there are some things that should remain private no matter how proud you are.

The fine line between exploitation and information is always changing.

"When I looked at McCombe's work, I cried at the end of the book," a young Navajo woman said. She continued,

It was published in 1951, but it could be 1993. The problems of alcoholism and racism are still around. The picture of the two young Navajo women made me think of my own mother. It really got under my skin. I have never seen anything as objective about who the Navajo are. But, I wonder, who did he take the pictures for—the Navajo or himself? If he was Navajo it would be a very insightful piece of work, but because he is white I can't help but think he's exploiting us.

Another woman brought up the point that

[b]oth books ignored the importance of women in Navajo society. The pictures of women seemed to be for decoration. A place to hang jewelry. The children are also ignored. Their chores, their way of life. They always seem to be sitting next to their mother. I can't keep my kids around me; they're too full of energy to sit still.

A middle-aged couple said of McCombe's work,

His whole focus on education is from a mission school. Why? It makes us look like we're Christians. Only a small portion of kids went to mission schools, but the perception is that we all did. In some ways, it is nice because it shows how these missions tried to change us; they might have cut our hair and showed us how to put on makeup, but we're still here.

Another point voiced by a young person was that McCombe seemed to sensationalize the life of the Navajo:

The death of a child, drunks in Gallup, the man going to the doctor, all of these make memorable pictures, but they distort the life of Navajos on the reservation. Not all Navajos are drunks. Not all Navajos allow photographers to photograph their dying child. I still like the book, but I feel like he focused on the extremes.

If you disregard the “sensational” pictures, what really sets McCombe’s work apart from others is that what you see are moments in people’s lives. These may be insignificant to some, perhaps, but they portray the reality of living on the reservation. McCombe’s work did not display a lot of preconceived ideas; he photographed people living their lives. The power of McCombe’s view is magnified because of Gilpin’s work. The two books actually help each other because of their stark differences.

Another important aspect of McCombe’s work is that he begins to show the connection the Navajo have with the land. However, the depth and intensity of this relationship is absent from both books. Also absent from both books is humor: Navajo history and culture are rich in humor. The legends of Coyote have kept the Navajo laughing for centuries, yet these two books show a very solemn people. “Sometimes I think non-Indians believe we don’t have teeth,” said one woman. “We never smile, we never laugh; all we do is look serious. Laughter is the sweetest music the Holy People taught us.”

These are the two biggest flaws in McCombe’s and Gilpin’s books: the absence of both humor and the bond with the land. One person to whom I showed the books said, “There are pictures of people and pictures of land, but there are no pictures of the Navajo with their Mother.” Mother Earth is not a cliché to the Navajo; it is central to their culture and their language. To ignore the relationship between the Navajo and the land is to ignore a significant part of their humanity.

The Navajo have a word for human beings. It is *bila’ ashdla’ li*, meaning “the five-fingered people.” I think this is one of the most beautiful phrases in any language. Like five fingers, there are many facets to being Navajo: the culture, the language, the religion, and the land, to name a few. Being Navajo is more than just putting on turquoise and velveteen. In order to reflect the Navajo truly, photographs must reveal all five fingers, the whole person.

Where does this leave the state of photography and the Navajo today? Some people say that any non-Indian photographer who

attempts to photograph Indians is exploiting them. For many years, it seemed that Indians either lived in barrooms or at powwows. This was the extent of Indian photography. Photographers were busy showing how Indians were similar to each other rather than how tribes were different. Despite what many other Indian photographers feel, I do not see anything wrong with non-Indians photographing Indians. We, as a people, are lucky that photographers like Leonard McCombe and Laura Gilpin have shared their humanity and their vision. The force of their imagery has depicted a people rich in spirit, culture, and nobility. But their time has passed. It is now up to the Navajo to define themselves.

It is a sad commentary on contemporary Indian photography that there has not been a definitive or insightful piece of work done by an Indian. It is not enough to be an Indian photographer; you must be good. There has to be a difference in your work.

Forty years after Leonard McCombe's work and thirty years after Laura Gilpin's, no Navajo photographer has achieved the success of either of them in defining the Navajo. The same is true for almost any Indian tribe in America. But it may be that the closer one is to a subject, the more difficult it is to be objective. Whatever the reason, Indians have been defined by outsiders. Sometimes it is hard to discern what came first, the cliché or the photograph.

As we enter the twenty-first century, many photographers are attempting to reinvent the "enduring Navajo" image. They come to the reservation with preconceived ideas, and they force their inadequate interpretation of the Navajo upon the subject. Is this the Navajo, or is this an image of the Navajo perpetuated by the repeated bombardment of the classic "noble savage" or "Gilpin image?" The "Gilpin image" has been repeated so often that it has become a reality. This is not a criticism of Laura Gilpin but rather of the state of Indian photography today.

I once took a well-known photographer around the reservation. We drove up to a hogan where an old couple were taking sheep out of the corral. The photographer was excited because he wanted to photograph Navajo shepherding. He went up to them, had them stop working, straightened up their work area, and proceeded to set up a portrait in which the two of them stared into the lens, with the sheep in the background.

I bring this up because it is not enough to discuss Laura Gilpin's and Leonard McCombe's work; we must also see what their influence has been on photography. Gilpin's work has, like Ed-

ward Curtis's, become a classic. Today, photographers visit an Indian reservation wanting to do some portrait work. It is—and I do not mean to offend—easy. Point a camera at an elderly Navajo, her face aged by a lifetime of hard work, and any picture will be good, especially with today's cameras.

McCombe has not created the same number of followers. For one thing, his book has been out of print since the early 1960s, and for close to thirty years few people have seen these photographs, except those who already have the book or have come across it in libraries.

Both McCombe and Gilpin wrote about photographing change, but each took a different approach to the idea of change. In the end, the books assist each other: The strong points of McCombe's work complement Gilpin's weak points, and the strengths of Gilpin help McCombe's shortcomings. To truly understand change and to capture it in photographs, the photographer must know what life was like before the photography occurred. Only by knowing the past can he or she focus on where the change is headed. This involves photographing the whole human being.

The Navajo are changing every day. A non-Navajo's reference point for change might be an image from Laura Gilpin or Leonard McCombe. The greater the difference, the greater the change. But because change occurs with each setting sun, the most important aspects of it are the most subtle. These are the changes that define the modern Navajo. These are the changes that go largely unnoticed. The ancient prayers that are offered to protect the Navajo in a modern world are the same ones that were first given to the Navajo by the Holy People when they emerged into this world.

I hope it will be Navajo photographers who begin to ask, "Who are we?" and who answer photographically—from a Navajo point of view—using all five fingers.

NOTES

1. Leonard McCombe, Evon Z. Vogt, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navajo Means People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951).
2. Laura Gilpin, *The Enduring Navajo* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).