

Gabriel B. Tait
SBMS: A Visual Exploration of Liberian Identity

Abstract:

This article explores the use of visuals by missionaries and social scientists to communicate their encounters in sub-Saharan Africa. It offers an alternative perspective by incorporating the Sight Beyond My Sight (SBMS) visual research methodology created by Gabriel Tait. SBMS is a participant research method that employs photography as a way to understand culture and identity. The implications of this body of work, and the method it provides, presents a much-needed contextual lens for missionaries, visual ethnographers, and general persons who are interested in communicating their contexts in partnership with the cultures they are encountering and impacting. The implication of this work is a more accurate representation of the identities of the people they are working alongside.

Keywords: Photography, Christian missions, identity, Liberia, ethnography

Gabriel B. Tait is an associate professor of diversity and media at Ball State University in the School of Journalism and Strategic Communication. In addition to his academic career, Tait's tenure as a photojournalist spans nearly 30 years, previously working at the Detroit Free Press, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and several other newspapers where he was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. He earned his Ph.D. in intercultural studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and is the first African American to graduate with a Ph.D. from Asbury.

“The Dark Continent’ has long been the common designation for Africa, but the darkest thing about it has been outsiders’ ignorance of its people.”

(Phipps 2002, xi)

Introduction

In the twenty-first century it can be said we live in a visual culture (Josephson, Kelly, and Smith 2020; Fahmy, Bock, and Wanta 2014; Tait 2010). Much of our history is preserved by what we see and how we process what has been observed. With digital technology and the instantaneous nature of producing photographs or visual artifacts, much of what we see is passed on by a simple click of a mouse or touch of an interactive screen. In many ways this immediate appetite for visual representational tidbits, has blurred, if not blinded the outsider’s appreciation for the historical contributions of those who navigated what Cain Hope Felder notes is “the stony rode we trod.” Historically missionaries and cross-cultural servants have used visuals, mainly in the form of photographs, as tools for conveying their communications and endeavors with the people they are serving. Just last month, Asbury graduates, including former classmates of mine, posted several photographs of their service in eastern Europe. One photograph was of my classmate’s family, another was of a local mechanic working at an auto garage. While these photographs seem fairly straightforward, allowing the viewer to read the captions, see the names of the people in the photographs, and gain a narrow perspective of the context that is being represented, there is a level of complexity in the representation that is not as readily apparent. For observers, questions arise. What is the specific location of the photograph? Where is the group located? Why was this photo presented and not another? Who selected the photograph being presented? Are there things that are being omitted from the photographs that would give a greater sense of the community and it’s needs? These questions are ones that I have aimed to answer over my 20 years of working and serving in cross-cultural contexts.

Broadly this article is about Sight Beyond My Sight (SBMS), a photographic tool and method I developed, for learning from local communities about issues of importance to them. More specifically, this article brings light to the importance of visually representing one’s service, but it is duly meant to encourage missionaries and cross-cultural servants of

the importance of encouraging members in their respective communities to photograph, share, and explain the value systems that they have, as well as the meaningful ways that they want to represent their own communities. I will accomplish the above-mentioned aim by presenting a case study taken from my research in Liberia that seeks to shed new light on and affirm the values often overlooked in western approaches to missions.

Charting the Journey

Over a decade ago I embarked on a missional and academic journey to learn about Liberian culture and identity from Liberians. Inspired by the missional calling of Lott Carey and other African American missionaries who chose to leave the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries to serve in Africa, I was fascinated with the country and its complex history with America. I was a Ph.D. candidate¹ in the research phase of Asbury's Intercultural Studies program. In my previous life before seminary, I served over 20 years as a Pulitzer prize nominated photojournalist for several of the country's top newspapers (including the Detroit Free Press & the St. Louis Post-Dispatch). I was seeking a way to bridge my giftedness in photojournalism with the representational void that often existed in the literature and the visual records from persons in evangelized contexts. I prepared diligently for my months-long assignment in Liberia. It was there that I piloted the groundbreaking inclusive visual method SBMS. I will share more about SBMS later in this article.



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Rev. Dr. Gabriel B. Tait gives a Historic presentation on some of the missionary photographs produced in the late 19th and early 20th century, during the inaugural SBMS training in the historic Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, Liberia. Founded in 1882 Providence Baptist Church is considered the cornerstone church of Liberia. Founded on the shores of modern-day Monrovia by former United States slave Lott Carey and associates, Providence Baptist has played a central role in the formation of the country. The constitution and declaration of independence was signed at Providence in 1847. Photo by: Amos Wonta/Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

Reflection on Liberia

Liberia has a complex² relationship with the United States. Originally called the Grain Coast by its indigenous leaders, in 1816, members of the U.S. Congress in partnership with religious communities and abolitionists developed a repatriation program that would “encourage” free African American and former slaves to return “back” to the small West African territory. The U.S. was following the model of the British in their creation of Sierra Leone. In Liberia this complex relationship would eventually give birth to what missionary and black nationalist Alexander Crummell would note was one of the most productive times in Black missions. During his twenty years of service in Liberia as a missionary,

educator, scholar, and lecturer, he observed in excess of tens-of thousands of African Americans heeding the call to missions in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Crummell's (2004) 1865 address before the Pennsylvania colonization society, he testified the following:

Go down two hundred miles to the Republic of Liberia, and see there 14,000 black emigrants from more than half of the States of America; and see there, too, how that God, after carrying on His work of preparation in the black race in America in dark, mysterious and distressful ways, has at length brought out a remnant of them and placed them in a free Republic, to achieve high nationality, to advance civilization and to sub-serve the highest interests of the Cross and the Church! (2004: 287)

Thus, the impact of African-American missionaries was motivated by what Killingray (2003: 7) asserts was a dualistic belief in "providential design" and "race redemption" in their efforts to return to Africa and share the Christian gospel. Their service in Liberia, while complex, highlights one of the greatest missional endeavors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of black missions.

Seeing Through a Glass Darkly (Photographs as Spectral Ships)

In Paul's letter to the church of Corinth, he tells readers that we metaphorically see through a glass darkly and eventually we will see clearly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Missionaries were early adopters of the camera. In the first half of the 19th century these western missionaries, settlers, and anthropologists often traveled to the continent of Africa. One of their innovative ways of communicating their encounters was to produce photographs. The photographs³ they constructed would become spectral ships or visual records to transport their home constituencies and others to lands where they desired to reach the "unreached" (Tait 2010: 321). Monti (1987) draws a through line suggesting, "the documentation of the ever more decisive European incursion into Africa's politics, economy, religion, and culture, transmitted to the outside world the first view(s) of this immense and indecipherable African continent" (5). Tienou (1991) rightly advances how many of these photographic representations exoticized the photographers encounters with Africans creating the perpetual stereotype

which served as the foundation for the “Invention of the ‘Primitive’ and Stereotypes in Mission.” He continues, “In mission circles, the idea of the ‘primitive’ is the cradle of many a stereotype used for describing missionized people” (1991: 296). bell hooks’ “miscegenated gaze” is illustrated by Willis’ (1994: 17) discussion on black identity and representations where she notes the “civilized” photographer – traveler often found the nude image of an African woman irresistible. Giving credence again to Monti’s (1987) realization that biases are always present when outsiders visually communicate their interaction. He continues, “Africa transmitted by photography... never was nor could be impartial; it was above all a Western interpretation, particularly rich in fantastic ideas” (5). However, photographs also serve as a record that one has been present in a particular place at a particular time, in a specific cultural setting. While photographs are useful for portraying contexts and providing a lens for those that are not physically present in the context, they can also result in a complex view of cultures and communities for those viewers. Combs (2014) notes, “While photographs are not absolute truth(s), and often suggest(s) more questions than answers, they have a power to provoke, push, or propel one to think about a historical moment, reexamine the known world, or demonstrate the possibilities of one’s future” (10). Unfortunately, many of these photographic representations missed the mark, transmitted exoticized and biased perspectives, and omitted the very voices of the people they were seeking to make known. Consequently, the way photographs were propagated to outsiders, misrepresented the very cultures they were trying to reach.



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Prince Mulbah (center, white shirt holding a photograph) leads a focus group discussion at the historic Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, Liberia. The 11 focus group participants were examined during the inaugural SBMS study on Liberian culture and identity. Founded in 1882 Providence Baptist Church is considered the cornerstone church of Liberia. Photo by: Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

The Infusion of Photography in Missions and Liberia

In Liberia, African Americans were some of the first to use the medium of photography in the form of daguerreotypes to record their encounters. Augustus Washington, an African American daguerreotypist⁴ from Trenton, New Jersey, traveled to Liberia, West Africa in 1853, as part of the American Colonization Society (ACS) repatriation movement. As a highly respected daguerreotypist in the United States, Washington was “cheered” by ACS officials because he would be producing daguerreotype views at the behest of the ACS upon his arrival in Liberia (Shumard and Washington 1999: 10). The ACS was looking for photographic views that could be reproduced as engravings in their publications. Washington established a daguerrean studio after arriving in Liberia and made a living photographing government officials, merchants, and religious leaders in the United States and in Liberia.⁵ One of the first photographs sent back to the United States was that of Virginia native and Liberian president Joseph Jenkins Roberts.

Washington would eventually produce a series of daguerreotypes that are now in the United States Library of Congress.⁶ The daguerreotypes brought to bear issues of identity and representation, particularly concerning how the westerners represented themselves and viewed the native⁷ people. They also helped viewers see the settlers' new land. Conscientiously, Roth (1982: 34) notes, "In their letters to stateside periodicals and in speeches while on furloughs, black missionaries increasingly refuse to portray the African as uncivilized and savage; he was unsaved, perhaps, but not unsound." One can argue that there was a sensitivity that existed when persons were representing communities that looked like themselves.

Sight Beyond My Sight (A Way of Seeing): Representation Matters

For the first half of this article, I have presented historical challenges that arose as many indigenous Africans, including Liberians, had outsiders come into their communities, photograph them, and represent their culture and themselves with an outsider's definition and perspective (Tait 2020). Most of the time, the indigenous community did not have a say in how they were visually represented, or even if they wanted to be photographed. Decades later, issues of identity and representation still arise in the photographs taken by a new generation of missionaries. Given the above challenges, SBMS was created to offer a much-needed communication vehicle for missionaries, anthropologists, and other social scientists seeking means to partner with local communities to learn about and document issues of importance from their perspective.

For the second part of this article, I will drill down into a few of the tenants of SBMS and its biblical basis. Taking its foundation from Mark chapter 8:22-25 there is this beautiful narrative of Jesus healing a blind man. This interaction offers a framework in which SBMS is conceptually designed and applied. SBMS uses this narrative as a metaphor (Lakoff 1980) to illustrate several components within the interaction which ultimately results in the transformation of the man from blindness to seeing with clarity. First, this is the only place in the biblical narrative where Jesus touches a person twice to perform his miracle. Second, the conversation with Jesus leads one to believe that the person whose sight was transformed had previously seen. SBMS argues that the local community producing, reflecting on, and giving meaning to their own photographs offers a more complete picture (both literally and figuratively) of their culture and identity for both

themselves and outsiders. SBMS allows (by employing local participants to 1- take photographs, 2- reflect on the photographs they have created, and 3- engage in a collective community dialogue for shared meanings of the photographs) the facilitator to provide a holistic understanding that “sees” beyond the obvious photograph for the deeper cultural narrative that exists.

In essence, through the medium of photography a researcher, missionary, or visitor from outside the community has the opportunity to learn at a deeper level the locally interpreted context of the communities they hope to understand. SBMS also empowers those who utilize it to express various cultural and religious values through the camera lens. The outcome of the initial SBMS study in Liberia, and subsequent studies in five American cities, has been a growing body of literature, and the documented stories of several participants who have had the opportunity to experience and use SBMS to share and address topics of importance to them.



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Amos Korzawu photographed business as his primary category of his four thematic piles. The piles were Community Dweller, Students, Campaigner(s), and Business. His largest pile contained 13 photographs of his 20. Korzawu, identified six different business types (A) tailors, (B) used clothes sellers, (C) fish/meat sellers, (D) rice and grain sellers, (E), money exchanger and (telephone) scratch card sellers and (F) street vendors. For Korzawu, these specific aspects of business reveal a hierarchical structure that existed in the Liberian business world. For an outsider going into this Monrovia, Liberian context, understanding the value placed on these aspects of business can be very helpful. Photos by: Amos Korzawu /Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

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A Glimpse at SBMS as a Method

Looking back at the first study, it was the rainy season in Liberia. It was also a period when political parties were campaigning for their respective candidates. Tensions were high. This was a time where people were reserved in their interactions, waiting to see who would win. It was in this context that SBMS was launched with eleven participants (eight men and three women), between the ages of 18-65. They represented eight of the sixteen ethnic groups and six churches.

For the photography study, participants were asked to take pictures that would represent their communities, cultures, and people as they saw it. Participants were provided digital cameras on a rotating schedule (up to four participants were given cameras in one-week rotations); each participant was given one week to make pictures. They were then asked to think about and photographically answer the question: "If someone were coming from outside of your community, what photographs would you take to inform the outsider about you and your community?" The participants were in essence asked to give a visual glimpse into their world through the camera lens. This was not done when outsiders came into their communities and photographed them without their input.

After participants made their pictures, their cameras, SD cards, and notes were collected. The photographs from the SD cards were coded and archived. During the next stage of SBMS each participant had one-on-one interviews with the SBMS research team. In the interviews five events occurred: 1- Participants were asked if the photographs they took were accurate representations of their culture and community. They were then asked to talk about the photographs broadly and provide a context in which they made their pictures. 2- The participants were asked to select their top 20 photographs that most represented the overarching question (showing the identity of the people, places, and things that they wanted to show); 3- They sorted their top 20 photographs into thematic piles to elicit categories of interpretation; 4- They provided a verbal explanation of what they were trying to represent in the photos; and then, 5- They provided their top three photographs as best representing their themes.

Following the individual interviews, all 11 participants came together in a focus group to discuss their top three photographs. There were a total of 35 pictures (33 from the participants and 2 bonus) in the focused group discussions. Four themes evolved from the focus group discussions (through interviews and sorting as described above) for the photographs

that were taken: Who we are (or are not), What we believe, How we live, and What we eat. These themes offered a more complete picture of Liberian identity and culture and served as a counter narrative to those historically presented.



Tailor Mazzie Brohme (cq) prepares to sew a Lapa Skirt while sitting at her older model sewing machine in her tailor shop in the Nekley Town community. Uniform skirts are sold for \$350 LD about \$5.00 U.S. According to Korzawu, the tailor has been one of the most important roles in the Liberia business world. Korzawu, noted how times are changing. He recalled, "People could not afford buy imported clothes suit(s). But now imported clothes suit, is not cheap. So now more people are not sewing coat suit again. Even people who are getting married now they are not sewing coat suits again. They just go straight to the store and buy that sets of clothes." Korzawu has observed how the role of tailors has been changing over the years. Big business is changing the way Liberians are purchasing their fine clothes. He says, men tailors tend to design and make suites and trousers, while women tend to make shirts and skirts. Photo by: Amos Korzawu /Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

A Case Study in Liberia

Amos Korzawu

One of the participants in the SBMS study was Amos Korzawu. When Korzawu requested to participate, I was looking through the visual records of the former Liberian Presidential Executive Mansion. He was a tall, slender, youthful looking man dressed in black pants and a white oxford style shirt. "Excuse me, sir!" "My name is Amos Korzawu and I am interested in your study, are you still signing up people?" he asked. Encouraged by Amos' initiative, I registered him.

Korzawu took 87 photographs of his community. The photographs represented various people, various campaign rallies, broken infrastructure, and a myriad of other images in and around the capital city of Monrovia. Of his many photographs Korzawu selected his top 20 pictures that he determined best represented his community. These photographs were then organized into four different thematic piles: *Community Dweller*, *Students*, *Campaigner(s)*, and *Business*. His largest pile contained 13 photographs of his 20. Thinking this was an error, I asked Korzawu if the images were in their most fitting categories. He said, "Yes, the photos all show business in Liberia."

Korzawu focused his most important pile on the theme *Business*. He included thirteen photographs in this grouping. The number of photos in the other piles varied from *Campaigner(s)* (3) *Community Dweller* (2), and *Students* (2). As a marketing student at the University of Liberia, Korzawu, says he took the photographs due to the businesses in his community. He said, "Liberia does not have just one business, but different businesses that people are involved with in our community" (Korzawu, Second Interview Part 1a 2011). From his grouping he identified six different business types: (A) tailors, (B) used clothes sellers, (C) fish/meat sellers, (D) rice and grain sellers, (E), money exchanger and (telephone) scratch card sellers and (F) street vendors. Korzawu, says these groups have specific roles in the business world.

In the middle of the piling session, I asked Amos, "How does this group of photos speak to you and your culture? And why should an outsider know about these different businesses?" He looked at me in his cool, laid back posture and said, "If someone from your side comes to Liberia and don't know [about the levels of selling] they will waste a lot of money. Selling is a part of Liberian culture." He added, "If a missionary could

help someone build a booth it would be a great help” (Korzawu, Second Interview Part 1a 2011). His photos provided an ethnographic look from the urban center of Monrovia. In his photo of the tailor (category A), she sits at her sewing machine that is set up inside of a converted shipping container. The various types of garments that she makes can be seen on the posters on the back wall. It’s important to note that those images are of black women. The implications of a black man and woman seeing themselves represented in these various types of clothing adds a level of authenticity and affirmation to their identity. They are able to show how they want to be represented. In another image, Korzawu photographs a mother sorting used clothes (category B) with her son in the photograph. A pair of used blue jeans may sell for several U.S dollars. This can be one of the financially secure careers in Monrovia. In a country where the average worker makes under one dollar US a day, the used clothing business provides an opportunity for the vendor to make a life for themselves and their family. In the images of the fish and meat sellers (category C), they work in outside markets. Relationships and pricing are very important in a market where there is a lot of competition. In another photo, a woman with many fish is depicted as a representative of local food sellers. The food sellers are able to make a living because people need food.

Korzawu’s grouping offers an important perspective on grasping the idea and diversity of business in Liberia. While the photos may not rise to a certain level of aesthetics, they offer an insider perspective of the Liberian culture. If one looks at the 13 images provided, they will see a diversity of ages, a diversity of genders, and a diversity of shared experiences. The connection between all of the photographs is that these are various ways Liberians make a living. To outsiders, the exercise of going to work may be defined in various ways. For example, consider the photograph of the tailor. Based on Korzawu’s understanding of Liberian culture he says that this is one of the most significant positions in the business community. He noted how the tailor is the person who has not only a skilled gift at making clothes, but their clientele is often a part of the community that can afford clothes and will pay for the respective garments purchased. This is not unlike an American haberdasher who focuses their attention on a specific clientele. The uniqueness of these photographs shows a particular hierarchy of business. A missionary might interact with each one of the vocations presented but may not make the important connection on how each of the business owners give value and meaning to Liberian identity. These photos,

provided together with the cultural descriptions and explanations, reveal meaning beyond what is seen by looking at the photograph. This is the essence of SBMS.



Janje David, photographs a Hunter in his River Cess, Grand Bassa County, Liberia community. David says the Hunter is one of the most respected people in the village. In a post-civil war era village hunter is one of a few people that is legally allowed to carry a gun. He says the hunter is responsible for finding meat for the village. He notes, "If your farm is going to survive the hunter works hard to be the protector." David's observations provide a unique lens to understand the role differences between rural life and "urban dwellers" which live in the city centers. Photo by: Janje David /Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

Janje David

Janje David was another participant in the first SBMS study. David, a married father of eight children (six daughters and two sons) and a member of the Bassa ethnic group, represented, River Cess, one of the rural areas of Liberia although he lived in Monrovia. David, a high school graduate with one semester of seminary training at the Baptist Seminary in Monrovia, says he was forced to withdraw because of the 1999 war, and he never returned (David, First Interview 2011).

David took 104 photographs of his community. These photographs represented 4 general topic areas- The way we live (7), communication in the African context (4), Hunting for a living-hunting on the farm (6), and cotton tree worship (3). The most important photograph in David's take was of a hunter. "The hunter is the most important person in the village!" is how Janje David started our session analyzing his photographs. His observations moved me to ask the questions: Who is a hunter? What does a hunter do? Why is the hunter the most important person in the village? The hunter, as one of the few people allowed to carry a gun following the civil conflict, is responsible for protecting the community. "When the community needs a protector, they call the hunter. When they need to collect meat, they get the hunter. The hunter is a tribal man and most important part of my community, (River Cess)," Janje concludes.



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Janje David, photographs the village drummer in his River Cess, Grand Bassa County, Liberia community. David says the drummer in traditional society is one of the most important communication channels. The drummer informs people in the villages and tells them when it's time to go to work, if there is danger, and good news within the village(s). David shares how this is an important communication tool of the past. Technology has changed how villagers communicate. Photo by: Janje David /Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Used with Permission.

Conclusion

The above examples highlight the value of SBMS as a participatory technique to learn about a culture from within that culture, and to have members of the culture share their particular views of their own culture and identity, as well as the various nuances and complexities of both. The photographs produced during an SBMS study or project provide an “insider” perspective that enhances overall understanding. For example, Janje David’s photographs provided us with access to an otherwise closed community. Through his participation in the study and his images, he offered a level of the inner workings of his community that would not have been readily available or known to an outsider. The importance of the village

hunter is communicated not only by the photograph, but also by David's explanation of context which enables us to understand why the hunter is so important to the community and the cultural context (in this case the law regarding bearing arms in a post-civil war country) that contributes to that significance.

Considering issues of representation, it is important to note the difference between how members of a specific culture choose to represent and identity themselves, and the lenses through which those outside of a given culture may represent members of that culture. Historically, "outsiders" have used photography and photographs to misrepresent various people and cultures, including the people and cultures on the continent of Africa. SBMS provides a tool and methodology that empowers members of various cultures to define and represent their culture from within. SBMS also allows those seeking to understand various cultures to gain an emic, and often deeper, perspective.



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Janje David, photographs children at the river in River Cess, Grand Bassa County, Liberia community. David says children have a joy living in the interior. He smiles and says, "This is my home!" Photo by: Janje David /Gabriel B. Tait/SBMS© Use with Permission.

End Notes

¹ In 2013, I would become the first African American to graduate with an earned Ph.D. in the seminary's history.

² Liberia has a unique relationship with the United States. In 1816, members of the U.S. Congress in partnership with religious communities and abolitionists (which included Quakers and others) followed the model of the British and developed a repatriation program. They would send free and former African American slaves "back" to the small West African territory.

³ In this article I will use the terms daguerreotype, photographs, images, and pictures interchangeably unless noted. Daguerreotype (produced through the early twentieth century) is the technical term in the early photographic process. All are synonymous with the visual record produced by a photographer using a camera. No distinction is made between daguerreotypes (a pre-photographic process) and the physical photograph. This article is interested in understanding how participants mechanically "capture" the images that are within their sight.

⁴ A daguerreotype is the earliest practical photographic process that produced a one-off positive image on either an iodine-sensitized silvered plate or mercury vapor metal plate. L.J.M. Daguerre invented the process in 1839. One problem of nineteenth and early twentieth century daguerreotypes was that the pictures were staged, due to limitations of equipment. In various portraits persons being photographed may appear stoic or disassociated because they had to remain still during the timed exposure.

⁵ The United States Library of Congress has a digital archive of Augustus Washington's most prized daguerreotypes. (see: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=washington+augustus&co=dag&st=gallery>)

⁶ The National Portrait Gallery has produced a web series that highlights the life and work of African American photographer Augustus Washington (see: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/awash/awintro.htm>)

⁷ Occasions exist, out of fidelity to the language and text of the period (generally the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries), where terms like "heathen(s)" and "savage(s)" will be used to draw attention to labels associated with the local communities. While I do not view the local community in a pejorative way, historically the above noted terms have been used to distinguish between Western cultures and "others." Joy Hendry notes that Edward Tylor, the first holder of the chair of anthropology at Oxford University, held the view that "'savages' were somehow different from 'civilized' people" (Hendry 1999, 10).

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