

The Camera and the House: The Semiotics of New Guinea “Treehouses” in Global Visual Culture

RUPERT STASCH

Anthropology, University of California, San Diego

One of the most frequently encountered representations of West Papuan people internationally today is a photographic or video image of a Korowai or Kombai treehouse (Figure 1). Circulation of these images first exploded in the mid-1990s. In 1994, an *Arts & Entertainment Channel* film about Korowai was broadcast in the United States under the title *Treehouse People: Cannibal Justice*, and in 1996 *National Geographic* published a photo essay titled “Irian Jaya’s People of the Trees.” Korowai and Kombai treehouses have since been depicted in dozens of magazine and newspaper articles and twenty television productions, made by media professionals from the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Vietnam, and recently West Papua itself. Some representations have had mass global distribution through programming partnerships and satellite transmission agreements, and international editions of major magazines. Recently, several reality television programs have been produced about white travelers’ stays in treehouses with Korowai or Kombai hosts. These include an episode of *Tribe* broadcast on BBC and Discovery in 2005, the six episodes of *Living with the Kombai Tribe* shown on Travel Channel and Discovery International in 2007, and an episode of *Rendez-Vous En Terre Inconnue* televised to much acclaim on France 2 in 2009. Treehouses were widely seen by Australian audiences in

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FIGURE 1 House (*xaim*) of Dølelale Xayaanop and Xondol Malongatun with “dog platform” (*mean büax*), 1996. The boy is Mendop Malongatun (author’s photo).

2006 in the *Sixty Minutes* segment “The Last Cannibals,” and during a subsequent media firestorm that surrounded a rival show’s unsuccessful effort to film their anchor accompanying a supposedly endangered Korowai orphan boy to a safer life in town. In 2009, a BBC film crew filmed Korowai house construction for the forthcoming blockbuster series *Human Planet*, and in 2010 *National Geographic* began researching a possible second story on Korowai treehouses. In late June and early July 2010, photos of Korowai treehouses were published by newspapers in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Paraguay, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Turkey, Finland, Germany,

France, the United Kingdom, and other countries, to illustrate stories reporting the Indonesian census bureau's announcement that it had counted Korowai thoroughly for the first time (e.g., Andrade 2010; most stories drew their content from Agence France-Presse). In August 2010, production began for a feature-length Indonesian film about physical and romantic travails of Javanese protagonists who sojourn with Korowai in their jungle home; no filming is being carried out in the Korowai area or with Korowai actors, but treehouses figure prominently in the film's early written and visual publicity.¹

Television and magazine representations can place a single Korowai dwelling before the eyes of millions of persons, yet images of Korowai treehouses have also entered the global visual imaginary via less centralized paths of circulation.² Several hundred treehouse photographs are posted on the photo-sharing web pages of tourists (representing virtually all European nationalities and most settler colonial ones), professional websites of tour operators (based in Indonesia, the United States, and a dozen European countries), sites promoting commercial television or print representations of Korowai, and others about architectural curiosities. The treehouses also appear in books and newspaper sections directed at children (e.g., Pitzer and Holland 1997; Bode, Frey, and Linke 1999: 10; Nixon and Tomlinson 2008: 23). Bookstall shoppers in Laos in early 2010 encountered a Korowai treehouse image in a dwelling-themed literacy primer (Stein-Holmes 2009: 22) at the same time that students in a San Diego elementary school were building a model Korowai dwelling for an annual open house.

This article seeks to explain the purchase Korowai house images have in global visual culture today. The scale and repetitiveness of these images' circulation is itself evidence that they signify a "treehouse idea" in the cultural and fantasy lives of metropolitan publics. The treehouse idea in global visual culture is one element in a larger primitivist understanding of Korowai as fascinating exemplars of a "Stone Age" human condition (Stasch 2011). Here I examine just the treehouse strand of this global primitivist cultural formation, arguing that treehouse images are more foundationally representations of the culture of the photograph makers and viewers than of the culture of the house dwellers.

I examine several forms of evidence offering access to the "mythic" idea carried by treehouse photographs (after Barthes 1972), and to the aesthetic principles that structure how foreigners experience the images. I first sketch associations of treehouses in global popular culture that inform the attractiveness of

¹ See, for example, <http://www.kaskus.us/showthread.php?t=2898520&page=4> (accessed 25 Sept. 2010). The plot of *Lost in Papua* locates Korowai as neighbors to a further Papuan group comprised of only women, who kill intruding men after mating with them. This revives an earlier episode of Korowai being linked to the widespread West Papuan urban legend of an isolated all-female society (see *Jakarta Post* 1991).

² For simplicity, I will often write "Korowai" even when meaning "Korowai and Kombai."



FIGURE 2 New house of Silom Dambol (lower left), 1996, on a day when several youths are helping him to begin thatching the roof (author's photo).

the Korowai images. I next look at an earlier boom in treehouse photography centered on a different part of New Guinea, which involved many of the same patterns of primitivist meaning-making now structuring Korowai house imaging. I then outline patterns of Korowai people's own understandings of their houses. Finally, drawing on these different layers of historical and ethnographic context, I put the camera and the house in relation to each other—"camera" as it tends to be used in treehouse photography, and "house" as Korowai build and occupy them. Juxtaposing these two objects as comparable technologies of mediation throws into relief contingent assumptions about seeing that are lost to awareness in most experiences of photographs, but which are crucial conditions of those experiences. These include assumptions that sight can be free from time and particularity, and offers direct access to the typical.

THE TREEHOUSE AS "OTHER HOUSE" IN GLOBAL CULTURE

About four thousand Korowai live dispersed across five hundred square miles of lowland forest, just over one hundred miles inland from New Guinea's southwest coast. Kombai live south of Korowai. Historically, both groups built most of their houses elevated on foundations of topped tree trunks and other supporting poles (Figure 2). Both have in recent decades newly entered into relations with missionaries, Papuan church workers, Indonesian and Papuan government personnel, Indonesian traders or other immigrants, and the economy of paper money and mass consumer goods. As part of these new connections, most Kombai and about half of Korowai have begun building

ground-level houses in centralized permanent villages. In the northern Kombai lands and across most of the Korowai region, many people also continue to build treehouses away from villages, and alternate between forest and village or live only in the forest. It is these areas that tourists and media professionals have been visiting for two decades in order to photograph treehouses.

To most people in industrialized countries, any dwelling built by its own occupants without sawn lumber, metal fasteners, and durable roofing is an instance of what Rykwert (1981: 140) terms “the ‘other’ house”:

This may be a house which had once existed, before heroic or divine intervention turned it to stone; it may involve a hut still standing, which had “in the first days” been inhabited by god or hero; most commonly it is a rite of building huts which in some way resembled or commemorated those which ancestors or heroes had built at some remote and important time.... In every case they are “other” than the normal dwellings of the time and place. And in every case they incarnate some shadow or memory of that perfect building which was before time began: when man was quite at home in his house, and his house as right as nature itself.

Treehouses take this quality of architectural otherness to a special extreme. Their status as an anti-type to global publics’ ideas about normal housing is attested by their prominence in such popular works of imaginative literature and film as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Peter Pan*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Tarzan*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *Avatar*.³

In New Guinea treehouse photography, as in many fictional representations, the main idea of the treehouse is its primitive otherworldliness. The house form amplifies depicted people’s spatial and temporal remove from white normalcy. In addition to the otherworldliness of living in the “jungle” on a “remote” island, New Guineans withdraw up into the trees. Their tall dwellings are houses out of place, combining the homelike and strange in an exotic deviation from the felt normative repressions and securities of house design in metropolitan modernity. Korowai treehouse images routinely appear in books of the *Ripley’s Believe It or Not* genre (e.g., Hibbert 2003: 44; Farndon 2007: 32), and in other ways participate in the tradition of exhibiting curiosities that fascinate viewers through incongruous violation of received category structures.

Within this basic primitivist idea, there are more specific axes on which treehouses depart from normal house form. One is the otherness of childhood. In their elevation and small size, children’s treehouses simultaneously mimic adult domestic space and signal liberation from adult structures of authority and diminished imagination. “It’s every child’s dream,” a pharmaceutical chemist said to me about Korowai houses in a 2009 interview in California, by way of explaining why he had visited Korowai four years earlier.

³ Besides the books, films, and cartoons, see also Internet sources on the “Tarzan’s Treehouse” or “Swiss Family Robinson” attractions at the five Disney parks. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* also spent his first night ashore in a tree, and was given an elaborate Swiss Family Robinson-style treehouse in a 2008 U.S. television series.

A Swiss filmmaker whom I met in the Korowai area in 2007 similarly explained to me the audience appeal of the documentary his crew was making by asserting that the house Korowai were building for the film “is like a dream.... As children we dream of this, and here in this place they actually do it.” About choosing the Korowai area as one of their West Papua filming locations, he repeated the idea: “It’s children’s dream to see treehouses like this, so it was a sure thing we’d do that place.”⁴

Treehouses are also iconic of the otherness of nature, and of reintegrating humans into it. A house is by definition a vessel segregating people from the surrounding world, but treehouses enact a figurative twist on this expectation: they make a rooted natural body the dominant element of a dwelling’s structure. Ideas of closeness to nature strongly color global interest in Korowai dwellings. In the book *Treehouses of the World* (Nelson 2004), two photographs of men thatching a treehouse are captioned “Korowai is [*sic*] a fine example of what architect Frank Lloyd Wright called Organic Architecture—a building perfectly in harmony with its site. The poles, taken from the surrounding forest, are held together by rattan—also taken from the immediate surroundings” (p. 164). Association with nature also informs foreigners’ frequent comparison of treehouses to bird nests (e.g., O’Neill 1996: 19; Raffaele 2006: 51).⁵

Freedom, play, and reentry into nature are among the values of the long tradition of building treehouses for *adult* use in the West (Henderson and Mornement 2005: 12–49). The publication of many picture books about adult treehouses in the last fifteen years might be understood as a late reflection of the boom in this movement inaugurated by the countercultural transformations of the 1960s. Books and websites regularly invoke Korowai houses as an external archaic charter for this sub-cultural departure from industrialized societies’ dominant norms. *Treehouses of the World* juxtaposes five photos depicting Korowai as people who “actually live in treehouses” (Nelson 2004: 164) with images of forty-two individual “great treehouses” in the United States and other industrialized countries (see also Clark 2003: 10; Harris 2003: 6–7; Henderson and Mornement 2005: 54–61; Collins 2009: 6). Korowai circulate in the global visual imaginary as the type-case of a Romantic idea of treehouse living as a vernacular architectural form practiced by an entire ethnic group.

There are several other important strands of the metropolitan treehouse idea intertwined with the utopian otherness of childhood and of reintegration with

⁴ The company *Korowai Handcrafted Garden Retreats and Treehouses* was founded in the United Kingdom in 2010, and one of its specializations is “children’s playhouses.” See www.korowai.co.uk (accessed 31 Aug. 2010). The owner considered both “Kombai” and “Korowai” as names (personal communication). He had previously encountered numerous print and broadcast representations of these people, including the Kombai episode of the 2005 BBC show *Tribe*.

⁵ For earlier instances of this figure, see Ratzel (1896: I, 263), echoing Raffray (1879: 263), on houses in the Arfak Mountains, and Militaire exploratie (1920: 285) and Brandes (1929: 289) on houses in the upper Digul and Fly watersheds.

nature, including wildness, animality, primitive archaicism, construction skill, and the dystopian nightmare of war of all against all. Captioners and viewers frequently bring to Korowai treehouses the idea that they are defensive structures, iconic of the savage brutality of life beyond civilization. Wikipedia's English entry on Korowai has since August 2009 stated: "The distinctive high stilt architecture of the Korowai houses, well above flood-water levels, is a form of defensive fortification to disrupt rival clans from capturing people (especially women and children) for slavery or cannibalism. The height and girth of the common ironwood stilts also serves to protect the house from arson attacks in which huts are set alight and the inhabitants smoked out."⁶

Korowai do not practice slavery or set fire to dwellings while people are inside, and although events of cannibalism have occurred at various places on the landscape within most adults' living memories (as a collective response to male witchcraft), those acts had no direct links to house height. Korowai do sometimes mention security from prowling humans as a motive for house height, but what they emphasize most of all when asked about treehouses is fear of two nonhuman monsters: the "witches" who cause all human deaths, and the "demons" people become after dying. Height's protective character thus involves something invisible in a photograph: the cultural imagining of death, and of death's threatening affinity with domestic space. Yet treehouses' supposed function of defending against human attackers is a spontaneous inference about the dwellings widely made by global publics.

That a myth of the treehouse as other house precedes its application to New Guinea dwellings is also suggested by foreigners' invoking of fictional texts to interpret Korowai or Kombai houses. For example, one episode of *Living with the Kombai Tribe* centers on hosts' construction of a very tall treehouse for the two British visitors, Mark and Olly (see also Hoesterey n.d.). When Olly ascends for the first time while being filmed from below, his response on reaching the house platform is to cup his hands before his mouth and make a Tarzan call. Here the Tarzan story informs creation of the treehouse image in the first place.

OVERREPRESENTATION OF ABNORMALLY TALL HOUSES

That the core of the treehouse idea is norm-transgressing otherness is also supported by a pattern of photographic overrepresentation of exceptionally high dwellings. The main houses Korowai build are called *xaim*, and are built on

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korowai> (accessed 1 Sept. 2010). The quote reflects various users' stylistic smoothing of the passage as it was originally entered in August 2009 (according to Wikipedia's "history" function). Elsewhere in Wikipedia forums, the passage's contributor identifies himself as Javanese, but his ideas about house height are international in distribution. For another occurrence, see *ScienceDaily* (1998).



FIGURE 3 Ground-level dwelling (*xaü*) of Xanduop Dambol and Nen Xawex, 2002 (author's photo).

topped tree-trunk foundations, with their floor between ten and thirty feet above ground (as in Figures 1 and 2; and Bogner 1995: 34, 90). Median height is about fifteen feet. Korowai also commonly build dwellings termed *xaü* that stand about three feet above ground or that are not elevated at all, but these are rarely photographed (Figure 3). The photos most valued by foreigners portray a third type of dwelling termed *lu-op* (lit. “climbing house”), which Korowai build relatively rarely. This is a house in the upper canopy of a still-living tree, typically at heights of between fifty and one hundred twenty feet above ground. The house in Figures 4 and 5, built in 2007 for the aforementioned Swiss film crew, was one of these (see also Francon and Gentil 2008: 72–83).⁷

The single most frequently seen photograph of a Korowai house is of a canopy-level house, taken from a helicopter by George Steinmetz in 1995 and published the following year as the first page of an iconographically foundational *National Geographic* article (Steinmetz 1996: 34). A few months later the photo was reprinted in *Reader's Digest* (Raffaele 1996: 105), and it has since been reproduced in many other books.⁸ Nelson captions a reprint,

⁷ For a photo of this house by a Spanish traveler who visited the same clan after the film crew, see <http://www.fotocommunity.es/pc/pc/display/17830356> (accessed 20 Sept. 2010). She also posts the text of another traveler's article on Korowai treehouses, from an architectural magazine (Garve 2004).

⁸ Reprints appear in Henderson and Mornement (2005: 56) and Harris (2003: 7), viewable via Google Books' “limited preview” (as of 22 March 2010). Very unusually, this house spanned the canopies of two trees. This house also appears at the end of the 1996 *National Geographic* article in the upper background of a two-page terrestrial photo (without being identified as the same structure



FIGURE 4 Canopy-level house (*lu-op*) built in March 2007 by Yakop Dayo (author's photo).

“I will never forget this photo that appeared in *National Geographic* of a tree-house in Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea [*sic*], where an entire culture lived in the trees! This aerial view shows one of their creations, one that hovers more than 150 feet off the ground” (2004: 22–23). A slightly different aerial photo of the same house by the same photographer was recently published on the website of Britain’s highest-circulation broadsheet newspaper, accompanying a story on the Indonesian census bureau announcement mentioned above

pictured on the article’s first page). The foreground is a low angle shot of two men walking with weapons in hand along a log in the posture of the *Discobulos* sculpture, linking Korowai and their houses to another exo-cultural ideal: ancient Greek nude bodily perfection, perhaps divinity.

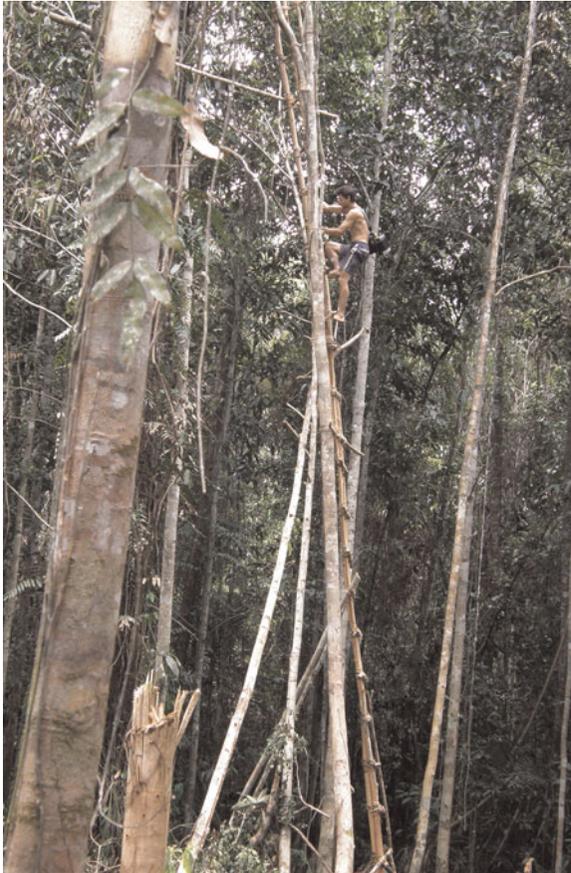


FIGURE 5 Cameraman climbing the ladder of the house shown in Figure 4 (author's photo).

(*Daily Telegraph* 2010).⁹ Since the *National Geographic* article's appearance in 1996, other journalists, filmmakers, and tourists have regularly sought to photograph houses of this ultra-tall kind, oriented by visual memory of the Steinmetz image.

Foreigners' imaging of these tall houses is out of proportion with their actual presence on the landscape. Korowai remember their life histories as a succession of dwellings, and in these histories about seven in ten houses are *xaim* on

⁹ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/7879628/The-Korowai-in-pictures-tribe-living-in-remote-Indonesian-forest-officially-recognised-as-tree-dwellers.html?image=2> (accessed 2 Sept 2010). The *Daily Telegraph* website does not mention that the treehouse photograph (like most other images in the gallery) was taken fifteen years ago. The same photo is posted on the photographer's website: www.georgesteinmetz.com/index.php?section=11 (accessed 2 Sept. 2010).

topped tree trunks, while three in ten are ground-level *xaiü*. Only one in fifty is a canopy-level dwelling. Historically, Korowai youths or men occasionally built treetop-level houses to enjoy the extraordinary view they allowed, to project sound across the landscape, and to be “talked about lots” (*aup lailai-*) by others as being “strong.” But such houses were rarely occupied by families. The house in *National Geographic* was abandoned by the time it was photographed, its roof and walls having been blown apart by wind soon after completion. Ultra-tall structures have the status of “other houses” to Korowai themselves: they are known as laborious to construct and impractical to live in. Today they are mainly built at the request of film crews and tourists, for fees of between US\$300 and \$1000. In March 2010, for example, two canopy-level houses were built for tourists: one for a German tour group, and one for a Japanese film crew whose images were broadcast the next month on the Fuji TV variety show *Unbelievable!*

Overrepresentation of canopy-level dwellings highlights that foreigners’ photography is a system of its own. The iconography of an ultra-tall house precedes images taken by specific photographers, and even precedes the building of a house by Korowai, who are routinely hired to make houses for purposes of filming. Even so, to photographers and viewers alike, the feeling around a photograph is that it is a transparent likeness recording an independently existing object.

One reason foreign photographers and viewers might select for canopy-level houses is the understanding that treehouses unify culture and nature. Such hybridization is strongest when a dwelling is integrated into a tree’s living branches and foliage. Even more, overrepresentation of canopy-level houses seems motivated by their maximum *extremeness*, on all dimensions on which treehouses are an anti-type to viewers’ expectations. Canopy-level dwellings are more extreme than others in their transgression of the assumption that houses are built near ground level, and that it is animals rather than humans who live in trees. They are also more extreme in evoking admiration of builders’ skill, against expectations that forest-dwelling people are technologically unsophisticated. And the houses are more extreme in evoking an idea of defensive retreat from attackers.

The boom in Korowai treehouse imaging across the last twenty years is partly a phenomenon of the present historical moment of the heightened marketability of primitivist representations in visual and print mass media. Causes and conditions of this upsurge include the rise of cable television channels and mass cable viewerships in the United States; the success of Discovery Communications specifically; the rise of satellite television internationally, the increased internationalization of the Discovery and BBC viewerships, and the further internationalization of the well-established visual aesthetics of *National Geographic* (Lutz and Collins 1993); the Reality television revolution in audience desires and in the budgeting and production of television programming; centralization and de-funding of journalism institutions; the rise of new

popular primitivisms in European countries, comparable to the earlier *Nachkultur* movement; and the increasing intensity of media publics' experiences of global connectedness in their own lives, deepening the appeal of the primitivist dream of a life outside international capitalism and mass consumption. Yet there are also levels at which the Korowai phenomenon is not new. Concerning treehouse images specifically, one pressure toward overrepresentation of Korowai canopy-level houses is that a visual idea of what a New Guinea treehouse looks like has already existed in global print culture for over a century, and canopy-level dwellings best match this idea. Present-day Korowai treehouse imaging repeats closely a previous burst of imaging centered not on New Guinea's western half (colonized first by the Netherlands and now Indonesia), but on the island's eastern end. A look at the substantial earlier international life of New Guinea treehouse photographs can further cast into relief the meaning-making processes unfolding through Korowai images today.

THE EARLIER BOOM IN NEW GUINEA TREEHOUSE IMAGING

New Guinea was linked to treehouses in fiction and in fabricated travel narratives before images of actually encountered dwellings began to circulate. The treehouse-residing heroes of *Swiss Family Robinson* were shipwrecked on an island near New Guinea. John Coulter, in a justly forgotten voyage narrative, invented a vast population of tree-dwelling New Guineans called "the Horraforas," one faction of whom followed an escaped Irish convict as their warrior-king (1847: vol. 2: 170–256; see also Ballard 2009: 228–29). But the main rise of linking New Guinea to treehouses came in the 1880s, and occurred visually. The "Protectorate of British New Guinea" was declared by British and Australian officials in 1884, and the years after this saw the initial mass dissemination of photographs of the region's people to global audiences. As Quanchi (1999; 2007) has shown, in this early colonial and early photographic moment, a small selection of stereotyped images of persons and material culture quickly became the stock signifiers of New Guinea at large. Treehouse photos were one of these half-dozen iconographic types. For several decades from 1880 onward, treehouse images were standard fixtures in Anglophone publications about New Guinea, such as travelogues and missionary memoirs. This was when treehouse photographs became an integral part of the visual culture of global primitivism. The frequency and compositional uniformity of treehouse illustrations did not reflect actual patterns of architecture in the territory (see for example Thomson 1892: 52; Burns 1899: 96; Walker 1909: 167; and numerous images discussed in Quanchi 1999: 226–29). Treehouses were built regularly in only a few areas in British New Guinea, and even in these places they were usually exceptional dwellings.

Most treehouse images were based on dwellings built by Koiari people, who lived in ridgetop hamlets just inland of the new mission, trade, and

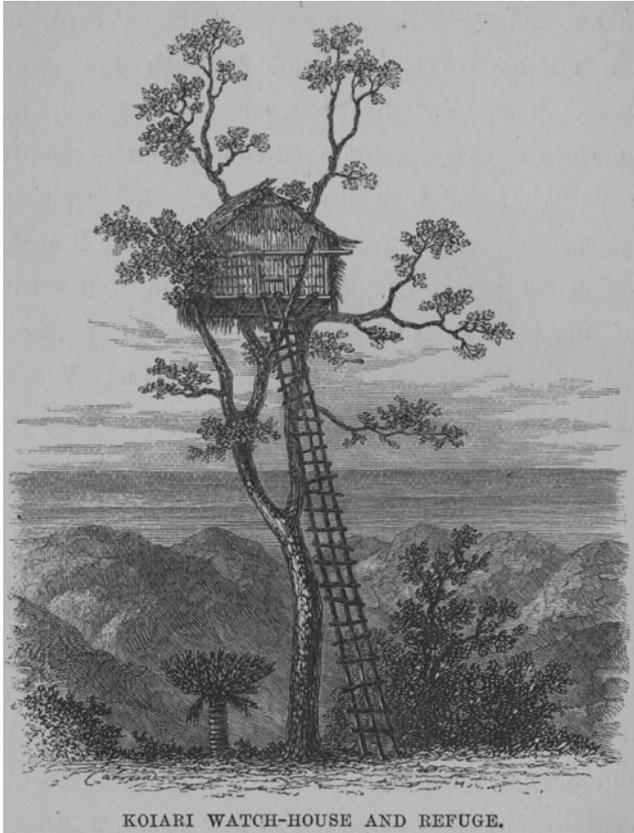


FIGURE 6 Illustration from Stone (1880: 121).

administrative center of Port Moresby. The siting of this London Missionary Society post and then colonial capital in this location was one contingency that led to the figuring of New Guinea as a land of treehouses. The first published images of treehouses in British New Guinea were 1880 and 1885 engravings depicting Koiari houses seen in the 1870s by naturalist Octavius Stone and missionary James Chalmers (Figures 6 and 7). Then, in 1885, the Frankfurt-born Australian photographer J. W. Lindt photographed Koiari houses during a six-week tour of the protectorate accompanying an expedition led by the administration's newly-arriving first commissioner.¹⁰ Lindt subsequently

¹⁰ For narratives of this expedition, including its political context and its culmination in the new commissioner's death from malaria, see Scratchley and Cooke (1887), and Fort (1942). Consistent with patterns I outline shortly, Fort never mentions Lindt by name, but reproduces five unattributed

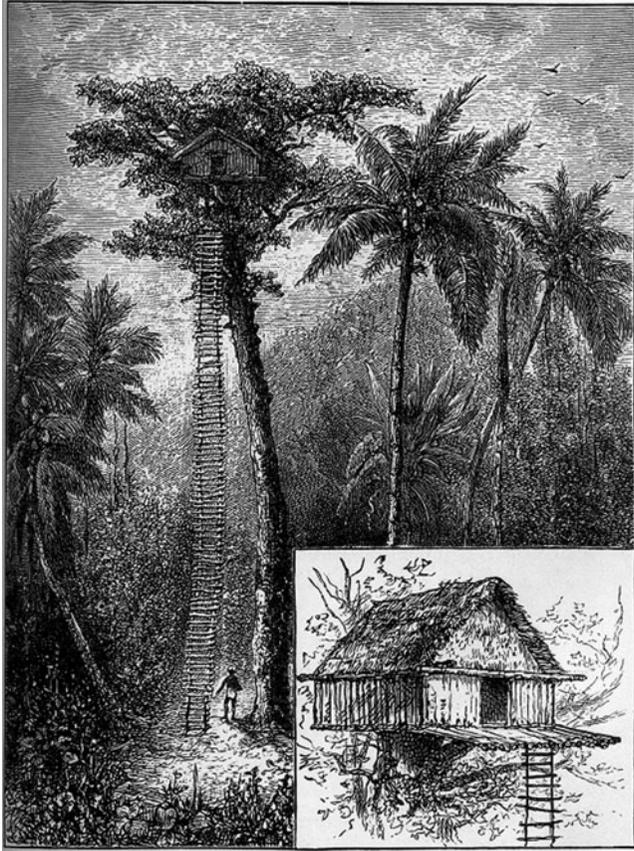


FIGURE 7 Illustration from Chalmers and Gill (1885: 102).

exhibited, published, and marketed his New Guinea photographs widely in Australia and Europe, with great critical and commercial success (Lindt 1888a: 7–8, 16–23). The images were important to his rise as a leading Australian professional photographer, photography promoter, and dealer of photographic supplies. In 1886, he made a well-received gift to Queen Victoria of albums containing over a hundred New Guinea photos, under the title *Picturesque New Guinea* (ibid.: 16–17). In the same year, his treehouse photographs were displayed in the New Guinea Court of the Colonial and Indian

Lindt photos, including a Koiari treehouse image captioned “HUTS IN TREES, NEW GUINEA” (facing p. 65).

Exhibition.¹¹ Attended by 5.5 million visitors, this six-month London exhibition was explicitly a celebration of the power and unity of the British Empire (MacKenzie 1984: 101; Barringer 1998). Prior to Lindt's travel to New Guinea, a notice in the *Sydney Morning Herald* had reported that "Mr. Lindt, the photographer to the expedition ... intends to take views of New Guinea to be sent home to the exhibition to be held in London next year" (quoted in Lindt 1887: 17), and during his one-night stay with Koiari people Lindt was described to them by intermediaries "as an artist who had come to take pictures of the village to be sent to far off lands beyond the sea" (*ibid.*: 40). Lindt himself traveled to London in 1887. There he oversaw publication of fifty New Guinea photographs, including three Koiari treehouse images, in a highly successful illustrated travel book, also under the title *Picturesque New Guinea* (Lindt 1887).¹² Appearing in Victoria's jubilee year, the book was dedicated to the Queen, an inscription that again inserted photography into a circular performative logic of creating colonial sovereignty. The return to the Queen and her metropolitan subjects of photographed New Guineans was a confirmatory celebration of the truth and correctness of the declaration of rule emanating from her person to begin with.¹³ Also before and during this Europe trip, Lindt circulated New Guinea images in professional photographic circles and exhibitions in Frankfurt, Munich, Paris, and Vienna (Lindt 1888a: 6, 50–53). From his Melbourne studio, he sold New Guinea photos as individual 6" × 8" prints, as a "Complete Set of 120 Subjects" in five albums, and as "A Set of 7 Characteristic Subjects" in oak-framed 48" × 36" enlargements "for Libraries, Museums, and Halls" (*ibid.*: 7–8).

¹¹ See *Colonial and Indian* (1886: 214). In 1887, the *Melbourne Age* noted retrospectively that at the London exhibition "Mr. Lindt's photographs of New Guinea scenery formed one of the most attractive features of the Victorian Court [Melbourne's portion of the exhibition]," and in 1888 the *London Athenaeum* recollected that Lindt's "series of remarkably fine photographs ... attracted much admiration at the recent Colonial exhibition" (quoted in Lindt 1888a: 26, 34).

¹² Plates 8, 12, and 14 of Lindt's book depict different angles and framings from among a single ridgetop cluster of four treehouses. On primitivist logics of the book's reception, see Quartermaine (1992: 96–99), and the period reviews gathered in Lindt (1888a: 24–36), a promotional booklet for distribution at the 1888 Australian centennial exhibition, which advertises Lindt's photos, studio services, photographic supplies, and services as exhibit photographer. See also Armstrong (1998) on the early history of photography in books, leading to breakthroughs at the time of Lindt's volume that allowed integration of photographic reproductions into the printing and binding process.

¹³ In presenting his albums to the Queen and arranging his book's dedication to her, Lindt was likely mindful of Victoria and her late husband's well-known enthusiasm for photography, as well as of securing his work's superiority to an earlier project. The annexation of British New Guinea was enacted in November and December 1884 by a naval expedition that raised the British flag and read a proclamation of protective sovereignty at eleven coastal locations in the claimed territory, beginning at Port Moresby. Thirty-six photographs of these proceedings and of some village scenes were published in an expedition report, and a fine album version was presented to Victoria, in whose name the annexation had occurred (*Narrative* 1885; Newton 1988: 58, 185, n. 62).



FIGURE 8 “Tree House, Koiari Village” (Lindt 1887: pl. 14).

One outcome of Lindt’s skills was that for several decades from 1885 forward, the iconography of New Guinean treehouses was dominated by prolific copying and compositional replication of a single one of his photographs (Figure 8). This pattern anticipates by a century the similar domination of contemporary iconography by Steinmetz’s 1996 *National Geographic* image, and by images of other atypical canopy-level houses that most closely match the Lindt and Steinmetz prototypes.¹⁴ In the Koiari village Lindt visited, four out of twenty structures were in trees (Lindt 1887: 34–35). More than Korowai elevated houses, these Koiari high dwellings were explicitly meant to provide security against organized raids, though Stone also reports Koiari saying the houses were for security against an occult being, and the term he provides for this being is recognizable as a regional word for witchcraft (1880:

¹⁴ For a book uniting a drawn copy of Lindt’s Koiari image and a reproduction of Steinmetz’s Korowai photo, see Henderson and Mornement (2005: 6, 56).

121; see Dutton 2003: 211, s.v. *voro*). In any event, treehouses were exceptional structures within settlements of greater numbers of ground level dwellings.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it is the treehouses that entered the global visual imagination.

The further career of Lindt's most famous treehouse photograph highlights certain ideological underpinnings of the wider explosion in treehouse imaging during his time. While Lindt himself energetically circulated his Koiari photos, the treehouse image took on a life far beyond his agency. It was copied in photographic or drawn form in dozens—possibly hundreds—of publications and ephemera (see Quanchi 1999: 225–26). Some replicas had a caption including the ethnonym “Koiari,” or even included an attribution to Lindt, but usually the image was copied without attribution and in an unabashedly decontextualizing and generalizing manner.¹⁶ In August 1886, the *Illustrated London News* published an engraved copy of Lindt's photo in an article about the New Guinea display at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, generically captioned “A New Guinea Native Tree House.”¹⁷ As Quanchi (1999) documents, this pattern would be steadily repeated across subsequent months, years, and decades. In June 1912, the *Missionary Review of the World* included a small photographic copy of Lindt's image on its back cover keyed to the caption “Tree House in New Guinea,” in the center of a collage of eighteen photos together captioned “Some Missionary Scenes in the Pacific Islands.”¹⁸ In 1915, a travel-writing anthology for young readers juxtaposed an engraved copy of Lindt's treehouse with a short excerpt from an originally unillustrated description of a treehouse seen in 1903 in a different

¹⁵ Quanchi (1999: 223) cites sources on the paucity of treehouses in Papua generally. See also Lawes' (1879: 375) report about Koiari ridgetop settlements that in “almost every village is one house high up in a tree.” Haddon (1900: 282–84) did hear an account of an 1897 daybreak raid during which inhabitants of one village successfully took refuge in *six* treehouses. A main Koiari expression for treehouses is “drum house” (*aea dobo*), or “lookout for sentry to give warning of approaching enemy by beating a drum” (Dutton 2003: 5), suggesting that elevated houses were for improving visibility and sound transmission, as much as for separating people from attackers.

¹⁶ For explicit crediting of Lindt, see the title page of Chalmers (1887). Photographic copies of Lindt's images had to crop or dodge the conspicuous placard he placed in many scenes prior to exposure, reading, “LINDT. MELBOURNE COPYRIGHT.”

¹⁷ The image appears on page 213 of the 21 August issue. The *News* notes, “Our Illustrations . . . are not all from the Colonial Exhibition, but include a few Sketches taken in New Guinea by Mr. G. R. Askwith” (*Colonial and Indian* 1886: 210). In fact, four of the *News*' five engravings of New Guinea subjects are Askwith copies of Lindt photos, not original drawings. George Ranken Askwith (later Lord) was publicity officer to the 1885 government expedition, charged with collecting information about the newly-annexed land (Fort 1942: 42). He was not on the brief inland trip during which Lindt took his iconic photo, but may have seen Koiari treetop lookouts at other times (see his notes in Scratchley and Cooke 1887: 369–70).

¹⁸ The collage closes volume 35, number 6 of this U.S. publication. Regionally themed collages on the back covers of other numbers similarly juxtapose photographs with and without clear Christian visual content.

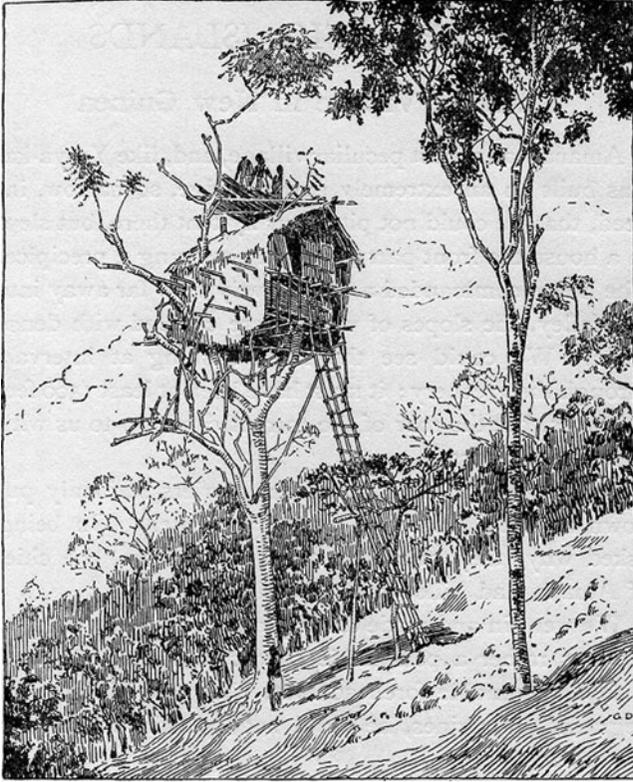


FIGURE 9 Drawing after Lindt's photo printed in Marsh (1915: 58) to accompany an originally unillustrated excerpt from Pratt (1906: 230–33).

part of New Guinea (Figure 9). Around the same time, the Tobler Chocolate company issued a series of twelve promotional stamps titled “Dwellings of the World,” including a tinted drawing copied from Lindt's photo.¹⁹

One revealing episode in the afterlife of Lindt's treehouse photographs was their pirating in *Our Islands and Their People*, an 1899 compendium of images of Pacific and Caribbean possessions newly seized by the United States in the Spanish-American War. This publication consists of eight hundred folio pages, presenting twelve hundred photographic illustrations under the prefatory assertion, “The camera cannot be otherwise than candid and truthful” (Olivares and Bryan 1899: 6). Produced while the U.S. military was fighting a war against the Philippine independence movement, its first two printings sold four hundred

¹⁹ The stamp is number 781, in series 66. In May 1989, Papua New Guinea issued a 35 toea postage stamp featuring a drawn color copy of Lindt's image. See also Quanchi (1999:229).



FIGURE 10 A Lindt Koiari photograph reproduced in Olivares and Bryan (1899: 694), above the caption “TINGUIANE TREE-DWELLERS. The Tinguianes occupy these houses as a means of protection against their enemies, and when attacked they heave down stones on the heads of the besiegers.”

thousand copies.²⁰ The Lindt image reproduced above as Figure 8 appears without attribution in the work’s second volume, above the caption “A TREE-HOUSE IN THE PHILIPPINES: Various tribes, especially in the southern portion of the archipelago, build their houses in trees; and in some instances there are villages of three to five houses in a single tree” (ibid.: 694). A second Lindt photograph of Koiari people and treehouses is reproduced on the same page, and captioned as depicting Tinguiane people (Figure 10). These two photographs are linked to two textual passages some seventy pages earlier in the book (in a chapter on “Wild Races of the Philippine Islands”) which mentions that Tinguiane people built treehouses (ibid.: 615–16, 621). Elsewhere, the authors quote a long excerpt from Alfred Russell Wallace’s *Malay Archipelago*, expounding a contrast between Malay versus Papuan racial types (ibid.: 666–69). It is in support of applying this same racial typology to the Philippines that the compilers insert into their text various illustrations explicitly labeled as depicting New Guinea subject

²⁰ The sales figure is given in *Who Was Who* (1973: 544), in an entry on José de Olivares (see also Thompson 2010: 34, 42, n. 30). Besides the 1899 printing, there was a 1902 printing (still bearing an 1899 copyright but in fact containing an added chapter on three further years of the Philippine-American war), and a 1905 printing.

matter.²¹ However, the two treehouse images are among several photographs originating from Lindt in particular that are deceptively captioned to relocate New Guinea subjects to the new American colony, evidently because these images were felt to meet the compilers' hurried need for generic primitivist visual content.²² Certain Philippines peoples did sometimes build treehouses, and pictures of these tall houses soon became de rigueur in representations of the new colony for U.S. audiences (e.g., Barrows 1903: 1143; Stuntz 1904: 43; Grosvenor 1905: 176). A replica treehouse was included in the large Philippines exhibit at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, and in a derivative permanent installation in the American Museum of Natural History (Sherwood 1911: 92–93; Fermin 2004: 116).

The pirating of Lindt's treehouse images in an early visual apologia for U.S. takeover of the Philippines underlines that the core meaning of treehouse images in this period was not their apparent documentary truth. Rather, their basic meaning was the mythic idea of racial and evolutionary savagery, connoted by the house form. This idea placed image viewers themselves into a position of superiority, tutelage, adventure-seeking fascination, and legitimacy of colonial appropriation (compare Quanchi 1999: 226–27).

THE AMBIVALENCE OF AN ANTI-TYPE: DYSTOPIA AND UTOPIA ACROSS THE TWO BOOMS

From the first burst of New Guinea treehouse imaging in which Koiari houses were the type-case, to the second one in which Korowai houses now occupy that role, treehouse photography followed changing geographic contours of overlap between places where New Guinea people were building the dwellings, and places where whites with cameras were traveling. Koiari stopped building treehouses soon after the structures' initial imaging in the 1880s.²³ The overlap between colonial reach and treehouse construction elsewhere in New Guinea has also been brief. The exceptionally long run of treehouse photography in the Korowai area, and the huge quantity of images produced, might be attributed to the unusual abundance of treehouses on the Korowai landscape, the ongoing weakness of the Indonesian state (and lack of Indonesian settlers)

²¹ On the place of *Our Islands and Their People* in a larger project of racial typology, locating different Philippine peoples in a taxonomic hierarchy in which New Guinean-like "Negritos" were the opposite extreme from white Americans, see Rafael (2000: 78), and in greater geopolitical detail Thompson (2010).

²² Other Lindt images appear on p. 680 (a Koiari photo captioned as "Wild Igorrotes of Luzon"), and on pp. 712 and 716 (New Guinea images captioned as representing a "Moro" boat, house, and village). On p. 546, another Lindt New Guinea photo is captioned as depicting a Samoan village.

²³ In a brief mid-1898 Koiari trip, Haddon apparently did not see treehouses himself, and notes, "Very few of these remarkable edifices are now extant, as the need for them has passed away in all places reached by the strong arm of the law" (1901: 248, and see 242, 247). After Haddon returned to Port Moresby, his photographer Wilkin made a second trip inland to another Koiari area, and secured treehouse photos that Haddon published (1900: 283; 1901: plate 20).

where Korowai live, and the increased economic and technological power of today's photographers.²⁴

When contemporary Korowai photography is seen as continuing a longer history, one issue that comes into focus is the volatility of the treehouse idea's evaluative load. As an "other house" bearing links to childhood, nature, archaicness, and violence, a New Guinea treehouse condenses dystopian horror as well as utopian desire, much as vampires or other monsters often evoke simultaneous feelings of "desire and fear" (Moretti 1983: 100).

One historical tendency is a shift from "hard" to "soft" treehouse primitivism (after Lovejoy and Boas 1935), in line with a wider global turn from evaluating people like Koiari or Korowai as evolutionary and racial inferiors of Europeans, to evaluating them as morally uncorrupted superiors. Such a trajectory can be appreciated in the contrast between treehouse representations in two pedagogical works. In *Curious Homes and Their Tenants* (Beard 1897), a "home reader" produced for U.S. youth, a four-page text on New Guinea treehouses is illustrated with an engraving probably copied after the early Koiari image reproduced above as Figure 7. All further items in the book's section on "Dwelling in Trees" are about animals, and construal of treehouses as animalistic is overt in the text's opening: "The natives of New Guinea climb like monkeys and travel long distances from one tree to another, without descending to the ground. In this country, where birds build little fairylike cabins on the ground [a reference to bowerbirds], the people construct their houses in the tops of the tallest forest trees" (ibid.: 101). Having made New Guinea a topsyturvy world where humans are bestial while nature is culture-like (see also Stasch 2011), the text offers an equally fabular account of treehouses' construction and purposes. Then the author returns to the bird theme with a closing judgment that the "rude huts" of the "wild men of New Guinea" are inferior to actual bird's nests, in the comforts they offer to vulnerable young offspring (Beard 1897: 105).²⁵

This portrayal contrasts with the positive evaluation offered in a recent university textbook on *Culture and Human Development* (Valsiner 2000: 120–22), which juxtaposes a Korowai treehouse photograph with photos of Buckingham

²⁴ Intervening links in the visual genealogy from Lindt's 1885 Koiari image to Steinmetz's 1995 Korowai one lie in photography carried out across the Fly-Digul plain (e.g., Militaire exploratie 1920: 269, 273; Brandes 1929: 289, 309; Boelaars 1958: 64, 160; Miller 1958: 128, pirating Krarup Nielsen 1928: 108; van Kampen 1961; and the apt discussion in Kirsch 2006: 42–44). For one example of cartographic iconography associating this area with treehouses, see the school map of the Netherlands New Guinea colony reproduced in Schoeman et al. (2003: 188). Korowai lands lie just west of the Digul's lowland catchment. Other people east and southeast of them, from the Digul to the Fly, all built similar treehouses.

²⁵ A March 1888 review of *Picturesque New Guinea* in the London *Spectator* had similarly suggested that "the tree-dwellings ... to the Darwinian will almost supply a missing link between the rude platforms in the trees of the orang-outang and the ordinary human habitations on the ground" (quoted in Lindt 1888a: 34).

palace and a U.S. suburban dwelling. Addressing cross-culturally the question “What is a home?,” the accompanying text explains that the British and U.S. examples are culturally particular resolutions of a problematic of unification and separation in relation to surrounding people, just as the Korowai house is a culturally particular resolution of a problematic of unity and separation in relation to surrounding nature.

Yet even while the first imaging boom was dominantly framed by an ideology of white racial and evolutionary superiority, treehouses’ evaluative load was in the late nineteenth century already complex, in ways that anticipate later trends. The case of Lindt himself is instructive. His New Guinea photographs, including the Koiari treehouse image, were successful due as much to his compositions’ aesthetic beauty as to their viewer-transporting documentary magic. The claim to aesthetic value was overt in his titling of New Guinea scenes as “picturesque,” and his prefatory characterization of his role as that of “a competent artist photographer,” conducting “artistic photography,” to produce “artistic views and portraits” illustrating a book of travel (1887: vii–viii). Reception of his New Guinea photos *as* artworks is firmly registered in critical notices.²⁶ Yet Lindt himself linked treehouse architecture to New Guineans’ temporal archaicism and to cannibalism. In an official guide to the British New Guinea Court of the Melbourne-hosted Australian Centennial International Exhibition of 1888, he told visitors, “You are among implements and articles produced by primeval man, who, in this newly-acquired territory, is still found in lake-dwellings, in houses on tops of trees, and curiously-shaped terrestrial dwellings, and who, in many places throughout the island, still practises cannibalism. The photographs close to the main entrance bring you face to face with some of the tribes and their aerial architecture” (Lindt 1888b: 7; see also judgments of New Guineans’ racial and evolutionary inferiority in Lindt 1887, e.g. pp. 28, 30). Close twinning of deprecation and beauty can also be appreciated in a compositional detail of Lindt’s most famous treehouse

²⁶ The Melbourne *Argus* in December 1885 affirmed: “Many of the views are beautiful as pictures, irrespective of their unavoidable fidelity as transcripts of natural objects” (Lindt 1888a: 16). The *Age* in the same month pursued a similar duality: “As photographs they are simply magnificent, but as truthful records of the strange features and stranger manners of this comparatively unknown land they are worth whole volumes of description. Mr. Lindt is an enthusiast in his art, and he has in producing these interesting and beautiful pictures largely aided scientific research, and at the same time has given ample proof of his pluck and energy” (*ibid.*: 19). The Sydney *Daily Telegraph* wrote of *Picturesque New Guinea*, “The book has no special claims to high literary merit, but as its title implies, it has artistic pretensions and these it fully realizes” (*ibid.*: 31). Upon awarding Lindt’s images a gold medal at the Australian 1888 Centennial Exhibition, the judges stated, “The ethnological illustrations from New Guinea are even more interesting from a theoretical point of view [than from a technical one]. It has often been a matter of discussion how far, or whether at all, photography may be considered as a fine art. By the works of Mr Lindt this question is decided in a way that is a triumph for his profession” (quoted in Jones 1985: 13). On Lindt’s compositional conventions in the Koiari treehouse images and elsewhere, see Quanchi (2007: 9), and Webb (1995: 181–88).



FIGURE 11 The lower two platforms of a treehouse at the Hermitage. Detail from photo by Mark James Daniel, 1899 (courtesy State Library of Victoria, H92.200/197).

image (Figure 8), the presence on the house's lookout platform of three men bearing painted shields and military decorations, which Lindt himself arranged: "When Hunter, at my request, asked the men to mount to one of the tree houses, and to group themselves in warlike array on the platform, as if defending their garrison against the attack of a hostile tribe, they ran up the ladders with the ease and agility of monkeys, donned their war coronets and masks, and in full war-paint armed with shields and spears, went through all the evolutions of Papuan defensive fighting" (1887: 44). Here the positive aesthetic effect of the men's ornamented presence in the image, and the negative evolutionary condition of Papuans as living in a state of endemic violence, are the same thing.

More remarkably still, within ten years of photographing Koiari treehouses and linking them to archaic savagery, Lindt was commissioning treehouses of his own. The three structures he had built were part of the overall aesthetic project of his "Hermitage," a garden complex, photographic park, and vacation lodge to which he dedicated himself from 1894 on, after closing his Melbourne studio due to the economic depression (Figures 11 and 12; see also Jones 1985: 113). Likely named in emulation of the prominent early photographer Nadar's rural retreat in France, the complex was sited on eighty acres of hilly forest in the Yarra Ranges northeast of Melbourne (De Lorenzo and van der Plaats 2004: 146, n. 7). Lindt's coauthored regional guidebook affirms: "'The Hermitage,'



FIGURE 12 A roofed, trunk-encircling treehouse at the Hermitage (upper right). Access is by a two-stage ladder and lower picketed platform to the right of the tree trunk. The women also face a log footbridge and road. Undated photo by J. W. Lindt (courtesy State Library of Victoria, H85.40/1, b48369).

should be visited. Built after the Swiss chalet style, in the midst of the forest, the house itself contains much that will interest the visitor in the way of curios, collected by Mr. Lindt during his travels in New Guinea and the South Sea Islands” (Caire and Lindt 1904: 52).²⁷ In a study linking the Hermitage’s design to ideas of Alexander von Humboldt, De Lorenzo and van der Plaats have argued specifically that Lindt’s project was influenced by “Humboldt’s conviction that the experience and representation of the exotic—best represented by the biodiversity of the temperate rainforests of the new worlds—

²⁷ For the 1885 trip’s prominence in Lindt’s professional and aesthetic self-fashioning, see also the photograph of interior walls of his Melbourne studio in Jones (1985: 8), showing poster-size enlargements of a Koiari treehouse and two other New Guinea dwellings, along with numerous items of New Guinea material culture.

were able to liberate the common man's imaginative capacity and reveal the sublime unity/divinity of nature" (2004: 133). On their account, the impress of Humboldt's thought could be found in the Hermitage's rustic footbridges, Swiss-modeled main lodge and outbuildings, and exotic garden plantings, as well as in the complex's close juxtaposition of these human creations with established towering eucalyptus and Mountain Ash, and with gullies and understories dense with tree ferns. In Lindt's own lodge promotion and his photography, he emphasized the treehouses' aesthetic utility as platforms from which to obtain panoramic vistas.²⁸ But it is likely that he and his guests experienced the structures as integral, sublimely exotic elements of the seen landscape as well. He was evidently explicit in linking his treehouses to the ones he photographed in New Guinea: talking to some guests, he termed his own structures *dobbo*, a Koiari word for "treehouse."²⁹ Lindt transposed the felt culture-nature hybridity of Koiari treehouses to his own plan for an ideal garden. Treehouses of "primeval" New Guineans were experienced as objects of aesthetic desire and admiration, powerfully embodying his project's goal of melding values of wild "sublimity" and created "amenity."³⁰

A similar twinning of admiration and horror runs through present-day approaches to the treehouse anti-type. Relativistic comparison of treehouses to Buckingham palace in a textbook is echoed by wider contemporary photographic emphasis on the technical and physical prowess of treehouse builders, and their ecological conservatism (e.g., Gentil 2008; Francon and Gentil 2008). The past fifteen years of professional treehouse imaging have seen a trend toward creating lushly colorful compositions and reproductions, shot from technologically hard-won angles. Recent film productions have invested

²⁸ For example, a guidebook section titled "Notes for Photographers" states, "'The Hermitage' itself is just beautiful, and its picturesque gateway makes a delightful study, especially with suitable figures. In the grounds there are two look-out houses placed a considerable height up two gum trees, and from which very fine panoramic views are obtained. It will be necessary to ask permission from Mr. Lindt if it is desired to ascend to them" (Caire and Lindt 1904: 68). Lindt circulated and sold many views of the Hermitage photographed from treehouse platforms. He also estimated that he sold twenty-five thousand prints of area scenery even before securing land and creating his retreat (1920: 1).

²⁹ In 1895, the Melbourne branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia held their annual General Meeting at the Hermitage, to inaugurate Lindt's new lodge. The Society's *Proceedings* mentions that prior to leaving, many members "climb[ed] up to a 'dobbo' which Mr. Lindt has built New Guinea fashion, far up on a great tree" (quoted in De Lorenzo and van der Plaats 2006a: 150).

³⁰ De Lorenzo and van der Plaats (2006b) draw on writings of Lindt's Melbourne associate James Smith to link Lindt to Humboldt, and to argue that Lindt's overall aesthetic principle was to unify the two qualities of "sublimity" and "amenity" in the manner of the Swiss Alps. They quote a revealing excerpt from Smith about the cosmological role of New Guinea in this project: "In addition to describing The Hermitage in 1901 as the ideal traveller's retreat, Smith also argued that it united scenery able to 'carry you back to the morning of time and remind you that they are coeval with the Age of Stone in the North,' with a 'lodge in which private enterprise has assembled the comforts and conveniences of civilisation'" (ibid.: 49).

extraordinary labor and money in dramatic aerial and arboreal panning shots, underscoring houses' beauty (e.g., Lopez and Stine 2009). At the same time, ideas of internecine violence and civilizational inferiority remain central to imaging practices, as in the already-noted regular inference that height functions to protect house residents from tribal warfare. Even more significant is the frequency with which representations of Korowai, alongside characterizing them as treehouse dwellers, also characterize them as cannibals. As the same filmmaker who idealized treehouses as children's dream described to me his relation to this other preexisting stereotype of Korowai society: "We have no choice. We cannot be in the land of cannibalism and not talk about cannibalism." Routine juxtaposition of treehouses and cannibalism as Korowai people's defining features sets up these two traits as reciprocally iconic images of the otherworldly deviance of primitive life.

Within the cultural and political circuits of Indonesian West Papua itself, the idea of a treehouse has tended somewhat more toward the hard primitivist pole. Following Indonesian takeover in 1963, the leftist Foreign Minister Subandrio (later imprisoned under Suharto) told a journalist that the administration's basic orientation toward Papuans was "getting them down out of the trees even if we have to pull them down" (Hastings 1982: 159).³¹ West Papuans of the southern lowlands today are heirs and active adopters of the tradition linking treehouses to civilizational inferiority. In certain interethnic contexts, southern lowlanders associate elevated houses (Ind. *rumah tinggi*) with archaicness, taking up the architectural form as a central figure by which they express consciousness of radical cultural transformations their populations have undergone, or now aspire to. Korowai traveling to towns commonly speak about their treehouses as a way of underlining their own primitivity, when talking with regional ethnic others such as Papuan government officials commanding fiscal resources, or non-Korowai love interests. So too, other southern Papuans of the present senior generations sometimes poignantly identify Korowai architecture with the practices of their own deceased parents and grandparents.

³¹ Subandrio's imagery and its evaluative load is echoed in a recent statement of a Papuan man studying in Java to become a civil servant, supported by the Special Autonomy funding by which Indonesia's central government has tried to quell Papuan independence aspirations: "To separatist Papuans, I am a traitor. To most of our Javanese teachers, I am a monkey they are trying to lure down from the trees. I just want to feed my family" (quoted in Célérier 2010). In southern Papua, the figure of bringing people down from treehouses as a foundational act of integration into governance was already widely circulating in the Dutch period. See, for example, a Biak man's recollection of working as a civil servant sixty miles southeast of the Korowai area in 1958: "The duty I then experienced as the greatest challenge was guiding those who lived in treehouses to be willing to descend and form villages together" (Wamafma 2008: 149). But compare also the cover of the Indonesian book *Make West Irian a Beautiful Emerald* (Departemen Penerangan 1964), anthologizing speeches of high officials, including two by Subandrio himself. A line drawing depicts a Papuan man in suit jacket and batik shirt with arms joyously outstretched, in front of sympathetically-rendered Asmat carved poles and a treehouse, among other Papuan artifacts (see analysis in Cookson 2008: 338–39).

In Korowai people's own lives, though, these emerging primitivist construals of treehouses are dwarfed by very different endogenous understandings of the architectural form, to which I now turn.

ON WHAT A CAMERA DOES NOT SEE

Production and reception of Korowai treehouse images today continues the long tradition of selecting and projecting this house form as an anti-type to houses of urban modernity, and as a metonymy through which to imagine a cosmological relation between two opposite kinds of humanity, the civilized and the primitive. Photographic practices have created a visual "place-image" (Shields 1991; Thompson 2006) of New Guinea as a land of extraordinarily tall houses, and New Guineans thus as people who are the opposite of metropolitan Westerners. They are primitive, mutually uncivil, free, or beautiful; they are unitary with nature; they live unbelievably and spectacularly outside of normal cultural expectations. The iconographic patterns creating this place-image are a series of part-for-whole substitutions. For the more than one thousand ethnic groups of New Guinea are substituted Koiari or Korowai. For Koiari or Korowai as humans are substituted houses. For the variety of Koiari or Korowai houses are substituted the elevated ones only. For Korowai treehouses at large is substituted an abnormal subtype. Through this chain of substitutions, a plural world is reduced to a single object that speaks powerfully to metropolitan audiences as an extreme departure from their own expectations.

Another substitution wound into each link of this chain is selection of *visual* experience as the way to know Korowai and their houses, from among all sensory and epistemological modes of contact. Possibly more important than the evaluative load foreigners assign to Korowai architecture are the cultural choices foreigners are constrained to make about their *mode of aesthetic engagement* with house forms. Benjamin, in his artwork essay, affirmed that "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (2008: 23). Foreigners' engagement with New Guinea treehouses has been primarily visual, and has followed a particular idea of photographic visibility. Jameson aptly describes the dominance of vision in contemporary capitalist consumer culture in these terms: "Were an ontology of this artificial, person-produced universe still possible, it would have to be an ontology of the visual, of being as the visible first and foremost, with the other senses draining off it; all the fights about power and desire have to take place here, between the mastery of the gaze and the illimitable richness of the visual object" (1992: 1; see also Fabian 1983, and Mitchell 1988, on the salience of vision in colonization). Lindt's treehouse photographs, as we have seen, came into existence right in the vortex of an important step in the

world-historical institutionalization of this mode of visibility: the practices of exhibition and mass spectatorship advanced in the great expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the extraordinary rise of photography as a medium of mass aesthetic consumption across the same period.

The centrality of this “ontology of the visual” to the functioning of global treehouse imagery becomes particularly clear if we juxtapose foreigners’ imaging with understandings of treehouses held by Korowai themselves (for more details, see Stasch n.d.; and 2009: 45–63). Putting the house on an equal footing with the camera can help throw into greater relief the camera’s sensitivities and blindnesses. By “camera” here, I mean the whole technological, social, and communicative process unfolding through this object and its image-fixing media, including the total field of social relations across which camera-produced representations exist, and the semiotic ideologies supporting those representations’ uptake (compare Tagg 1988: 3). Korowai people’s own experiences of their houses highlight possibilities of an embodied visibility, in which sight coexists densely with evidence of other senses, and with other faculties alongside sensation. These possibilities tend to be lost to the forms of photographic visibility structuring the global circulation of treehouse images. The points I develop here with respect to Korowai houses could also be made about houses in other cultural and historical settings, including the houses of people (like myself) who create treehouse photographs, look at *National Geographic*, or produce or watch primitivist television programming. I focus on Korowai houses here opportunistically, because ethnographic data on Korowai house experience contrasts so sharply with the meanings of these same houses as they are represented photographically.

One major element in Korowai understanding of houses that is little registered in foreigners’ photography is social relations. Korowai experience house space sensorily as qualities of relatedness among persons who belong there, and as qualities of relatedness between those who belong and those who do not. The overall landscape is a patchwork of clan-owned territories, and divisions of landownership color almost all social interaction (Stasch 2009: 25–45). With respect to houses, people are also acutely sensitive to who is an “owner” (*giom-anop*) and who is not. Related to this sensitivity, a perceptual feature of houses that Korowai understand as an obvious concomitant of height is the distance *between* dwellings. To them, the treehouse form is an architecture of spatial dispersion and adherence to political values of autonomy and egalitarianism. Korowai build houses singly or in pairs in garden clearings, and it is often a mile between neighboring clearings. People associate dispersed residence in high houses with staying out of each other’s way, so that they will not form desires for each other’s spouses, food, and wealth that would lead to transgressions and conflicts. Korowai are uncomfortable with entering houses they or close relatives do not own. Within a house, interaction between owners and guests is both valued and marked. Each side strives to signify

goodwill and lack of impingement on the other's autonomy, but everyone is also hypersensitive to possible breaches of etiquette. This valuing of separation, as well as the valuing of social cooperation *across* appropriately respectful and equality-preserving separateness, is a main meaning of treehouse architecture in Korowai eyes.

Foreigners bring to treehouse photography an idea that the visual is the actual, and to see is to know. International circulation of treehouse photographs is often informed by a sense that to have vision of a house is to have the meaning of it, and of the humans whose house it is. Investment in visuality, particularly as a way to reach the minds of audiences, is exemplified by another filmmaker's statement to me that by the time his team and editors finished, "The pictures will look better than the original." Yet it is difficult to portray experiences of belonging and alienness in relation to house space within a photographic frame. For Korowai as for other people, houses are a kind of second body within which persons share in each other's being through common eating, sleeping, talking, and other activities. Thus the meaning of houses very much exceeds the domain of the visible. Contemporary photographs depicting internal spaces of houses in use by families go some distance toward softening these deficits, as do television productions that join images with occupants' voices, and follow social stories unfolding around houses. But there is a basic conflict between photographic faith in vision and Korowai houses' deep relationality to other spaces and persons beyond the local visual field, as well as houses' relationality to an overall ethic of social relating that is conceptual, political, and bodily, not just visual.

Another crucial presence that photographs generally do not make visible is the prominent link that Korowai draw between house height and two categories of malignant monsters: "witches" (*xaxua*) and "demons" (*laleo*). Witches are men in the Korowai population who have ceased to be human (*yanop*), by acquiring an incurable pathology of wanting to eat human flesh. Their attacks are thought to be the ultimate cause behind all deaths. Witches act without detection, by consuming a solitary victim's body and replacing the victim's body parts with counterfeit materials, then leaving the victim amnesiacally behind, doomed to die of other apparent causes. "Demons," meanwhile, are what people become after death. They are zombie-like walking corpses thought to haunt the edges of Korowai social activity out of desire to be reunited with living relatives. Encounters between human and demon would lead to the humans' immediate deaths. The extraordinary grip of these two monsters on everyday Korowai consciousness is exemplified by the fact that all across the landscape, the height of people's houses reflects their hope that this will make them safer from the monsters' nighttime attacks. Ironically, where foreigners experience Korowai houses as aesthetically wild and sublime, for Korowai it is houses that are normal, and this domestic normality is pitched against unseeable, sublimely fearful monsters. These death-imbued

monsters are an anti-type to Korowai humanity, much as Korowai treehouses are an anti-type to foreigners' architectural norms.

Monster beliefs—the most basic motivation that Korowai see in house height—are not visible in photographs. The monsters themselves underline the contingent character of global visual culture's identification of visibility with knowing. Witches, for example, are figures of the unreliability of sight and other kinds of sensation. Acting invisibly or in occult forms, they are prototypically associated with “stealth” (*nanem*). To Korowai, the visible, sensible form of a house is motivated by sight's compromised relation to knowledge. Seeing takes place under conditions of epistemological opacity that require people to join perceptual experience with acts of thought exceeding the evidence of the senses. Korowai subordinate the sense of sight to something they consider even more basic and true—the sense of death.

Even Korowai ideas about strictly visual aspects of houses contrast with foreigners' thought. Korowai emphasize houses' value in organizing visual experience, construing vision as something people deliberately shape rather than as a neutral collecting of knowledge about a preexisting object. They like the quality of visual openness given by house elevation and by the felling of nearby trees, linked to their understanding that domestic space is a project of security and transparency relative to the opaque monster- and stranger-populated world. Qualities of embodied visual experience are also emphasized in people's ideas about canopy-level houses. A standard reason men give for building these exceptional dwellings in the past (before they began to be built for foreigners) is, “I wanted to see the beautiful world” (*lamol folul imop*). From such a house, “It's open/clear on all sides” (*men-men saox-telobo*), and this panoramic visibility is pleasurable. People also sometimes deliberately site regular houses next to stands of tall slender palms, so that occupants can watch the rippling fronds. Persons in mourning are routinely moved to tears by shimmering vegetation of a surrounding forest wall, seen from a house's balcony in late afternoon light. These embodied aspects of treehouse visibility are partly what Lindt embraced, in commissioning treehouses himself. But the idea that treehouses could be meaningful as instruments of aesthetic experience for Korowai themselves does not arise readily in foreigners' approaches to treehouse photographs.

Another prominent aspect of house visibility, one linking up with social relations, is the “middle wall” (*walüp damon*) that divides most houses longitudinally into a separate “women's territory” and “men's territory.” A main purpose of this wall is to obscure and channel sight. The wall helps mothers-in-law and sons-in-law keep out of each other's view, and it obstructs people from forming vision-triggered attractions to new possible sexual partners. Sometimes a wall will be newly installed or improved in an existing house, because a mother-in-law and son-in-law pair are going to be in each other's presence there. In this way, the architectural feature is directly indexical

of a social relation, and of a desired organization of vision appropriate to the morality of that relation. Here vision follows from other considerations rather than being the source of knowledge in its own right. In fact, *avoidance* of sight is experienced as a more powerful path to a social truth than sight itself.

A last sensory aspect of treehouse experience that exceeds vision is time. Treehouses are time-saturated and time-making. Basic here is that houses are transient. People stop using a house within one of two years of its construction, and adults are often able to list a succession of fifty or more houses they have lived in. Transiency is such a prominent feature of houses that the expression "house deterioration" (*xaim demun*) is a unit of time reckoning, like "year" in other languages. People regularly express how long ago an event took place by speaking of how many "house deteriorations" have elapsed. Speakers also locate events historically by saying what house they were living in when they occurred. Organizing memories around houses is aided by the convention of calling individual houses by the tree species that was the house's main support, joined with the suffix *-genop* "house." Korowai build houses on enough different species that this pattern almost amounts to giving houses proper names (within a given network of speakers). A further aspect of houses' temporality is residents' practice of tucking bones and other meal traces into the ceiling, so that visitors will "see the beauty/well-being" (*folul imo-*) enjoyed there. Viewing a house interior, Korowai see the duration and history of residents' shared lives.

By comparison to the vivid temporal content of houses as Korowai sense them, the time sense in foreigners' photographic experience of treehouses is limited. Creating and looking at treehouse images, foreigners do not usually see the duration of people's dwelling in the house, the relations between a given house and previous ones, the site of the house on an owned territory separated from and oriented toward surrounding territories, the processes of bereavement people have experienced, their anticipation of future deaths, or other basic Korowai acts of house-focused cognition. If for foreigners the visual is the actual, for Korowai the temporal is the actual. Absent from dominant ideologies of the meaning of treehouse photographs is temporality as something that is not present in vision alone, but is made present by a subject's active work of memory and inference in relation to what is seen.

CONCLUSION: THE TREEHOUSE IDEA AND THE IDEA OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Patterns in treehouse imaging examined earlier in this article also highlight treehouse photographs' limits as representations of temporality. These photographs hide the conditions of their own making. While there are many subtle, unsettled stories to be told of what defines photography as a technology and idea in different historical locations, one issue is the medium's intense claim to make present a transparently iconic, directly indexical visual duplicate of its subject, across distances of space and time. Travelers and magazine readers

centrally understand treehouse photography as making present a past moment of seeing (the “that-has-been” of Barthes 1981). But this is a temporality attributed to the visually accessible, transparent relation between photographic image and what it depicts, not a temporality in the treehouse itself as something more complicated than what is seen, or a temporality attributed to photographic actions as themselves relational to a history and future of other such actions. A photograph’s meaning as a *desired* connection between viewer and a particular depicted treehouse outpaces the image’s ability to convey actual knowledge and experience (compare Batchen 1997). A treehouse photo so strongly provokes an idea that a house portrayed by it has physically existed, and the visual relation between image and house is so full, that other more foundational iconicities of a photograph are usually left in the shadows. These other iconicities include the photograph’s likeness to a tradition of other photographs that have come before it repetitively across breaks of time, and the photograph’s quality of being iconic of a treehouse *idea* that seems naturally present in the treehouse form but on examination is an element of the fantasy formations of photograph makers and viewers, preceding their search for houses in New Guinea.

An important contrast between camera and house as overall semiotic phenomena lies in the Korowai emphasis on a house’s particularity, as against a photograph’s barely-cloaked emphasis on the house as type. Korowai emphasis on particularity is apparent in the practice of individuating houses by the names of tree species; in the understanding of a house as defining a specific temporal era, relational to earlier and later house occupations; in the strong indexical links people draw between dwellings and position on a landscape of environmental features and ownership zones; and in the experience of houses as spaces of belonging and comfort, or non-belonging and edginess. When Korowai themselves look at photos of treehouses, their response is often to try working out what specific house it is, including who owned it, where it stood, and when it existed. Here the house as type is inherently also the house as token. Like linguistic pronouns (Benveniste 1971) or a living human body, the very idea of a dwelling centrally involves also an idea of its particularity in a given here-and-now of personal ownership and action, looking outward relationally toward other times, places, persons, and events.

By comparison, in the ways users and audiences tend to put cameras into engagement with treehouses, the camera works to create an object dominated by a quality of being typical, as in one earlier-quoted author’s linking of a single canopy-level house image seen in *National Geographic* to the idea of “an entire culture liv[ing] in the trees” (see also Quanchi 1999: 225 on genericizing language in captions historically). Foreigners’ photos compositionally emphasize the separateness of houses, while missing paths by which Korowai understand separateness as relational. A bounded photo, like a visual field divorced from other simultaneous acts of cognition, isolates a

house from the wider landscape of owned forest on which the house sits, and from its own time-saturated character as a moment in people's unfolding sequences of movement across the land while living in the midst of death. Around photographic fetishism of certain kinds of visual information, a house is loosed of time, social relations, death, and reflexivity about seeing as embodied social action, turning the structure into something very different than what it is to its makers.

Joined with the patterns of photographic selection, substitution, and repetition sketched in earlier parts of this paper, this stripping of particularity seems also crucial to the production of the New Guinea treehouse as globally famous "other house." The treehouse needs to be first a type in order to be an anti-type, so to speak. Abstracted into a visual look, the treehouse as disseminated to global audiences can "reach the recipient in his or her own situation" (Benjamin 2008: 22), and more readily come to signify a latent idea of other-worldly difference already present in those recipients' dreams.

There may be an affinity between the mythic idea of the New Guinea treehouse as "other house" and the popularly dominant idea of photography. The experience of treehouse photographs as an immediate indexical and iconic visual duplicate of a separate object is intertwined in global visual culture with an idea of vision as socially free and non-impinging, as far as the relation between photographer and photographed, even as acts of creating or viewing a photograph are thought of as an achievement registering positive social value. These understandings are vividly combined in a June 1886 notice about J. W. Lindt's New Guinea photographs at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, published in the then new (and today extant) British weekly magazine *The Amateur Photographer*: "Civilisation has indeed done much, when at a distance of thousands of miles photography places before us exact representations of the customs and habits of these strange races" (quoted in Lindt 1888a: 18). Here the visual power of photos as "exact representations" that can bring New Guinea sights to metropolitan audiences across great distances is testimony to the collective accomplishments of the society of the photographers, but the camera itself is vastly different from "the customs and habits of ... strange races" it depicts. Under the ideology that a camera is fundamentally different from a house, a documentary photograph can be experienced as the socially unencumbered transposing of an object from someone else's world into one's own. This ideology is itself persuasively iconic of the notion of the treehouse as the anachronistic, numinous presence of an original form out of step with the current age.

Unsurprisingly, Korowai ideas about photography do not follow this chain of assumptions. Concerning the social content of photographic acts, it is a widely-repeated Korowai idea that tourists take photographs in order to give them to their "big head" back home, who in turn pays the tourists large quantities of money. This representation no doubt reflects canny perceptiveness of

the actual economic organization of professional photojournalism and film-making. As I hope to describe elsewhere, the representation even more reflects a Korowai sensibility that sight is a form of exchange on a par with other material acts, and that tourists and Korowai live in the same world and owe each other a great deal.

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