

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche. Edited by Garrick A. Bailey.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3kd7t606>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Lewis, Thomas H.

Publication Date

1996-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

sciences. He argues that "a culture" is most usefully considered "a series of processes that construct, reconstruct and dismantle cultural materials." This contrasts with Lewis's more static concept which seems mainly to constrain social actors. Further, Wolf notes that although "all social actors are defined as participants in commodity exchange" by the theory of capitalism, actors occupy distinctly different "points of vantage" (pp. 390, 391, 425). With this in mind, readers should consider whether all factors shaping the outcomes Lewis describes were of equal valence. Cultural and political economic theory aside, Lewis's focus on native peoples as "rational actors" should also recognize that a potential motivation for not participating in agrarian reform was their awareness that many imposed programs were simply unworkable.

Overall, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* contains both strengths and shortcomings. Lewis provides an admirable quantity of descriptive historical data for those pursuing background information about his case studies. The approximately fifty pages of bibliographic "notes" represent extensive archival research and provide access to original sources that can be difficult to track down. Readers' understanding of the historical detail would be enhanced if a more precise theoretical tool were used to craft analytic comparisons among the case studies and/or generalizations about processes of agrarian change under specific environmental or political circumstances. Lewis's stated goal is to tell a story, and he introduces and guides readers into events. The book's subtitle and introduction may lead readers to anticipate a story of human, cultural, and political ecology that remains to some extent unrevealed and largely unfinished by the end of this volume, yet it provides fertile ground for further analysis.

Tracy J. Andrews
Central Washington University

The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche. Edited by Garrick A. Bailey. University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. 323 pages. \$29.95 cloth. Volume 217 in *The Civilization of the American Indian Series*.

Here is a book of accomplished scholarship, well constructed and of substantial content. It is of lasting value, not least because it records the last priesthood of the Osage.

The Osage and the Invisible World requires contemplation on several levels. It is a meticulous record of the religion of an eastern horticultural native American tribe, a late derivative of the mound-building Mississippian culture. The authors describe and explain two of several lengthy initiation rites of the priesthood. The rites—and Osage beliefs—were not based on divine revelation or named deities, but on empirical observation and reasoning (I did not say *logic*). It was a system consciously created by humans and periodically revised. The purpose plainly stated was the survival and perpetuation of the people through unity in action, particularly in war. Rituals were both supplicatory and pedagogical, containing songs, recitations, dramatic actions, and narratives, all turgid with symbol and multiple meaning. To the study of this exceedingly precise canon the theologic-philosophic-scholastic priests devoted entire lifetimes, always with emphasis on the idea that collective security depended on the ability of the Osage to defend themselves against other humans and on the continued blessing of a divine, nonpersonalized “Power” (Wa-kon-da hon-ba-don) that manifested itself in all living, moving things.

The system came to an abrupt end in the early twentieth century upon the introduction of the peyote religion. Most families converted and erased traces of the old faith in the education of their children. La Flesche undertook his studies just in time, for the priesthood was disappearing (the last initiated member died in 1971). It is not a searching revelation that the Osage cosmos had visible and invisible components (don't all religious systems?). The initiates were the ultimate authorities and decision-makers in secular affairs. Their formal rituals permeated all life and thought. Garrick Bailey tells us, somewhat ominously, that the present volume is “only an introduction” to the vast record and ponderous system.

We have also to consider, in this book, the career in science of Francis La Flesche, 1859–1952. He was born to an Omaha mother and grew up fluent in the language. His paternal grandfather was a French trader, his grandmother Ponca. His father, Iron Eye, was reared among the Omaha and became a chief in 1853. The family was remarkably accomplished. One of Francis's sisters, Susette, was a prominent Indian political activist and lecturer. Another sister, Susana, was the first American Indian woman to become a physician. Francis himself studied law (LLB, LLM). By his own effort, university curricula being what they were then, he became a linguist and an ethnographer and held positions in the Indian Service and the Bureau of Ethnology.

La Flesche also was a major Indian writer (three thousand published pages). He formed close professional friendships with James Dorsey and Alice Fletcher and, with the latter, wrote "The Omaha Tribe," 27th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1905-1906. He coauthored numerous papers and authored fifteen major works, writing mainly to an academic audience. He produced the definitive studies of Osage religion, incomparable in quantity if not lucidity. Was this enough for a career? Of course not. There are reasons: La Flesche passed to near-obscurity in American letters because his works, although voluminous and detailed, were, Bailey thinks, faultily arranged, weak on analysis, and without overview. La Flesche it seems, had a purpose in mind (Bailey again) which he left unstated, or not clearly stated. He assumed that the bulk and mass of his studies would bring enlightenment by indirection to the reader. Was his purpose to show that Indian tribal thought was as subtle, complex, and imaginative as white or "civilized" thought? A need to demonstrate equality may have had roots in his failure to win a sense of enduring recognition among his contemporaries. His position in the academic establishment was precarious; he was in it but not of it. Despite his election to the presidency of the Anthropological Society of Washington, he was aware of the diminished regard in which the mere "native informant" was held, analogous to and as destructive to science as the paternalistic contempt of institutionalized professionals toward the "avocational" contributor.

If La Flesche's implicit purpose was to change white concepts of Indian mentality, did he succeed? Probably not. Changes in thinking come slowly and reluctantly and require dramatic events, not argument. Certainly La Flesche succeeded in showing that Osage religious thought was as obsessively concerned with dogma, ritual, and repetition as that of the medieval European Church. An Osage priesthood immersed in repetition found an explicator if not an acolyte in La Flesche. He piled detail upon detail, repetition upon repetition, until his writings became almost incomprehensible. Still, he is matched by Bailey, who, giving thirty years to the study, is equally near-drowned in meticulous reexamination of the sacred text. Neither author, nor the Osage, questioned the ultimate value of endless recycling of words in precise and sacred order, as if the uncontrollable can be thus controlled or the unpredictable thus predicted. Doubt that magical repetition can achieve empirical ends occurred to a few medi-

eval and modern minds but has as yet made no appeal to the commonality, perhaps because the child mind still rules all cultures. Doubt about the efficacy of ritual did not occur to the Osage, who abandoned one magic system only to take up another.

Individuals differ in their propensity to dedicate themselves to ritual. A small number of highly regarded persons in either a tribal or civilized society find it essential to prescribe rites for the guidance of all. The Osage theological elites conceived and continually revised a massive liturgy. They found a profound meaning in ritual, and a conviction that life depended absolutely on their constructions. La Flesche became, at the end, their exegete as Bailey became his. Osage priests were tireless in attention to correct explication and practice of the canon. La Flesche was tireless in authoritative recording, and Bailey followed with meticulous (now academic), sifting of the holy text. It is not surprising that Bailey found irresistible the urge to edit, correct, and rearrange, and that he found gaps, puzzles, and inconsistencies—all to be tenaciously pursued, all in the interests of clarity, I am sure, and no complaint from me. But then I have not read the La Flesche original or talked to an orthodox Osage priest. Like most Osage people, I suspect, I am content to go on without grappling for salvation by repetition.

Thomas H. Lewis

Our Tellings: Interior Salish Stories of the Nlha7kapmx People. Compiled and edited by Darwin Hanna and Mamie Henry. Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 1995. 217 pages.

Our Tellings is an anthology of contemporary oral accounts by twenty-three elders of the Nlha7kapmx (Thompson Salish) Nation located in southeastern British Columbia. Compilers Darwin Hanna and Mamie Henry present their materials in a self-effacing style of scholarly organization that foregrounds the stories effectively and beautifully and conveys an immediacy rarely present in publications intended for audiences outside of a native community. They have crafted a book that will be admired by scholars interested in varying voices and viewpoints, by storytellers, and by those working on other native oral history projects.

Introductory and concluding materials contextualize the stories for an academic audience but are also personal enough to add