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Social Sciences

Traditions of the Osage
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To scholars of Native American culture, little-known historian Francis La Flesche is the Rosetta Stone.

Prior to La Flesche's early twentieth-century field work, there were anthropologists and there were Indians. But there had never been an Indian anthropologist until he arrived to study the Osage. La Flesche was Omaha, a people who speak a similar Siouan dialect; so he was not only fully able to understand the language of the Osage, but also the cultural context of the stories he heard.

Of course, this cultural sensitivity meant nothing to the white scholars of the time, so La Flesche's collection of stories sat gathering dust for a century in journals and footnotes at the Smithsonian Institution. It took current Osage historian and University of Tulsa professor Garrick Bailey to collect them, polish them, and present this remarkable view of an ancient people in their own words.

On many levels, the Osage were themselves remarkable. Called by nineteenth-century artist George Catlin the largest Indians he had ever seen—with some approaching seven feet tall—the Osage embodied the white man's image of the "savage Indian." Skilled horsemen and trackers, the men with their shaved heads and feathered roaches (what we today call "Mohawks") presented a frightening visage. These stories attest time and again that the tribe was every bit as violent and warlike as it was reputed to be. Some of the stories are frankly shocking in their cruelty. Even the Osage Nation Web site, while praising the book, states that it "shows the best and worst of the Osage."

The stories are broken into three groups: sacred teachings, folk stories, and animal stories. The animal stories are similar to the children's stories of other Indian nations, with smart rabbits, dumb and prideful coyotes, and Osage mores wrapped around parables. The stories of sacred teachings, which were meant to be told only by tribal priests, are the least interesting of

the three groups—they are repetitive, occasionally contradictory, and perhaps purposely confusing.

It is the folk stories which bring the book and the people it studies to life. Osage values about infant care, relations between men and women, even how to properly build a wigwam, are imparted in tales made richer from repeated telling down the years.

The warrior Osage is no more, replaced by the oil-wealthy and casino-operating Osage of modern-day Oklahoma. But for more than 200 years, the Osage were the ruthless rulers of the Great Plains. Thanks to Francis La Flesche, *Traditions of the Osage* shines a light on this unique nation.

Jack Shakely