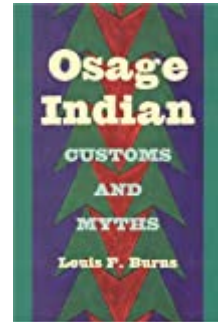




**Louis F. Burns.** *Osage Indian Customs and Myths.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xvi + 230 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5181-6.



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### An Osage on Osages

Louis F. Burns, a member of the Osage Mottled Eagle clan, has written several excellent books on Osage history and culture. This latest volume provides for the general reader as well as the specialist a valuable introduction to Osage ceremonial customs and associated traditional narratives.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, "Customs," begins with a chapter describing the Little Old Men. This is a group of elders who, having devoted their lives to study and contemplation, are charged with the responsibility of upholding community spiritual, moral, and ethical values. The Little Old Men functioned as the keepers of the sacred lore that forms the primary subject matter of this volume. Seven additional chapters follow, detailing Osage ceremonial life in the contexts of government, religion, family life, food production, warfare, funeral observances, and sundry other affairs. Part 2, "Myths," presents traditional narratives in two short chapters dealing respectively with genesis accounts and general myths. These traditional narratives provide the conceptual framework on which the ceremonial life of the community is based, a point that I wish the author

had addressed in greater detail.

The bulk of the material presented in the book pertains to a bygone era when Osages existed as an independent, native North American tribe. Indeed, the primary source for the information presented in the book is the voluminous work of Francis La Flesche, an Omaha Indian who worked for the Bureau of American Ethnology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fluent in the Osage language and trusted by the most adept religious practitioners of that era, La Flesche published several volumes together containing thousands of pages of highly detailed descriptions of Osage beliefs, ceremonial practices, and cultural institutions. Unfortunately, this material is difficult to find outside of academic libraries and none of it is easy reading. Burns provides a great service in selecting from this mountain of information the most essential facts required for a general understanding of traditional Osage customs. He presents these facts in a well-organized, easy-to-read account.

The information provided in each chapter yields many valuable insights into the organization of Osage

culture and the manner in which it was sustained, and some information is included that illustrates how these customs were modified across the generations. The chapter on Osage government, for example, begins with a brief summary of Osage religious and philosophical precepts, and then traces how fundamental religious and philosophical principles were embraced in successive governing institutions. The next chapter, on religion, does not dwell on sacred texts, as might be expected from a western cultural perspective, but instead examines the songs, material accouterments, and rituals through which Osage communities celebrate their relations with supernatural powers and spiritual beings. Social relations within the community are shown to be premised on those spiritual ties. Family matters, the quest for food and other necessary resources, warfare, and mourning of the dead similarly involve the performance of specially designated rites that are likewise based on fundamental religious beliefs. These rites make use of their own material trappings to symbolize the Osage social order and acknowledge its dependence on cosmological relationships.

Though the information in each chapter is but a brief summary of fuller expositions in primary sources penned by La Flesche and other writers, Burns's well-organized treatment ably succeeds in conveying the richness of Osage beliefs and associated ceremonial practices. The few and spare line drawings that illustrate each chapter don't

do much to support the narrative presentation (a central colored insert of ceremonial design motifs adds a nice touch), but this sacrifice was undoubtedly made to maintain the book's modest pricing. The careful reader will still come away with a profound sense of how life in an Osage community would differ from more familiar social and cultural experiences.

Beyond the general reader, Burns's careful reliance on basic source materials makes the book a handy, thoroughly annotated reference for students and scholars, who can use it to guide more thorough study. Furthermore, when read in conjunction with Burns's *A History of the Osage People* (2004), the shortcomings of this book's a-temporal treatment are overcome and a sense can be gained of what has changed and what has endured throughout recorded Osage history.

In sum, this brief volume is a very welcome addition to the literature on Osage culture and history. It will appeal to the interests of the general reader, it can be used as a text in college courses on North American Indians, and it will serve as a useful reference for more advanced students, scholars, and teachers. Many thanks are owed to Louis F. Burns for his personal commitment to disseminating high-quality information about the Osage people, and to the University of Alabama Press for assisting in this endeavor.

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