

## OSAGE & BOARDING SCHOOLS: CASE STUDY IN ETHNOCENTRISM

### Background Reading & Discussion Questions:

How were the Euro-American educators *ethnocentric* in the way they devised the Indian Boarding Schools system of education?

Consider this quote from **Osage historian Louis F. Burns**:

It was a matter of **cultural ethnocentrism** for the Americans to assume the Osages would want to be totally educated in American culture. The Osages desired education in order to improve their existing culture; the American idea was to **destroy Osage culture and replace it with American culture**. The ability to see their own cultural weaknesses and **to seek to improve their [American] culture by borrowing from the Osages was never applied by the Americans toward Osage culture** in any formal way.

-- Louis F. Burns, p. 164, *History of the Osage People*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004)



Captain Richard H. Pratt: "Kill the Indian that is in him, and save the man." From iconic speech on how schools should "civilize" and "Americanize" the Indian. (1892)

Analyze and discuss Burns' **three main ideas** as follows:

### 1. "It was a matter of cultural ethnocentrism for the Americans to assume the Osages would want to be totally educated in American culture."

**What is culture?** The way a people live - a group identity from shared patterns of behavior, interaction, and understanding of the world.

"Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things," says Cristina De Rossi, an anthropologist.

**What is ethnocentrism?** Evaluating other cultures according to the standards and customs of one's own culture.

### Ethnocentrism and the Failure of Imagination:

**Q: Why did the U.S. insist on an educational system that would eliminate Osage culture?** i.e. that would not let students continue speaking their own language, wearing their own clothes, following their spiritual beliefs, etc.? Consider these explanations:

**Failure of imagination:** The Euro-American educators were unable to imagine:

(1) Another culture could be as valid as their own, or

(2) Compromise might be reached in which Native people could *retain their culture* while also being educated in how to fit into Euro-American culture.

- **The educators were completely ethnocentric:** unable to accept the validity of any culture except their own, i.e. they believed the **native Osage culture had no value**
- **All or none philosophy:** The educators believed the two cultures were contradictory: the **Osage had to abandon the old ways in order to learn new ones.** *i.e.* - students would not be able to accept new ideas or learn new skills as long as they retained traditional values and skills.

**DISCUSSION: How and why did the American educators fail in their ability to imagine more appropriate ideas of education for the Osage?**

**2. The Osages desired education in order to expand their existing culture, but the American idea was to destroy Osage culture and replace it with American culture.**

**DEVISING A SYSTEM OF EDUCATION FOR THE OSAGE:**

**Compare Goals: What was the cultural tension here?**

- **Osage goal for education** - help children find ways to survive in U.S. society (learn English, reading, math, science, history, etc., gain new technical skills to increase employment and self-employment opportunities, manage finances, learn world history and humanities, but do so *while preserving their own Native culture and language*)
- **U.S. goal** - assimilate Native Americans into U.S. society by *eliminating Native culture*

**Q: Why did the U.S. government choose boarding schools instead of local day schools for Native American students?**

- **Q: Why distant boarding schools?** Why did Native American students - even the very young - have to completely leave their homes and families for long periods of time, going far away to overnight schools, in order to get an education? Consider these effects of **separation of children from parents:** emotional trauma, loss of parental role models, loss of family cohesion, loss of learning how-to-parent their own children.

- Q: **Why not local day schools?** Why not establish day schools on the reservations - at least for younger students (i.e. grades 1-8), such as the common one-room country day schools for white children which were springing up all across the frontier even in sparsely-populated areas - schools where the students could go home at night to their families?
- Q: **Why rigid military-style regimens?** Why were the Indian boarding schools so much stricter than most white schools?
- Q: Were there **any practical or financial justifications** for the boarding school vs. local day school system?

**DISCUSSION: Why was the structure of the Indian Boarding School system chosen, and what was the effect on Native cultures?**

3. **The ability [of Americans] to see their own cultural weaknesses and to seek to improve their culture by borrowing from the Osages was never applied by the Americans toward Osage culture in any formal way.**

Fortunately, the **Osage people and culture have survived** - in spite of loss of their lands, the boarding school system, etc.

Q: Can Americans *today* reverse the early assumption that the Osage must learn from American culture, and instead consider *what American culture can learn from Osage*?

Q: What opportunities does the survival of Osage culture give Americans today?

Following are some traditional Osage values. (See examples of these values in current Osage culture in the [Osage Nation website](#) and [Osage News](#))

- Respect for nature and the environment
- Avoiding materialism
- Enriching experience by finding spirituality in all aspects of life
- Loyalty and dedication to family
- Respect for elders
- Helping the poor and sick
- Preserving community and culture through traditional events
- Civic involvement - voting and community service

**DISCUSSION: What weaknesses in current American culture might be strengthened by borrowing from traditional Osage cultural values?**

## WRITING ACTIVITY:

Write a 5-paragraph essay in which you address the question:

**How were the Euro-American educators *ethnocentric* in the way they devised the Indian Boarding Schools system of education?**

Your three body paragraphs can follow the above outline of Burns' analysis:

1. Americans were so culturally ethnocentric they failed to imagine any way to preserve Osage culture while also educating Osage students in American culture
  - Explain ethnocentrism and apply it to this context
2. American educators devised the boarding school system for Native students in order to destroy native culture
  - Give examples of boarding school practices
3. Today, American educators can reverse the old educational model and help students *learn from* the traditional Osage culture
  - Explore Osage culture to find examples of behavior and values to strengthen areas of weakness in American culture. See the [Osage Nation website](#) and [Osage News](#)