# Confessions of a *Road Man*: Being an Indian in Academe

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> I am an Osage *Road Man*. An Osage *Road Man* is a person who conducts the traditional ritual of the Osage Christian way of worship that was adopted by the tribe in the late 1880s. In traditional Osage practices the way to everlasting life is to follow the Good Road of Christian teachings that had been adapted to traditional Osage values, beliefs and worldview. The term *Road Man* refers to the person who conducts the ritual and symbolically leads the participants in prayer in following the Good Road of Life. The ritual usually begins at sun down and continues until the next mid-day. (Pratt, *Personal Communication*, October 19, 2002)

As an intercultural communication researcher my focus has been upon identifying and explicating American Indian communicative behavior. Even though I write of Indian and Osage communicative behavior I have been reluctant to share my everyday experiences (a life of being a university professor who concomitantly lives a traditional life of an Osage Indian *Road Man*) with my colleagues, students and non-Indian associates. My reluctance stems from past experiences when I have shared information and the response has usually been in the form of culturally insensitive remarks, disapproval, complete misunderstanding and a barrage of inappropriate questions. Consequently, personal information that could illuminate, expand upon existing intercultural communication theory, or simply be of interest goes unheard. Moreover, it is ironic that my scholarship and teaching are dependent upon teaching textbook material as opposed to sharing and teaching real life cultural experiences.

The purpose of this festschrift is to reflect upon the impact that my friend and teacher L. Brooks Hill has had upon my development as an intercultural

researcher and to disclose a few cultural experiences which I have heretofore been reluctant to speak of. Specifically this essay will (a) illustrate how I came to learn about my culture through graduate study (b) describe my experiences as a university professor and (c) describe my experiences as a traditional Indian in an academic environment.

**Coming to Know and Understand Culture**

My saga began at the University of Oklahoma Department of Communication when I entered into the Master of Arts program focusing upon intercultural communication. Little did I realize that as I began to study culture, specifically American Indian culture and communication, that I would come to know and understand my own Osage culture. It was through studying with L. Brooks Hill that I would come to know and find out about who I was as an Osage Indian and as a burgeoning communication researcher. During this era Professor Hill was collaborating with Phil Lujan, Ralph Cooley, D. Lawrence Wieder and others in researching the communicative behaviors of American Indians. They were studying areas such as Indian public speaking, symbolicity, hedging, and other forms of Indian communication.

The article which prompted the most thought and stimulated questions was Hill and Lujan's (1984) "Symbolicity Among Native American Speakers." This article focused upon contemporary Indian culture and the struggle to develop and maintain an Indian identity; a struggle that continues today. This was the first time that I began to understand the struggle for identity that I, as well as my contemporaries, were facing. The questions that were prompted by their essay and the discussions with Professor Hill about those questions served as the basis for my doctoral dissertation and subsequent research, and even to my efforts in restoring the Osage language.

**Experiencing Real-Life Cultural Differences**

It may seem unusual to say I came to know about my tribal since I had been born, raised, and educated on the Osage Indian reservation at Hominy, Oklahoma. I had been socialized by full-blood Osage Indians and had been exposed to the language and customs of my tribe. As with other people who are socialized in an ethnic environment, the notion of culture was unfamiliar to me. So also I did not realize the influence that my culture had upon my interactions with others in both an Indian and a non-Indian environment. It wasn't until I began to study Indian communicative behavior that I came to understand that there were real-life differences between Indian communication and non-Indian communication. Through my studies I began to find out who I was, not only from a theoretical perspective but also from a social perspective.

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at Hominy, Oklahoma. I had been socialized by full-blood Osage Indians in which I was exposed to the language and customs of my tribe. As other people, who are socialized in an ethnic environment, the notion of culture was unfamiliar to me, and the implications my culture had upon my interactions with others both culturally and in a non-Indian environment. It wasn't until I began to study Indian communicative behavior that I came to understand that there were real-life differences between Indian communication and non-Indian communication. Not only from a theoretical perspective but also from a social perspective did I begin to find out who I was.

When I was accepted into the graduate program at the University of Oklahoma I was unaware that my social background was unique. My social world consisted of only American Indians both intra-tribally and inter-tribally. This is not to say that I did not have any social interactions with anyone that wasn't Indian. On the contrary, I had many interactions with non-Indians who had chosen to be a part of the Indian world; however, I didn't venture out into non-Indian environments until I began my graduate study.

It became evident from my interactions with Dr. Hill, my other professors and fellow graduate students that there were many culturally communicative differences. The differences were evident in communicative behaviors such as uses of humor, hedging behavior, self-disclosure, collectivism and individualism; not only was I learning these concepts in my course work but I was concomitantly experiencing them first hand in my communication with faculty and classmates.

Perhaps the incident that led to my epiphany of cultural differences came from the tacit social expectations associated with graduate school. For example, the graduate students and an occasional faculty member would often get together on weekends to socialize, usually at someone's apartment or at a faculty member's house and even an occasional outing to the local bars. I was always invited and asked if I would be attending and I would always reply that I would try to attend. However, in the Osage culture when someone is tendered an invitation it is impolite to say no to a direct invitation but to say you will attend. The Indian person tendering the invitation knows this and does not expect you to say no and knows that if you can make it you will be there.

I soon came to find out that this was unacceptable in the non-Indian community. I would find this out on Monday mornings when I would be confronted and asked why I didn't attend when I said I would. In my most polite Osage manner I would say that something with my family came up that required my presence. My fellow classmates were understanding on several occasions but I was soon confronted by a delegation that asked me what the problem was. They explained that it was troubling to them for me to say I would attend and then not show up and they wondered if there was a problem. In my most

appropriate Osage conflict management behavior I would say I just couldn't make it. It was quite a while before I was invited to the social gatherings again. Needless to say, we were all unaware that we were experiencing problems associated with cultural communication. However, this incident led to a collaborative research project with Bill Kennan and Phil Lujan (1983) addressing the concept of "The Use of Affirmations as Hedging Behavior Among American Indian Speakers."

Another incident, which particularly stands out, occurred in graduate school when I was assigned to share an office with another doctoral student from Ohio who had never been to Oklahoma and had never met a "real live Indian." Besides the usual questions of "are you really an Indian' and "what kind of food do you people eat" we would often get into discussions of how I did not use the English language properly when I would refer to events, objects, places, etc., in describing my tribal activities. Our primary argument focused on the word "*arbor*." On my reservation we have family campgrounds which are utilized during our ceremonial dance, the I-lon-shka. We call this structure, where we prepare meals, dress for the ceremonial, and engage in other related activities an *arbor*. My colleague would often argue with me and say that what we called an *arbor* was not an arbor. She informed me that an arbor was structure resembling a trellis in which flowers grew freely through. Even though she visited our *arbor* during the ceremonials she never relented and even sent me a post card from Ohio which had a grape arbor on the front of the card with a notation which read "this is an arbor!"

This led to the creation of the concept of "Osage English" – a gloss, in the anthropological sense – of Osage words to describe an Osage concept in English. "Osage English" is a concept I have used extensively in researching Osage communication (Pratt & Wieder, 1993) and I use italics to designate a gloss, as in the examples below.

It was the forementioned experiences and a myriad of other cultural faux pas that served as the basis for my course of study and subsequent research efforts.

**Stereotyping of an Indian Professor**

The primary course that I have taught during my tenure as a university professor has been Intercultural Communication. Obviously a primary focus of the course is upon stereotyping, cultural sensitivity, prejudice and intercultural competence. Although the university where I now teach is committed to maintaining cultural sensitivity it seems to apply to other cultures rather than to Indians. I am still amazed by the stereotypical images my colleagues hold of Indian people. It seems that a week doesn't go by that I am queried as to my perceived ability to make it rain, to interpret patterns of smoke in the sky, and to speak for all Indian people on issues such as tribal gaming and Indian mascots.

Also, I am considered to be an Indian movie critic and always asked my opinion of the movies such as "Dances with Wolves" and "Windtalkers".

For a recent example, a colleague asked me quite seriously if I could read smoke signals. I replied that I had read *Smoke Signals* by the Indian author Sherman Alexie but if he was referring to the old western movies in which an Indian would be on a mesa and use a blanket to cover and uncover a burning fire to create a type of Indian smoke Morse Code that I could not. I explained that only happened in the movies and furthermore, I had not received my flame retardant signal blanket from the government yet. I did jokingly reply that I was pretty handy with a mirror to signal the approach of the Calvary. By his quizzical expression I don't think he got my Indian humor, however my Indian friends with whom I have shared this story thought it was very humorous.

An incident which I did not think was humorous occurred during a recent heat wave in our state. During a succession of one hundred-plus degree days a colleague stopped by my office and told me that I needed to do a rain dance. I replied that my tribe did not have any dances to create changes in the weather and if I could make it rain by dancing I would be getting huge consultant fees and would be making guest appearances on talk shows hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, and of course Oprah. Again, my colleague did not get my Indian humor in my reply and reiterated that I still needed to do a rain dance.

**On Being an Indian in Academe**

Being a traditional Indian in contemporary society, specifically as a university professor, is a difficult task. In living my life as an Osage man I am obligated to maintain our traditional way of life which is in so many ways in direct contrast to living my life as a university professor.

Within my role as a traditional Osage I am required to be on call at all times. On the reservation there are ceremonial events that are more or less scheduled to occur such as the I-lon-shka (an annual ceremonial dance which is almost always held during the month of June) and seasonal Ki-kon-ze (Native American Church meetings). However, many other activities arise whenever there is a need for them. For example, a Ki-kon-ze may be held whenever there is a need, such as an illness or for a family in mourning. Typically the all-night church meetings are held on a Saturday but can be held on any day of the week. Honor dinners, announcement dinners, naming ceremonies and funeral rites can also be held any day of the week.

Often, whenever a ceremonial/traditional event is held by my *relatives* my attendance and/or participation as a *Road Man* is required. During these events, I can be *called upon* to help by "*talking*" for the families that are hosting the event, conducting a ceremonial ritual, serving in an advisory capacity or simply by being in attendance to serve as a witness to the event. Moreover, if I am invited or *called upon* I am expected to be in attendance regardless of any other

obligations I may have at the time. In other words, there are no excuses that would justify my not being in attendance.

Osages view time much differently than non-Indians. In the Osage world, when your help/attendance is needed you are expected to be there, regardless of how the modern workday is segmented. Although traditional Osages do lead their everyday lives according to a western concept of time, e.g. going to work, attending school, having appointments, they also incorporate Osage perceptions of time into the management of their day-to-day affairs. When the need arises for a ceremonial event it is taken care of. The needs of the extended family supersede that of the individual. In my case, everyday obligations such as teaching classes, holding office hours, meeting research deadlines and having social activities such as going to a university football game are expected to be put "on hold" when a family or tribal member *calls upon* me for help with a traditional or ceremonial event.

Obviously, this presents a double-bind dilemma; do I place priority on meeting the requirements of my profession that provides for my family's security or do I place priority on meeting the requirements of my Osage people which provides a way of life for me and my son? Quite simply, I try to do both. It takes approximately two hours to return to the reservation, therefore, I try to meet my classes (missing an office hour or two) drive to the reservation and attend the event then return to meet my classes on the next day. In many instances I have had to repeat this process for three or four consecutive days. However, sometimes I get lucky and the event will be held on the weekend and I will not have to miss any university obligations.

Although my department chair and college dean are supportive of my role with my Osage people, university regulations are not as easily adapted to my particular situation. For example, faculty are only allowed a maximum of three days funeral leave per year for immediate family. Among the Osages, immediate family includes aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins and close friends. This is evidenced in the Osage language in that the words for aunts and uncles is the same as the words for mother and father, nephews and nieces are referred to as sons and daughters, and there is not an Osage word for cousin, they are considered to be brothers and sisters. Too, when an Osage dies the modernized funeral ritual can take four days to complete, however, traditional *full-rites* can take up to eleven days. When *full-rites* are conducted the deceased is brought to their family home where he or she is kept for three days with the ritual and interment being conducted before noon on the fourth day. A period of mourning is observed for four days after the funeral ritual, preparations for the funeral Ki-kon-ze are made on the fifth day, the funeral Ki-kon-ze is held on sixth day. The service is completed on the seventh day after interment.

However, according to university regulations immediate family members of the Osages are viewed as extended family members and traditional services are

not recognized. Although the university is committed to serving a multi-cultural community, the traditional practices of the Osages, as well as members of other Indian tribes are not covered under the leave policy.

**Conclusion**

This essay has allowed me to reflect upon how my academic studies and my traditional Osage lifestyle have merged to give me a unique perspective on culture and language. Without my experiences in and out of the classroom I would not have been able to gain an understanding of the role that Osage culture has had in my daily interpretations of my world. Nor would I have been able to share my experiences with our discipline.

Without the assistance and guidance of my mentor L. Brooks Hill the understanding of my role as an Osage Indian and intercultural communication researcher would not have been as easily apparent to me. I have finally became aware of the real-life cultural differences in communication and the problems that occur in living and working in a non-Indian environment and have been able to incorporate these real-life experiences into my research.

This essay has also allowed me to disclose information about being an Indian in academe and the stereotypes and prejudice that occur within this role. This is not to suggest that academe is rife with insensitive, racist professionals but simply to point out that cultural misunderstandings exist. On the contrary, this essay has allowed me to reflect upon and acknowledge the invaluable influences of the scholars I have been fortunate to study with. Thanks Brooks.

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