Chapter XIII

Cut from the Same Cloth:
The United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, Geographic Information Systems, and Cultural Assimilation

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Abstract

The construction and implementation of geographic information systems (GIS) within the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is yet another attempt to assimilate American Indians into the greater American society. Historically, the BIA collaborated with Christian missionaries to assimilate indigenous Americans. The United States federal government implemented the reservation and boarding school systems, and promoted the English language and Christianity while effectively suppressing indigenous languages and religions. Today the BIA collaborates with new missionaries who are distinctly technical and corporate. This particular BIA/GIS implementation strategy can have homogenizing and universalizing impacts upon American Indian cultural landscapes, geographic knowledge and native languages.
Introduction

Recently, there has been a push by government and non-government organizations to develop and implement geographic information system (GIS) technologies within indigenous communities around the world. Computer-based information technologies such as GIS are “transforming basic cultural concepts and experiences such as those of time, space, reality, privacy, and community and … also affecting fundamental shifts in cultural practices” (Brey, 2003, p. 55). Technological determinists argue that GIS are a way for indigenous communities to attain progress by replacing old, traditional views of geographic knowledge with new, progressive, scientific and technological ways. However, technological determinists fail to acknowledge that information technologies like GIS are not endemic to indigenous societies. Like all technologies, GIS are socially constructed within the historical contexts of some institutions (Chrisman, 1993), and some institutional histories are filled with conflict, military action and the colonization of indigenous peoples throughout the world. One such institution currently involved in the promotion of GIS within indigenous communities is the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The BIA was officially created on June 30, 1834. At first, the bureau was under the administration of the Department of War and later moved to the Department of the Interior (DOI). Historically, the bureau implemented and carried out the United States government policies of extermination, assimilation, termination and self-determination on American Indians and their land resources (Jackson & Galli, 1977). One former BIA administrator stated that, “The two main functions of the BIA through most of its history have been (1) to help Indians adjust to the society that gradually surrounded and engulfed them; (2) to exercise trust responsibility for Indian land and resources as long as that was required by law” (Taylor, 1984, p. 45). Some American Indians see these objectives as a product of colonialism, and assimilationist and paternalistic in nature.

To fulfill its mission to assimilate American Indians, the BIA often collaborated with Christian missionary groups. Missionary groups and administrators, “largely viewed the BIA as somehow their bureau, with the assimilation process being their responsibility to guide and shape” (Daily, 2004, p. 35). Through their relations with the U.S. federal government, missionaries gained access to American Indian people through the reservation system, boarding schools and the development of churches in Indian Country; all of which promoted the implementation of the English language and westernized education. Through these social structures, missionaries assisted in the cultural assimilation of many American Indians. American Indian scholar and activist Vine Deloria “argued that it is because Indians perceive themselves as sovereign that they resisted assimilation, fought termination, and preserved their cultures as much as possible” (Deloria, quoted in Gross, 1989, p. 8).
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