



# The Ute Language in Context

Essays relating the Ute language to  
practices, culture, and history

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# **Introduction: Naming Practices, Speech, and Beliefs of the Ute**

A belief in the supernatural forms the undercurrent of Ute naming and speech practices. From personal names, place names, and to their speech practices regarding nouns such as kin, plants, and animals, elements of the Ute religion can be found. This factors into a larger sense of place and community in the Ute tribe, as names and speech behaviors tend to come from their interactions with and their personifications of the natural world. In the pursuit of understanding Ute culture, where their language comes from, and why it behaves the way it does in certain contexts this work will explore Ute personal and place names, speech practices, and provide a general overview of Ute tribal life and culture, and history.

The Ute are a Great Basin tribe that once occupied parts of present-day Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and southern Wyoming. They lived in tepees, were largely nomadic hunters, and today live on two reservations in Colorado and Utah. Their language is Numic which is a branch of the larger Uto-Aztec language family and is part of the Shoshonean linguistic stock (1)(2). The climate meant that communities were small, consisting of just 1-2 related families during the summer before converging to 50-200 family groups during the fall. During the winter, smaller family groups would live together with a temporary chief.

This annual pattern of movement would be repeated barring no economic challenges, such as a lack of food (2). Their environment of the southwest United States influenced their language and cultural development by making the local wildlife, springs, and caves integral parts of their language, mythology, and naming practices. The mythology built around certain animals and geographic features developed into a sense that the supernatural was part of the world the Ute inhabited, and caused linguistic changes such as differentiation between animate and inanimate nouns based on the object's role in the supernatural.

Ute place names are fully transparent, and can be directly analyzed using their contemporary language. This implies that these names are relatively new, and that Ute occupation of the Great Basin region is recent (2). These place names are often inanimate and uncommon nouns and are also often gerunds. For example, the Ute name for Pagosa Springs is *pa-lusa-tý*, which translates to Water-gushing. An interesting feature of Ute place names is that certain names and locations tend to be animate, rather than inanimate nouns. These are usually places of cultural and mythological significance, such as springs, caves, and large stone landmarks. Springs were considered sacred places, and caves were featured in legends as being the homes of legendary creatures that brought death and disease (3). As is common with indigenous names and their use in other languages, exoticism and marketing have corrupted the actual meanings of Ute place names. Returning to the Pagosa Springs example, the town has adopted the Ute word *pah-gosa*, where *pah* is a common Ute word for water. It is maintained that this translates to water that smells like sulfur, however linguistic analysis shows that this word actually means *acid*, or *smelly water*, which of course is less exotic. Many mistakes in the use of Ute place names occur because Ute is an agglutinating language, resulting in a number of names that differ because listeners could not distinguish between,

for example, lake which is "have water" and natural ponds which are "sitting water" (4).

Personal names in Ute are also transparent, and tribal members would receive a new name at each major transition in life. A typical number of name changes over a lifetime was five (2). The first naming would occur about four days after birth and the child would be named by a parent or an older relative of the same sex. The child would be named again when they began to walk in the same fashion, usually for some physical characteristic. At puberty boys would be named by another relative that took them on their first hunting trip, usually for the first animal they killed, while girls would be named by an older female relative that took her gathering. Another name was given to validate adulthood, usually after the first solo hunt or first child. Most interestingly as men aged they were serially renamed for increasing supernatural potency, as would women past child-bearing age who would then also take part in claiming supernatural power. These names would evolve over time such as a man starting with the name *kɪukɪ́-ɸ́-ci*, or Sitting Bear which can evolve to *tukɪ-ɸ́-ci*, or Sitting Mountain Lion which implies an growth in supernatural power. Names were also often built around Ute nouns for women or men, such as *mama-ci* which is Ute for women, which can be transformed to a name such as *wa'a-mama-ci* which means Pinyon Woman(3).

In speaking styles one of the more interesting features of the Ute language is how the differences between animate and inanimate nouns are handled. Generally, animate nouns are given the suffix *-ci* while inanimate nouns are given *-pi* (5). Many objects that would be considered inanimate in English are considered animate in Ute due to personification, such as the sun, moon, and stars which feature heavily in Ute mythology. Meanwhile, some nouns that we would consider animate such as insects and small animals are considered inanimate. This is because they are regarded as too small or

unimportant to be considered animate- the English terms "bug" or "vermin" most closely match Ute attitudes to these creatures, explaining the linguistic difference. This is also explained by these creatures not having any sort of supernatural identity in Ute religion (3). Animate nouns tended to have a supernatural connection, which is reflected in the personification of their animate nouns as well as in their division of labor. Men largely dealt with the supernatural world, acting as shamans and hunting, while women dealt with the inanimate world. Nouns associated with women and gathering are built around the word mua-pý which is a noun meaning thing or natural phenomenon. Nouns associated with men are of similar form to wi-ci, which means knife. Women did hold some animate tools, such as wju-ci, or awl. This is further tied to mens' personal names, which quickly began to be associated with a supernatural power in adulthood, something that women were not able to be a part of until they were past child bearing age (3). Further, only animate nouns could be plurals (1).

When dealing with kinship relationships, age differences were phonetically marked based on the generation of the person being addressed and your own (2). The nouns are further broken down to consanguineous relationships, generation, sex, and whether or not the person being addressed is older. Whether or not the person is related to you through your mother or father is also important. Diminution and stem changes are often the ways generational differences are shown, such as mother being pia-ni while the aunt on the mother's side is called naa-pia-ni. This reflects Ute cultural values of close family groups, as the close relation between these words reveals linguistically how women generally acted as a mother to each child in a family group. It also reflects how a successful Ute man would often be encouraged to also marry his wife's sister if economic conditions allowed for it, which is also reflected in how close

these words are in structure. Cross and parallel cousins out to fourth cousins are treated similar to kin in Hawaiian, with each being called the same terms (3). Polygamous and incestuous relationships were also practiced and this is reflected in the language, such as the term for your mother's sister; naa-pia-ni is almost the same as the word naa-piua-ni which means potential spouse (6). Also of note is how closely kin terms seem to follow Ute language for animals and myths. For example, tuac refers to children of any species but tua-ni is your child in Ute. More importantly mythological creatures show up inside kinterms, such as in older brother papi-ni containing part of the word papipic, which refers to a mythological weasel. This has to do with the Ute belief that they are descendants of spirit ancestors from the mythological past described in Ute religion (3)(6). This again highlights the supernatural undercurrents that seem to pervade how many Ute words are formulated and developed.

One way kin names were differentiated was with diminution. Adding additional suffixes -ci to human nouns or -ta for nonhuman adds diminution and can be used to imply affection, which is apparent in its use with consanguine relatives due to the large emphasis on family life and values in Ute society. For example, wici-ci means song bird but we can stack additional ci endings to get wici-ci-ci to get little songbird (3). Another example is the word sister, which uses diminution to specify what generation is being referred to. Your aunt on your mother's side is called paa-ni if that aunt is older than your father, while paa-ci-ni is your older sister. Note the addition of the ci ending stacked with the suffix ni to show that this sister is part of a younger generation. The suffix ni means "like", which further shows Ute family values linguistically by referring to kin as being like oneself (5). Ni also shows up when one wants to show possession, such as nūni kan, or my tent, which also makes sense when one is talking about one's kin to show that they belong to your family group (7).

Polite language and signing are also features of Ute society. In terms of language, one of the biggest taboos is using the names of the dead. After death, names became avoided as were any words conveyed by that name. This has to do with how names in Ute convey power, and also the supernatural belief that using any of the property of the dead encourages them to return from the afterlife, which is also why it was tradition to bury a Ute with their tools or to burn them (1). This plays into the more general belief that personal possessions among the Ute are things that one manufactured, and that only the person who made the object can dispose of it (2). Body parts also carry distinctions in the language that reflect societal norms and politeness, for example pita-pi is the right hand which is very different from kwiya-pi in stem because the right side is considered the "good" side, especially since rituals and dances tend to move in a right-handed clockwise motion. It is also impolite to point in Ute- a universal sign among Ute to signal direction or to gesture is to jerk the chin in the direction one wants to gesture. It is especially impolite to point or communicate using the left hand, since this is regarded as the "bad" side (3).

The supernatural and the natural environment directly govern how Ute words are formed. If you have a Ute's name, you can deduce their gender, age, and their claimed supernatural power. These elements of their livelihood and culture govern even how their nouns work. This reveals a deeper sense of place and sense of indigeneity- without a shared cultural past in the Great Basin these words and forms would not exist as they are today because the environment shaped the Ute's supernatural and spiritual beliefs which in turn profoundly shaped their language, divisions of labor, and ways of speaking.



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# **Writing, Literacy, And Communication Methods of the Ute**

The geography of the lands the Ute historically inhabited influenced the development of their communication methods. Their mountainous home holds rock faces that led them to utilize pictographs (1), and their Great Basin location led to contact with the Spanish. This not only influenced their language and place names but changed their way of life through the introduction of horses (2). This influenced their culture to become closer to that of the plains Native Americans, and thus also changed the way they communicated with each other and their neighbors. From their literacy, to their communication methods, and finally to their contact with settlers and evolving language, the location of the Ute's home impacted how these features of their language and culture developed.

Traditionally, the Ute did not have a written language (3). This can potentially be attributed to the impregnable nature of their lands in the Great Basin, which has been linked to food scarcity that kept Ute family bands small, with a net population of only about 10,000 prior to contact (4). In response to shrinking numbers of fluent speakers following contact, in 1975 the Southern Ute

Tribal Council contacted a linguist to develop both an alphabet and dictionary for the Ute language which was

distributed to every home on the reservation (5). This constitutes a shift in language ideology, as prior to this point a written language was not seen as something in line with Ute traditions, however newer documents show a consistent theme of allowing writing and orthographies to be drafted in an effort to enhance the language and preserve it (6). This work is ongoing, with Thomas Givón, the original linguist, being brought back to work on a revised reference grammar and dictionary in 2011 (7). The system developed was phonemic. Examples of the phonemes used in the Ute written language are p, t, c, k, uu, and others all making up this initial orthography (8).

Givón thus adopted a linguistic alphabet and borrowing from other tribes' alphabet and writing systems did not occur. Givón's dictionary, reference grammar, and orthography remain the most widely used and accepted written forms of the Ute language and was the first effort to preserve the language. Despite this being the most widely spread orthography, other efforts have been made by different councils, such as the White Mesa Ute Council in 2008. These efforts followed in Givón's tradition and developed phonemic alphabets (5). The Ute tribe officially does not recognize a single orthography and forbids any one written Ute language to be taught as the most correct (6). This is because each band or reservation has ordered their own orthography, essentially one per dialect of Ute, such as the most recent effort to produce an orthography for the White Mesa dialect from Utah and Colorado which is among the oldest Ute dialects (5). These separations are also due to geography, as each band or reservation follows roughly how historically there were bands of mountain Utes and then those that inhabited the plateau and desert (4)(8)(9). Today classes are offered and children learn Ute in school, although in 2014 of the 1500 Southern Ute there were still only 35 fluent speakers, with most tribal members primarily speaking Ute English, a fact exacerbated by how the reservations are

checkered across English-speaking Colorado and Utah communities (3)(10). An online Ute language project was started, and includes its own dictionary with recorded pronunciations associated with the Ute Tribe Library (11).

The influence of the Spanish due to the Ute's Great Basin location led to them being skilled horsemen, and led to hunting expeditions that brought them into more frequent contact with plains tribes and neighbors that used Plains Sign Language. This led to the Ute adopting the sign language themselves (9). The sign for Ute in Plains Sign Language is to bring the left hand horizontally across the body with the thumb closed on the palm and then with the right hand rubbing gently towards the wrist along the line formed by the left index finger. Alternatively, the sign was the sign for black and then the sign for Native American. Despite this, the use of Plains Sign Language was not ubiquitous among the Ute, and the Ute never used Plains Sign Language among themselves. It was largely used as a communication tool with plains tribes and white settlers (12). Ute pictographs have been found in Utah and Colorado, perhaps most famously in Moab and Arches National Park. The Ute appended their pictographs to ancient petroglyphs found at crossroads and waterways. These pictographs typically describe the Ute passing through the area, and describe who they have with them or animals they encountered. Ute pictographs can be distinguished from the petroglyphs by often being painted red rather than simply pecked into the rock face and by also featuring horses, placing a number of the pictographs as being created after contact by the Spanish (1). The pictographs also feature bows and arrows, tepees, and baskets which are components of the Ute culture and not the Paleo-Indian culture that preceded them. Of course, the images are also representational and feature distinguishable people and depictions of war (13). These crossroads were of significance to the Ute since these were geographically good places to stop and rest. They also likely held significance to them

because of the previous rock art present, which also likely served to imply the route they were taking or the place they were in was both safe and contained resources, which is why people had been stopping there and marking the area since the earliest inhabitants migrated to Colorado and Utah.

The geographic proximity of the Ute to New Mexico and the conquered Pueblo towns of the Spanish led to frequent borrowing of words between both languages, which is evident especially in place names. The name of one Ute band, as well as a present-day Colorado lake, is Capote which is a word borrowed into English from Ute, which in turn the Ute borrowed from Spanish. The original word was *capota*, which is Spanish for hood, which the Ute adopted into the word *kapúuta* before it emerged on English maps as Capote (2). This is one example of the fairly frequent acculturation that occurred during contact between the Ute and the Spanish. Acculturation also occurred later when contact with English speaking settlers occurred which can be seen in the Ute words for new items such as window, which in Ute is *weendoh* or tomato which in Ute is *toomeedtrees* (11). It should be noted however that acculturation and borrowing occurred much more often between Spanish and Ute than from English due to geographic proximity. Many Ute preceding English contact were bilingual and spoke Ute and Spanish in order to facilitate trade (8). Many English place names were borrowed from Ute, such as Pagosa Springs (sulfur water) and Utah (people of the mountains) (2)(8). The Ute migrated to the Great Basin region relatively recently as evidenced by their transparent place names (8). A number of their words are borrowed from their neighbors, such as their tribal name which likely comes from the Western Apache word *yudah*, which means high up and suits the mountainous geography of their home (14). This relatively recent migration explains why so many words were borrowed, as lexical borrowing would be the fastest strategy to familiarize themselves with the new fauna and geography.

In contemporary times Ute has evolved to develop new words to accommodate new conveniences, foods, and objects, which fit into existing structures for their language. For example, animals of burden have kah- prepended to them. The Ute words for train for example is kahs, showing that these new modern words fit into the existing structure of animate and inanimate nouns while keeping the language up to date (11).

The local geography determined who contacted the Ute, what they shared, and how it impacted their language and way of life. It also affected how the Ute's shared their language with other people, giving them a canvas from which to scribe pictographs and influencing their family group size so that they did not develop a written language until later. While Ute literacy is at an all-time low, it is encouraging that the tribe has developed an internet based dictionary as well as an app for introducing young Ute to the language, and are also offering classes to get more tribal members learning (11) (10). It is a common Ute saying that their the voice of their land is their language, and this is true when you look at how it is constructed and how it has shaped what their language has become (6).

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# Storytelling of the Ute-

## Analyzing a Ute Myth

Storytelling, religion, social behavior, nature-oriented beliefs, and the borrowing from and adaptation of plains Native American culture are each interconnected elements of Ute tribal culture. The importance of the coyote and the buffalo to their storytelling canon is evidence of this, as the coyote is a common trickster character in stories from many tribes, indicating sharing stories between different groups (1). The buffalo show how the introduction of horses in the 1600s led the Ute to begin melding their mountain and great basin beliefs and stories to introduce their new foodsource and some elements of plains culture. Other elements common to plains culture and Ute culture are their ceremonial pipe designs, and the Ute adoption of the Sun Dance (2)(3). These elements combine to form a rich storytelling tradition and set of myths and folktales that each reflect social ethics, religion, and sometimes mechanical skills (4). These stories were used as oral teaching tools, and were considered to have an innate power that specified when a story was allowed to be told. The Ute library of stories consists of summer and winter stories, and certain stories of great importance such as the Ute origin story cannot be told out of season out of belief that this will invite misfortune or danger. These important or sacred stories are typically only told in winter, while in the summer less important or humorous stories were often told (5).

One common and interesting Ute folktale that would have been told in the winter is the story of Porcupine Hunting Buffalo. This is also known as Porcupine Tricks Coyote depending on the text. Analyzing this story in terms of its text, texture, and context reveals that this story is one that

expresses Ute social ethics, has deep religious symbology, and is a trickster tale which helps emphasize what kind of character Coyote and Porcupine are in the Ute storytelling canon. Coyote's behavior as a trickster calls back to the most fundamental Ute story, their creation myth, in which Coyote allows his impulsiveness and selfishness to get the better of him and he *opens* a bag full of humans into the world that was given to him by the creator (1).

The story consists of Porcupine, who appears more than once as an adversary to Coyote in Ute stories, trailing some buffalo to hunt them. Porcupine, depending on the text, may have a kinship relation to Coyote (he is sometimes considered Coyote's uncle (1)) and is somewhat of a trickster and cultural hero himself. Porcupine stops and finds buffalo dung four times, and reveals that he has supernatural power by being able to talk to what the buffalo have left behind to find out where they have gone. After the fourth interval, which is a sacred number in Ute tribal culture, Porcupine arrives at a river where the buffalo are on the other side. He asks for one to bring him across. He proceeds down the line of buffalo, refusing their help from left to right until he can pick the one he likes best. This is a religious detail, as in Ute religion moving clockwise is considered the correct and sacred way of doing things, while using the left hand or proceeding to the left is considered bad or evil (5). He refuses the help of all but the biggest and best buffalo, and he convinces the buffalo to carry him across inside of his mouth rather than carrying him on his back. Porcupine kills the buffalo on the other side by sticking his quills into his heart. He sings loudly about his good fortune and captures the attention of Coyote, who steals the buffalo from Porcupine by saying only the one who can jump all the way across the corpse without touching it can butcher the buffalo. Coyote succeeds this arbitrary test, to which porcupine does not protest as in many stories they are kin and because Porcupine is often in the role of humbling Coyote and demonstrating

proper behavior (1). Coyote then tasks porcupine with cleaning the paunch (which was often used to carry blood home for making soup in Ute culture, and was seen as a low or dirty job (6)), but forbids him from eating any of it. Porcupine does this anyway, and Coyote kills him in anger. When Coyote brings the kill back to his family, Porcupine again reveals his supernatural power by coming back to life and having a pine tree grow with him and the meat on its branches. Coyote demands that he give his family the neck of the buffalo, so Porcupine tells the youngest coyote to stay away while he drops the neck of the buffalo to the Coyote family, ironically killing them. He then feeds the youngest coyote, and in some stories they become friends while in others Porcupine feeds the coyote until he bursts and dies. This shows the dual characterization of Porcupine as somewhat of a trickster character, while in other texts he is purely a demonstrator of proper behavior (7)(8)(9). Porcupine is always the noble trickster however, if he falls into a trickster role (6).

In the context of Ute culture this myth is applied in reminding listeners to respect their kin and to show that Coyote does not respect the assumed cooperation of Ute culture. In many texts Porcupine and Coyote are family, and thus Coyote's stealing the Buffalo via an arbitrary competition would be seen by Ute audiences as highly inappropriate (1). Further, Coyote never suggests that Porcupine share the kill, just that he should have it, even going as far as forbidding Porcupine from eating any of it. This is emphasized in some texts by the part Porcupine eats being a waste part of the paunch that was going to wash downstream, rather than a deliberate disobedience of Coyote (6)(7). Porcupine often is in the role of humbling Coyote, and appears in several stories where he proves to Coyote that he is either wrong or to emphasize that Porcupine is good and goes through all the correct ceremonies to obtain supernatural powers, while Coyote is rarely observed having

any powers (10). Porcupine's frequent use of supernatural power serves as a source of literary irony as Coyote should be powerful as well, being the son of Wolf who is often portrayed as the creator in many Ute myths (1). Thus, juxtaposing Coyote with Porcupine serves to emphasize that despite Coyote's kin being all powerful, his trickster identity and constantly wanting to show off, always be correct, or get something for nothing ends up being his downfall. One can imagine that this story being told to emphasize the cultural values of assuming cooperation among kin and the danger of stealing another's work or food. The fact that this story falls into the category of being a winter Ute story emphasizes this further, as this would be the time of the year when taking another's food would be especially heinous and frowned upon, in addition to being an important lesson in a time when the stories being told are typically sacred myths rather than humor or entertainment. Porcupine's changing role as either a second trickster there to be Coyote's adversary or as a demonstrator of ideal Ute behavior likely also depended on the context, as one could imagine that the ending where Porcupine kills all of the coyotes could be seen as Porcupine getting revenge or as misbehavior and abuse of his powers, while in most texts he befriends the youngest coyote and takes care of him which emphasizes the point of the story's emphasis on taking care of kin and demonstrating proper Ute behavior.

In terms of texture, the story follows many classic examples of texture in Ute storytelling. It starts off with one of the characters going somewhere, in the translated form "Porcupine was going there," for .. example. Like a "once upon at time" Ute stories tend to start with the main character along with *u'p·Apiga* which is going there. It also ends with "it is the end of my tail" as a concluding thought, transcribed as *u'RU sambak plse renen·án*, which is a traditional and expected ending of a Ute myth or story (6). These serve to introduce a Ute audience to the story and to end it in a

familiar way, and the rest of the story proceeds in a typical textural pattern as well. The story has four parts, with Porcupine hunting the buffalo, porcupine killing the buffalo, Coyote confronting and killing Porcupine, and Porcupine finally tricking Coyote. This matches the expected pattern of Ute myths, which are often told as stories consisting of four distinct events, which goes along with Ute religious symbology where four is a sacred number- something they share with many plains tribes (2)(5). Coyote's speech is of particular interest when studying these trickster stories, as he has his own unique word that is only used by him in trickster stories, *anta' - n* which translates to "my friend" which he uses repeatedly in reference to Porcupine (6). This signals to listeners and readers about the lack of sincerity in Coyote and his intent to take advantage of whomever he is talking to. Further, the translation does not always match the Ute and tends to expand upon what kind of supernatural power Porcupine is using. For example, rather than saying explicitly that Porcupine comes back to life, as in the translation, the transcription of the story uses the word *gwai ia ik* which translates literally to "they exercised their supernatural power to spoil his luck", which offers to the text more of a humorous and adversarial tone than the translation.

The storytelling tradition of the Ute constitutes a set of social guidelines that can be called back upon in times of ethical crises. They often setup an adversarial relationship between a good character and a bad character to emphasize how those who live as they are supposed to are taken care of, while those who try to get something for nothing are harmed. They do this by calling upon a number of great basin and plains traditions, ideas, and characters such as the Coyote and the sacred number four to set up a canon in which certain characters, themes, and texture within stories are easily recognized and signal the coming lesson in the story. Thus, through storytelling these elements are connected to Ute culture and show the blending of the cultures of the two

regions, as well as giving a glimpse into Ute social values, kinship, and beliefs.

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# Contemporary Ute Language Loss and Cultural Shift

Language loss among the Ute is being countered in many ways by the tribal leadership, including using 21st century techniques and technology, schools, mentorship programs, and community courses (1)(2). The language currently has 35 known fluent speakers out of a total of 1500 registered tribal members, and most of these fluent speakers are elders raising anxieties that elements of the language could die out as they pass away (2). The desire to revitalize the Ute language is rooted in a set of ideologies about their language, culture, and identity. Among these is the fear that the Ute identity is becoming that of so-called "paper Indians", meaning that they are Ute in name only and have embraced the hegemonic culture versus their own. This also comes from anxiety over the wealth of their reservations- the Ute reservations are rich in mineral, oil, and gas wealth, gambling has been introduced, and the growth of the nearby communities of Bayfield, Ignacio, and Cortez have rapidly put pressures on tribal members to learn English. It has also placed a number of pull factors on English in order to be part of the reservations' economic growth (2)(3). Beyond simply language the Ute are seeking not just to revive their language but to primarily bring their community together and revive old customs to counter what they feel is a fracturing of their community by the exploitation of their resources and the intrusions of external communities on their lands.

To the Ute, the language is a gift from the creator and it has been a centerpiece in the past for efforts to bring the community closer and to revitalize traditional customs. In an effort to counteract rising alcoholism, crime, and their

children being part of the boarding schools system the Utes re-embraced the Sun Dance, Bear Dance, and powwows. These efforts came out of a belief that these activities inspire camaraderie among the

Ute and they were successful in drawing tribal members back onto the reservations for the periods the events were going on as their groups had splintered during the economic development of the reservations in the mid 20th century (4). This was also a response to the prohibition on the language at the boarding and public schools until the early 1980s. A revitalization program was launched at the local elementary and middle schools as soon as the ban was lifted, but no immersion programs emerged until the late 1990s. The establishment of the bilingual schools on the reservation and through programs in the local public schools came about due to the ideology that Ute children should know both English and Ute in order to be able to participate in the growing reservation economy. The establishment of the Red Willow Production Company and the reservation casino by the Ute tribal governments brought the Ute tribe more money, but also introduced a new pull factor for English in order to interact with their new clients and competitors. The Montessori model was chosen in the late 1990s after previous programs were found not to be producing adequate numbers of fluent speakers, falling victim to lack of funding and the difficulty of managing a bilingual curriculum. It was chosen out of the belief it would allow for more guided instruction and help decrease drop out rates by not forcing Ute children to conform to the existing educational system. This connects with the Ute ideology that the culture is in the language, as part of the decision to use this model was based in the idea that Utes traditionally learned from guides and family members and also had an education that focused on developing the student spiritually, physically, and academically. It was decided this model would best suit these needs (5).

The fear that the Ute are becoming a "paper" tribe is a chief anxiety among the current tribal leadership and among the tribal members themselves. More specifically, they hold the ideology that without their language, they are just people instead of Ute people, an idea that has been brought up by multiple Ute elders and leaders (2)(6). This ideology has shaped how they have attempted to tackle language loss. This ideology is further rooted in the painful history of the Ute reservations, such as the legal fights over blood quantum when tribal assets were divided in the 1960s, an event that has left a great deal of animosity with the Northern Ute due to the belief that they disenfranchised a great deal of their former tribal members. Those who had more than one-half Ute ancestry were granted tribal membership while others were declared "mixed" and were forced to form their own organization. To this day legal battles for tribal participation and alleged disenfranchisement are being fought, leaving behind a troublesome history as to what it means to be Ute (7). It has led to the belief that without the language, and implicitly teaching and practicing the rituals and culture, the tribe will appear to only exist on paper and instead appear to be a group living off the wealth of their land rather than a community of common heritage. Community building has thus become a primary focus of the Ute tribe, especially the Southern Ute which occupy southwestern Colorado. Echoing the Hawaiian model for language revitalization, the Ute have attempted to add prestige to their language and to increase the visibility of the Ute culture in the local community. Ute is taught in the local schools, including a Montessoristyle immersion academy and as a course in the local middle and high schools (5). The local radio station, KSUT, runs a "Ute Word of the Day" segment in addition to Ute-language recipe and news programs which are helping to normalize the use of Ute in the area and to inspire the language to enter more domains than only the school and tribal government (1)(8). They have also commissioned numerous technological tools

and resources for teaching the language. One such tool is a mobile phone app that was designed in Durango on behalf of the Southern Ute in order to reach more young potential Ute speakers by presenting Ute vocabulary and grammar as an interactive game (2). CD-based learning systems and workbooks have also been produced by the tribe's relatively new language committee, with plans to broker more deals with local colleges and universities and to introduce more Ute content to get more involvement. Mentoring based language learning has also begun to be implemented as of 2015, and has been met with praise by the Ute community although the degree of effectiveness will not be able to be measured for some time (9).

Despite these efforts the number of fluent Ute speakers has continued to fall. When the government introduced rehabilitation funds and the energy resources on the reservations were developed in the mid to late 20th century, the Utes were introduced to an economic boom that led to widespread running water, electricity, and widespread telephone access. In addition, it brought societal ills such as alcoholism and crime, which in addition to the collapsing agricultural economy on the reservations led to flight from the reservations as well as deterioration of the sense of community (10). By the time gambling was introduced in the early 1990s fears that the community was rapidly become a "paper tribe" were strong due to the increased reliance on per capita payments for income and the increasing domination of outside culture due to the growth of the surrounding communities. These pressures remain, and have become the chief pressures that the Ute language and cultural revitalization program is fighting against. They have recently become even more pressured, as with the passage of marijuana legalization in the state of Colorado increasing pressure has been put on the tribal council to allow its cultivation on Southern Ute lands, which raises fears of further splintering the community and further pushing Ute

towards monolingualism and the hegemonic culture (11). The Ute hold the ideology that without the language, one is not truly Ute, which is a belief that has put pressure on Ute tribal members to learn the language but is insufficient to push them towards fluency (5). One potential reason for this is that the methods being attempted, with the exceptions of the private Montessori academy and the new mentoring program, are those known not to be able to produce fluency. The tools the tribe has developed, such as the app and CD set, require self study which is not sufficient for most people to achieve fluency. Further, the other attempts are community classes and electives in local public schools which likewise do not encourage fluency. Finally, some of the ideologies that the Ute hold about their language are ironically working against them. Their belief that all important and tribal business be conducted in their language, such as tribal meetings and debates, comes out of a belief in the sacredness of the Ute language and that certain phrases only have the proper meaning in Ute, not in English or another language. Ironically, this ideology has served to alienate or even anger tribal members who feel disenfranchised by this decision, and rather than inspire them to learn the language has led to the belief that the language is impeding progress and being used to keep people in the dark about what their leaders are doing (4)(10). The Ute have attempted to implement a number of the elements that have made the Hawaiian revival program successful, such as attempting to implement a new social reality by introducing Ute language media and introducing the language to the schools but tribal leaders have criticized the lack of resources for parents and parent buy in, especially in the bilingual schools. Additionally, student buy in is still low since their efforts have yet to hit the amount of inertia to break the ideology of contempt of the Ute language on the reservations and the surrounding areas (1)(3). If the Ute language is to survive, more cultural shift needs to occur for the social reality to hit the inertia needed

to make learning the language viable and part of the mainstream. To the Ute, this is a matter of identity and community beyond their language- it is proving that they are not a "paper tribe" and that they each have the ability to live up to what they believe being Ute is- language, culture, and a community identity.

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# **The Ute as a Community of Practice**

The Ute, throughout their history, have demonstrated elements of being a community of practice — that is, they have come together as a group engaging in a mutual common endeavor and can have elements of their language, practices, and stories explained in terms of their culture being a tool to achieve their goals. Most recently, they have also become a community of practice in danger, fearing that their community may become instead a community of interest where the barrier of expertise or membership has been lowered by the loss or cheapening of the Ute language, religious, and storytelling practices. In the past, their social structure, government, and way of life was structured for survival, while today they are organized around protecting the sovereignty of their land, improving education, and community building. These endeavors are reflected in their practices as a group- both contemporary and in the past. Further, we can reinterpret knowledge-based claims about the Ute which reflect a more static and unchanging model to include explanations as to how the Ute have changed and survived in response to changes in their environment and due to colonialism.

In terms of their endeavors, today's Ute can be described as a political party or like a corporation in that they have actively practicing members on their reservations supporting each other with the goal of improving the economic condition of members and protecting the sovereignty of the group — keeping it from getting swallowed into either the hegemonic culture or having its

lands taken by private landowners and government projects. For example, the Ute reservation governments have endeavored mutually to protect the sovereignty of their lands by brokering deals to prevent the government from taking land for light rail and water projects in Utah and Colorado, respectively (1). Further, they have developed the resources on their reservations in the form of several energy corporations, working to provide jobs and improve the economy on the reservations while drawing criticism that the Ute of today are growing further from their pre-contact practices while becoming relatively wealthy from the resources on their ancestral lands (2)(3)(4). One of the biggest contemporary endeavors of the Ute however has been to prevent themselves from becoming a “paper tribe” — becoming so much like a corporation that the only thing the group is concerned about is managing the reservation’s resources, casino, and water rights rather than focusing on building a tighter community and engaging in the interactions key to being a community of practice, such as having more activities that promote community growth (5)(6). In terms of practice theory, the fear is that rather than a community of practice the Ute are becoming a community of interest, meaning a group of people still coming together to exchange ideas and be part of a community with goals but has no barrier of entry of expertise in the cultural practices and language. Without the group’s endeavors to bolster language and perform community building, they become a tribe only “on paper” and the sense that members would gain identity, belonging, and a better way to provide for their family members through being a part of the Ute community is cheapened and dramatically reduced. Thus, to protect their status as a community of practice the Ute have leveraged their culture as a tool. They have begun using the Bear Dance and Sun Dance, two key elements of Ute religion, as ways to draw youth back into the community and introduce them to Ute from all three Ute reservations to build relationships and

foster a stronger community and identity as Ute. Thus, they are improving the ways in which they interact as a community, and strengthening the habitus they have developed as a tribe. Further, they have begun participating in the Tri-Ute Games to build up a team to compete in the Native American Indigenous Games, fostering not only a better community identity but also leveraging the idea of indigeneity as a whole to market the Ute identity as part of something bigger and marketing the Ute identity as unique not only compared to the hegemonic American culture but also to native cultures from around the country. As part of this effort, they are currently petitioning for their historic practice of using an atl-atl to throw spears to be added to the games (1). They have also instituted bilingual schools and one immersion academy to help revive their language in order to prevent the loss of practices that they feel are key to the Ute identity they are marketing, such as how the language reflects their culture of assumed cooperation and their close-knit kinship groups (3)(7). The Ute have also developed a mobile application and an internet presence in an effort to connect Ute from across the country — a community interaction building move that particularly reflects the idea that the Ute are behaving like a political party or organization in that they are reaching out to individuals and marketing their identity across the world using new technological tools (5).

Practices that demonstrate that the Ute are a community or practice include many elements of their language, which have become intertwined with the group's goals and interaction practices forming a language habitus for the Ute in that the elements and practices are inseparable, especially in translation. From the extensive kinship groups they built with the goal of survival developed a set of diminutives which are useful for identifying the generation a Ute is from. In Ute one can stack multiple *-ci* suffixes to show how many generations someone is younger than you or

someone else. For example, an aunt that is younger than your dad is called *paa-ci-ni* while an older aunt is *paa-ni* (8). These practices likely developed to make managing and organizing large kinship groups easier, which would be key to the endeavor of survival since the Ute traveled mainly in individual kinship groups for much of the year (9). Another example is possession, which in Ute applies between both kin and objects through the suffix *-ni*. This suffix translates to "like", and demonstrates that the purpose linguistically is to show that kin are "like" oneself, in addition to showing which objects belong to oneself, such as *nüni kan*, or my tent (10). This reflects communal practices that would have come about out of the Ute's mutual endeavor to survive, as it would make sense to share resources and housing especially when for much of the year they lived in small kinship-based groups. It should be noted that translations of many language practices such as these among the Ute do not translate into English- an aunt is an aunt and possession has no link to kinship so these links are broken, as is the connection between these practices and the Ute's contemporary and historical endeavors. The goal of survival and prosperity also led to the Ute power structure, where chiefs were only temporary when these kinship groups came to live with each other during the autumn and winter (9). It can therefore also be interpreted that from this endeavor the

Ute storytelling practices developed, where there are stories that can only be told during the winter and fall. These stories are of great importance and carry with them a language ideology that telling them out of season will invite great danger or misfortune (11). This practice developed out of the goal of survival because you would have more Utes congregated in one place during the winter and fall, making this the ideal time to share wisdom, ideas, and guiding principles rather than the summer when groups of Ute were more nomadic (9). Since telling stories was one way of conveying information and wisdom, from this practice also

came the language structure of having unique words that only appear in Ute stories. For example, in Ute trickster stories the trickster coyote uses the word *anta'-n'* which is unique to the character and translates to “my friend”. It is one signal to Ute listeners that the character is not to be trusted and immediately signals that the subsequent story is to be a cautionary tale and will convey some lesson about proper Ute behavior (12). This, too, is not translatable as this immediate alert would be lost to a Ute listener in English.

In previous analysis it was discussed how one of the main reasons the Ute felt it was necessary to revive their language was because of their often-repeated fear of becoming “paper Indians” and thus the analysis focused mainly on the anxiety among Utes that they had embraced the hegemonic culture rather than their own (5)(7). This analysis rests mainly on a knowledge-based perspective in which the focus of the loss is on the loss of knowledge needed to maintain their society. The community of practice perspective would have us analyze this situation in that the Ute are primarily losing a connection between various practices that is not translatable into English. Further, the idea that they are losing knowledge beyond the information about their language structure is problematic — any loss in knowledge about Ute practices would come from the loss of these practices due to changes in Ute society, rather than from the loss of the language itself. This knowledge based perspective was also seen in the analysis of how Ute culture and plains culture combined with the introduction of horses. The knowledge-based analysis was that this melding of cultures led to a shared knowledge of hunting and ceremonial practices, for example introducing ceremonial pipes to Ute religion (13). Critiquing this from the perspective of the Ute as a community of practice, we would say that the Ute primarily gained new practices that let them achieve their goal of survival in a new location as they pushed geographically towards the plains and front range, more so

than just adding new knowledge to be passed down as in the knowledge-based definition of culture.

The danger for the Ute is the loss of practices due to the encroachment of American hegemonic cultural practices. If the language and cultural practices of the Ute continue to be eroded, tribal members will stop seeing their identity as Ute as being conducive to survival and prosperity and the Ute's fear of becoming a "paper tribe" or community of interest will come to fruition. The current practices they are engaging in – language renewal, participating in pan-Indian groups, and using their culture as a tool to get more youth and members involved in the community are all actions to bolster their new community goal, to build their community, secure their tribe's prosperity, and secure their identity in the face of criticism of their economic and tribal activities. Their practices are consistent with these goals and their focus on interaction secures their identity as a community of practice.

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