

## Naming Practices, Speech, and Beliefs of the Ute

### **Author's note:**

*This work is an excerpt of a larger work analyzing the language of the Ute tribe of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and*

*Wyoming in terms of their culture, beliefs, and practices. It analyzes this group as a community of practices that can be used to explain the development and features of their language and tries to place these elements in the context of their history, from arrival in the Great Basin of the southwest, to contact by Europeans, to present day. This excerpt was selected as it gives the best overview of Ute practices, history, and language while standing on its own. Here I synthesize speech practices in terms of religious practices and supernatural beliefs.*

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-Aztecan 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-ti, 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 acrid, 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 k<sup>w</sup>uk<sup>w</sup>i-pi-ci, or Sitting Bear which can evolve to tuk<sup>w</sup>u-pi-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-pi* 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 *wiu-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 *nüni 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 *k<sup>w</sup>iya-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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