

“Paiute 101: A Paiute Perspective – A Culture...A History”

By

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The Paiute World

The Paiute world view is defined by earth and sky. It is an “inverted” view compared to our earthly perspective. The constellations, stars, etc. are people, ancestors, spirit beings.

Paiute territory is bounded by 4 sacred mountains, San Francisco Peaks, Navajo or Paiute Peak, Mt. Charleston and Mt. Nebo. It extends from the San Juan River on the east, across southern Utah, to the Las Vegas/Lake Mead area on the west.

The Paiutes have two main groups – the Yanawant to the east from the Santa Clara River east and the Paranayi to the west. There are also two main groups in this region, the “Kaiwitz” to the east and the “Shivwitz” to the west. The word “Kaiwitz” (an approximate spelling) as pronounced by Mormon settlers became “Kaibab.” Paiute-based languages are spoken west to California and north to Oregon, but the people there are culturally different than the Utah and Great Basin Paiute groups. Specific to our region – The Kaibab Paiutes are called the “People from the mountains lying down”. The original people of St. George were the Tonaquint (“The Black Flowing People”) who were wiped out and now extinct. The Shivwitz were originally from the Mt. Trumble area and are called “the people of the white clay”. They were relocated to the St. George area in the late 1800’s.

There is no common Paiute dictionary since each band attempts to distinguish itself by the way they speak. The language is quite nuanced. For example, men and women speak the language differently, and a given phrase means something different whether it is spoken in a certain direction or toward a certain orientation. In that way it is very difficult to translate. Paiute speakers do not simply string words together to produce a meaningful statement.

“Paiute” means “pai,” or water, plus the name of the Paiute’s enemies, the Utes. Legend has it that the Kaibab people originally came from Deer Creek in the Grand Canyon. It is a slot with a narrow trail on one side that plunges straight down into the river. On the opposite wall are pictographs with no visible access. The general ceremonial area is 300 feet upslope from where one can see the river entering the chasm. Down the river chasm is an even deeper chasm, a large

hole or waterfall, and beyond that a large field. When Benn was younger he saw the field when it was full of shady trees. The following year a hiker burned some toilet paper, destroyed all the trees and left the waterfall at the end of the narrows black with soot. This fire, however, revealed many habitations in the field. As the years passed the vegetation grew back so the habitations are no longer visible.

Every six months groups of Paiutes go down to maintain the site. They check on the status of the pictographs and the sacred ceremonial locations. They also visit many sacred sites that are not recorded by the Bureau of Reclamation. Among the ceremonies conducted there is the Earring ceremony, which allows Paiutes to be admitted to what we would call Heaven. Also a mark is placed on the forehead to mark this special status. Elders preside over the ceremonies and stay camped there, as Benn put it, “until the memories start to come.”

Paiute History / Culture

Ben talked about the Paiute culture which was focused on the environment, climate and the river. The culture would advance or regress due to the environment.

He talked about the slave trade, where the Spanish and also the Utes would come and take Paiute women and children as slaves to be sold in places like Los Angeles.

He talked about the Paiute use of Baskets rather than pottery because of the ease of carrying the baskets from place to place.

He stated that the Kaibab population was estimated by John Wesley Powell to be 6600 people in the 1860's. In the 1870's it was 76 – due a variety of reasons. It is now 340 people.

He said the John Wesley Powell was a friend of the Paiutes however he turned his back on the Paiutes in their time of need (in the 1880's) and wanted them to be given to the Navajo or the Ute, their enemies.

He talk about Wovoka and the ghost dance and how people from other tribes came to the Paiutes to learn about it.

Indian school was common for many of the Paiute children. The thought was to “kill the Indian to save the man”. They were forbidden to speak their language, have long hair (boys), etc.

Paiute Life

In terms of clothing and shelter, women wore woven conical hats, and men wore headdresses made of bobcat skin. They were mostly naked until given conventional clothing by Mormon settlers. Often they were baptized several times in their lives because with each baptism came new clothes and food. The small, simple structures depicted in the William Palmer photo collection at SUU (wikiups) were for storage or temporary shelter. Paiutes did not sleep in one,

since, as Benn put it, “your feet would be sticking out.” The more permanent habitations were in caves or overhangs. [Note: The photos appear to be the ones taken by J. K. Hillers for the John Wesley Powell expedition.]

Paiute Elders

An elder is anyone of any age who has a special gift or knowledge of a subject important to the tribe—“plants, animals, constellations,” and so on. Elders identify youngsters who have these gifts at an early age and cultivate them. Few elders remain because the cultivation process is now very rare within families. The transmission of knowledge happens slowly. One does not ask questions of an elder, for one “will not get an answer.” One is quiet and listens. After a while the meaning becomes apparent through one’s own life experience. Paiute is Benn’s first language, so he can listen and understand, but he himself “does not speak unless spoken to.” Only two elders converse with him easily enough so that any significant information is exchanged. According to Benn, the oral tradition is “hanging by a thread.”

Song and Ceremony

Musical instruments include the drum, rattle, flute and dewclaws. Here Ben talked about how one becomes one with the drum or the deer or the buffalo, etc. He talked about how the music brings the creature that made the instrument back to life. At the turn of the 20th century, early Paiute songs were collected on wax cylinders and stored at the Smithsonian “near a radiator.” Some of the songs were lost. They now have been preserved on CDs and given back to the families that owned them.

Songs are important for the two funeral ceremonies that occur when someone passes from the earth to the sky. First and second funerals (The Salk Song Trail) each take 12 hours. The first ceremony contains a break of four songs, often sung around 3 or 4 am “when,” as Benn put it, “everyone is grumpy and tired.” At that time, a bridge comes into being that allows the person to travel to the Pleiades star cluster. There the person resides for a year. During that year, the family does not attend parties or gatherings “where there is laughter.”

During the year of mourning, the early Paiutes collected goods and saved up to acquire things to be given away or otherwise disposed of. Horses were killed, new saddles were burnt, and other items were destroyed after the year was over. This practice was economically unfeasible and may have led in part to the poverty found by the Mormon settlers. Still, even today, the children are not encouraged to attach themselves to what Benn termed “material things.”

At the end of the year, the second ceremony occurs. At that point the person leaves the Pleiades and travels on the Milky Way further into the sky. The family ends its mourning period by burning everything belonging to that person, including clothing, so a new start can be made.

Personal History

Benn was born in Fillmore and went to community college in Sevier where he trained as a nurse, as well as taking classes at Dixie College. His first patient was his 114-year old grandmother. He was the only caretaker and he had another job, but she had to be turned every two hours. That was a difficult experience for him. He did not have formal schooling after that point, but his house is full of books and he reads constantly. He is particularly interested in music of all kinds, except rap. At one point in the presentation he played a buffalo hide frame drum and sang an “historical” song for the group in Paiute.

His presentation was followed by answers to many questions, some of which are integrated into this summary.

Reference books for the Paiutes:

”Southern Paiutes – Legends, Lore, language and Lineage” by Lavan Martineau, KC Publications, 1992, Available on Amazon

“Southern Paiute: A portrait”, by William Logan Hebner and Michael Plyler, Utah State University Press, 2010

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