



AN INTRODUCTION TO UTAH'S INDIAN HISTORY

AT A GLANCE: LEADERSHIP AMONG UTAH'S INDIANS

Popular perceptions about Native American leadership are generally shaped by Hollywood portrayals of Indians and focus upon strong, centralized leadership in the person of a single “chief” presiding over an entire tribe. While it is true that powerful chiefs did lead Native American peoples at various times, notions of hierarchical leadership and centralized command are usually by-products of Euro-Americans superimposing their leadership structure and ideals upon Native Americans. This is particularly true of Utah’s tribes.

Power in Utah’s five tribes, particularly in the centuries before contact with non-Indians, existed indirectly at the most local band level. The Southern Paiutes and Goshutes were the most decentralized. They organized themselves in small extended family bands spread across vast geographic spaces, and the bands were only loosely organized as tribes. Although these Southern Paiute and Goshute bands were detached from each other politically, they were nonetheless tightly connected through marriage and kinship. The various bands formed an extensive safety net of community concern, especially as non-Indian settlement depleted the Paiute population.

The Utes, Navajos, and Shoshones were structured similarly to the Southern Paiutes and Goshutes, but because they lived in larger bands, they had more complex leadership. Their leaders accepted greater central control, especially when they waged war. The Navajos also coalesced into close-knit family groups or clans and were led by warrior leaders and peace leaders.

Leaders among the tribes emerged and were acknowledged through nomination or popular con-

sent. They were people who demonstrated wisdom, ingenuity, and foresight in dealing with challenges that faced their bands. They tended to make decisions through consensus rather than dictatorship or majority rule. Leaders offered counsel and advice and worked to carry out the decisions made at council meetings. Band leaders, or chiefs, served as spokespersons for their bands, especially when dealing with other tribes or outsiders. Among the Southern Paiutes, a band leader began each day with a speech, wherein he instructed band members on the day’s activities and exhorted them according to community values. He served as a guide for hunting and gathering activities and shaped and promoted community standards and morals.

With the acquisition of the horse, the Utes and Shoshones developed a more centralized leadership structure, which in turn gave rise to leaders with more influence. Wakara, who built a vast network of trading and raiding relationships from the Great Plains to California, became one of the most powerful and wealthy Ute leaders. He and his band traded and raided for horses, manufactured goods, and slaves. They captured Southern Paiute and Goshute women and children and sold them into Spanish colonial society as slaves.

Among the tribes, some headmen enjoyed more influence than others. As non-Indian settlers arrived in the Great Basin, the settlers tended to ascribe prestige to various chiefs according to their willingness and ability to forge ties to the Anglo power structure. Mormon authorities, for example, regarded Tut-se-gav-its, the leader of the Santa Clara band, as “head chief” among the Paiutes, a role he filled until his death in 1871. After that, government agents



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viewed Taú-gu as “principal chief” of the Paiute “alliance.” He was leader of the Cedar band and the same man whom Mormons called Coal Creek John. When John Wesley Powell, as special government Indian agent, negotiated with the Southern Paiutes, it was Taú-gu whom Powell viewed as the primary representative of the entire tribe. Taú-gu resisted Powell’s efforts at moving the Southern Paiutes to the Uintah Reservation in 1873, instead arguing for several small reservations for each of the Southern Paiute bands.

Not all band leaders in a given tribe adopted the same policy or agenda for a given issue. With the arrival of Mormon settlers in particular, some Indian leaders were willing to cooperate with the Mormons, while others advocated resistance, a factor that sometimes led to factional splits. Sometimes government officials negotiated only with a few tribal leaders but applied the resultant agreement to all members of a given tribe, even to those who had not consented.

Shamans, or medicine men, were also well-respected leaders in Indian communities. Among the Southern Paiutes, shamans could be either male or female tribal members who possessed keen spiritual awareness and came to their power through unsolicited dreams. Some shamans gained reputations as specialists. A rattlesnake shaman treated snakebites, a spider doctor specialized in insect bites, and a rock shaman worked with injuries received in falls from cliffs or trees. Particularly successful shamans commanded the respect and reverence of tribal members and were valued for their examples and spiritual wisdom.

As the various tribes transitioned into the twentieth century, political and governmental structures patterned after the Euro-American political system slowly evolved. This evolution is most noticeable among the Navajos, who in 1901 divided their reservation into five geographic districts, each presided

over by a governing agency. The Northern Agency, comprising the Utah section, is headquartered at Shiprock. In 1923 the Navajo created a legislative business council in order to have a formal organizational structure and entity through which the tribe could negotiate with outside business interests. The present-day Navajo Tribal Council, with an elected tribal chairperson, grew out of the earlier business council.

One Navajo leader also became politically influential outside of tribal politics. In San Juan County, where 54 percent of the population is Native American, a Navajo Democrat, Mark Maryboy, became the first Native American to hold elective office in Utah after voters chose him as one of three county commissioners in 1986. He served a total of four terms. At the 1992 Democratic National Convention he met President Bill Clinton and offered a prayer in Navajo at one of the sessions.

Like the Navajos, other Utah tribes adopted leadership structures in the twentieth century, presided over by a tribal chairperson, generally with some form of tribal council. Tribal leaders in the twenty-first century, much like their nineteenth-century predecessors, are frequently engaged in important leadership functions that involve asserting and maintaining tribal sovereignty, addressing land and water issues, working for the economic betterment of their peoples, securing health care and education, preserving and celebrating their languages and cultures, and passing tribal values on to the next generation.