



AN INTRODUCTION TO UTAH'S INDIAN HISTORY

AT A GLANCE: SOVEREIGNTY, TRIBAL CULTURE, AND “LIVING IN TWO WORLDS”

This lesson explores how Utah's Indians negotiate their place in Utah and the United States. As members of tribes, they are part of sovereign aboriginal nations that predate the United States. This means that they belong to a group that can govern itself independently from federal, state, and local governments. Sovereignty for these five nations is rooted in ancient ties to their homelands and traditional cultural practices and resides, in part, on articulated agreements between tribes and the federal government, in tribes' explicit pronouncements of sovereignty as written into formal governmental constitutions, and in tribes' powers to control their membership. It is important to remember that each of the tribes represented in this curriculum guide have distinct histories of sovereign relations with the U.S. and the states, and they articulate aspects of their sovereignty in distinct ways.

Although members of a political entity that possesses inherent sovereignty in its relationship to state and federal governments, Utah's Indians also are part of life in Utah and in rest of the United States. Contrary to the perception of some non-Indians, being a tribal member does not exclude one from being a citizen of the United States or participating in state and city activities. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 formally conveyed American citizenship to American Indians and confirmed their right to vote in both tribal elections and state/local government elections. Unfortunately, the act was not uniformly applied; Utah, for instance, did not allow Indians to vote until the 1950s, making it one of the last states

to do so.

Utah's failure to grant Indians the vote prior to the 1950s—despite the federal ruling—is in keeping with a history of marginalization that has profoundly shaped the experience of being Indian in Utah. Historically, many non-Indians viewed Indians as inferior to white Europeans and Americans. The doctrine of white superiority supported the idea that it was legitimate to take away vast tracts of Indians' original territory and place Indians on reservations.

The settlement of Utah, contrary to popular belief, was in many ways typical of the national story. In his introduction to *A History of Utah's American Indians*, Forrest Cuch, the director of the Utah's Division of Indian Affairs and a Ute educator, identifies two major “myths” about Utah history: that “no one” lived in Utah prior to Mormon settlement and that after settlement, Utah's American Indians received better treatment than Indians in other states. Both assumptions about the state's past are inaccurate and deny Utah Indians their rightful place in the state's history. The second assumption is particularly damaging because it masks the mistreatments and injustices that Utah's Indians suffered. Indeed, as Cuch points out, “in the case of the Bear River Massacre . . . treatment was even more harsh and severe than what was experienced by Indians residing in other states.”

Ironically, while most whites did not want Indians in their midst, they also believed that



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Indians should be forced to assimilate into Euro-American culture, and starting at the end of the nineteenth century the federal government implemented a series of policies aimed at forcing Indian assimilation. Perhaps the most well-known example of the national assimilation effort was the policy of sending Indian children to boarding schools, where they were not allowed to use native languages or engage in indigenous practices. In Utah, the push for assimilation was more complicated because it could come from both the federal government and the dominant immigrant group, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some Indians rejected Mormon doctrine as incompatible with their traditional belief systems and church-sponsored farms as contradictory to their traditional economies. But others embraced Mormonism and the social and economic support the LDS Church provided, although for many Indians, conversion did not necessarily mean giving up all ancestral spiritual beliefs and practices.

Contemporary Indians, as KUED's documentaries make clear, are well aware of whites' historic desire to eradicate or alter their native cultures. They are also aware that some whites still do not acknowledge the importance of Indian cultures today, but still think of Indians as "out of place" when they engage in "white" cultural practices, especially in cities and towns outside of tribal sovereign boundaries. Such prejudices affect tribal members' perception of their relationship to both tribal and national culture. While some choose to stay on ancestral lands to maintain close ties to their communities, others may do so because they believe that they would not be accepted in white society. At

the same time, while some Indians disdain mainstream American and Utah culture, the majority engage deeply with those cultures. Indeed, we should not see "American" culture as completely separate from tribal cultures, given that the latter predate the American nation and have profoundly influenced its formation. Accordingly, the notion of "living in two worlds," which is used repeatedly in the KUED documentaries, accurately reflects some Indians' individual experiences but does not fully convey the complexity of those individuals' relationships to their sovereign cultures and American culture at large.

In spite of being an oversimplification, the idea of "two worlds" is useful because it reminds us that tribal cultures remain distinct from—and marginalized by—the dominant U.S. worldview. Listening to current members of each of Utah's five tribes discuss their and fellow tribal members' place in the world is the best way to understand how they have personally experienced historical efforts to erode their tribe's sovereign rights and culture. For example, in the *We Shall Remain: The Paiute* documentary, tribal member Travis Parashonts discusses how the history of marginalization of the Paiutes has made Paiutes feel that they must choose between being Paiute and participating in the world at large. Parashonts says, "You can have balance in the modern world, the white world, and you can have balance in the Indian world, and when I went to college I had this thing called marginalism for my people. We live in a world of marginalism—we walk the fence, and sometimes this fence is made up of all kinds of obstacles. . . and the Indian person has to walk that. Where do they fall in at, you know? A lot of them get confused. Where am I in life? Who am I, you know?"



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Parashonts uses the metaphor of “two worlds” to show how Paiute cultural values have been undermined in the broader American society.

Because of such marginalization, it becomes increasingly necessary for Indians to experience and assert their distinctive and sovereign tribal cultures. In *We Shall Remain: The Ute*, Ute language and cultural studies instructor Venita Taveapont argues that it is important for students to learn tribally specific cultural practices such as speaking the Ute language. Such knowledge benefits both the tribe and the individual; as the tribe's *Ute Indian Tribe Education Department Plan of 2004* states, students need a strong Ute cultural program so that they will “realize their maximum learning potential in maintaining dignity and self-worth throughout their lives.”

Indians can exert this cultural sovereignty and also participate in American culture at large. In *We Shall Remain: The Goshute*, student Candace Bear suggests that Goshute people can both maintain their cultural knowledge and be part of the larger world. She feels that the real question is “Do we go forward or back?” and notes that her grandfather used to tell her, “There is another day coming.” She also points out that

the Goshute people have survived the effects of non-Indian settlement in their territory, and this persistence serves as evidence that the Goshutes have a bright future and can move forward as a distinct people living in the broader world.

These are only a few examples of the reflections by tribal members in *We Shall Remain*, and more extensive excerpts have been included in the student materials for this lesson. These diverse voices indicate the complex ways Utah's Indians negotiate tribal, state, and national cultures and remind us of the distinct histories and cultures of each of Utah's tribes. The *We Shall Remain* documentaries—along with the individual lesson plans that follow—testify to the value of tribal sovereignty, but they also insist that Indian cultures and individuals are integral to the cultures of America and Utah.