

Circles, Trees, and Bears: Symbols of the Power of the Weenuche Ute [Abstract]

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The Ute community of White Mesa, comprised of approximately 315 souls, sits in the corner of southeastern Utah, eleven miles outside of Blanding. The residents of primarily Weenuche Ute and Paiute ancestry enjoy a cultural heritage that embraces elements from plains, mountain, and desert/Great Basin Indian culture. Among their religious practices are the Worship Dance, Ghost Dance, Sun Dance, and Bear Dance. Although each ceremony is unique in its own way and performed for a variety of reasons, the common ground among them cannot be missed. Healing the sick, renewing necessities for survival, connecting spiritually with ancestors, communicating with the Land Beyond, establishing patterns for life, and sharing symbols that unify religious expression—such as the circle, tree, and bear—are elements that characterize the faith of these people as expressed in these ceremonies. Their origin sheds light on the relevancy of these practices as they blend traditions from the past with contemporary usage. As symbols imbued with religious relevance, they make the intangible tangible while continuing to teach and protect that which is important in Ute cultural survival. This article looks at these shared elements while offering new information about the origin and symbolism of the Ghost Dance as practiced in the Worship Dance. Circles, trees, bears, and other emblems provide not only themes from past teaching but empower the Ute universe today.

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