

INTERVIEW CLIFFORD DUNCAN, UTE ELDER & SPIRITUAL LEADER

FORREST CUCH: Clifford, why is it important to keep the Ute language alive?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: The language that we speak today, we use that to communicate. But the other part of that, it contains words which has a spiritual connection to nature or to higher-level spirit. Words that we cannot put into like English and that's why it's important. The language itself at this point is deteriorating. It, also with that, kind of gives it a feeling we are losing our identity. Once a language is gone, there will be no more Ute tribe, because it's other, that is the other part of having Ute blood and all that conjures that is there that brings us out, at the center of that, I think. And it's important that we either record that where we cannot lose it altogether. But if we can teach it later, fine. I think that's the answer that I would give.

FORREST CUCH: Clifford, there's a perception that Mormon pioneers treated American Indians better than elsewhere in the history of our nation. And it's also the perception that the land around Salt Lake City wasn't inhabited with Indian people when the Mormon settlers arrived. What's your perception of that?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: The first answer will be like people living within the valley. I personally would say that Utes were there and also Shoshones. And prior to that I'm sure, the shoreline of the Great Salt Lake was inhabited by what we now refer to as the Fremont. So the people had been there prior to the arrival of the Mormons. The band that was associated in Ogden area, north of Ogden area, they refer to them, as English speaker would say, Cumumba band. A Ute will say Cumumbas band. So Cumumbas would mean "speaks two language." So that would mean they speak Ute and they also speak Shoshone. Which then comes down to this. They were Utes that came out of Shoshones families and they lived around Fort Bridger area, which is now Fort Bridger area. And then they drifted down into what is now Heber Valley and down into Utah Valley. So those people were up in that area too. The treatment of Indians in that area by the Mormons, it differs with different writers. One will state that they were treating them in such a way that it was better to feed them then to have war with them. Then when they have an in-depth study about Brigham Young talking to his saints, he stated, "Treat Indians as Indians and not as your equal." That was a directive to, to the people that were there. So that gives this - that the Utes were at a lower level so you don't get that treatment. In fact, most books are written by them. The winners are writing a book. The winners will write a book in such a way that it covers their tracks. If a loser writes a book, it's going to be an entirely different book. So we haven't come to that point yet. And that's the way that I would see that at this point.

FORREST CUCH: What are your thoughts about how the conflict began between Mormon settlers and Indians? Some people never explain why our

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people killed livestock for food. They never explain that our food sources were displaced. What are your thoughts about that?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: In our studies or reading about the history of Utah, it always starts out where Brigham Young came to this land and then he said, "This is the place." But the question that always, is there - from the Indian point of view is where was the Indian that was supposed to be standing there and says, "This is yours"?

It's gone. The man just went there and said, "This is the place" without inquiring about who lives there. Then we'd say there a year after they were been there, they began to go out and start developing settlements throughout the country. In doing so, they were intruding on the land which was occupied by Utes. So not only was it where there were like villages, but they were also going into the mountains, cutting timber, killing wildlife. They used that and have taken it away from the Indians. So for the Utes, they could go back on that to take one of their [pioneer] livestock, I'll take this or that. It was like a trade to them. Remember, that we're not all speaking the same language—Ute and English—and they cannot communicate to each other and say "Here's what I'm doing." So the difference was there. So one treated it as a war; the other one treated it as a trade. So watch one thing happen then, the other would then come back and retaliate and it's a big war. And even after 1861 when the reservation was established, that went on. They had these other chiefs or there were somewhat leaders of warriors that were still pushing for that, that they controlled that. So that's what I think started the whole thing. It's not dealing with the Indians at the time that they arrived here. So to this day, even though they say it's a state of Utah, us Utes, certain ones would say "No, it's still ours" because we never crossed that first day. Nobody gave it away.

FORREST CUCH: Give us your version of the Meeker incident, how you view it?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: The Meeker incident is actually part of a bigger movement. I read about how the state of Colorado became a state four years prior to that incident. So one of the things that was happening was this, that an official was wanting the Indians to be removed one way or another, they would exterminate them. You go back to a time that Cherokees were removed from Georgia, all of that was at the very same thing. It was "keep moving, and keep moving and keep moving."

Then when you study Meeker and how that happened, is it really true? When the Indians were promised that they would get their goods like several times during the year and they'd never got it, where was it? Meeker was selling farm implements and not to Indians but to other people. Was Meeker ripping off the Utes? Is that's what's behind that?

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Then when the troops came in from the north, they were told to stop at the boundary and they never did. They put themselves onto the reservation and that's when that firefighting began. So when you study that, perhaps Nathan Meeker was a scapegoat. They blamed him or blamed that incident for their own, because of the removal. It was based on that, but it's not really true. So the story is not clear. And I think that too, we are still attached to Meeker in such a way that the sacred sites are still there. You go to the mount of flat up, you find the teepee rings. You find the vision quest sites. You find the trails. You find campsites, you find all kinds of Indian items, objects, and it's still there. So you look at the treaties that were signed. None of the treaties is stating that we relinquish our sacred ties. It didn't even have anything that dealt with religion. So that would mean that I still possess that by means of saying "This is where I'm gonna worship." Then you back like, tomorrow, I'll be going to Meeker. The powwow is like spirit of my people, our people that are there. What we going to say is this: I'm not going to talk to the people that's there, but I'm gonna talk to the spirit. I'm going to say this: "I am back. My grandpa's grandfathers lived here, they were pushed out of here, but someday we would return. I am now back. We did not forget you. I did not forget you. And together, we're going to make the sound of the drum. And everything will be back again."

FORREST CUCH: Tell us a little about, a little bit about your grandmother's story.

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: My grandmother's story. She would talk to us about, or my mother would talk about what grandma said. When they walked from Meeker to here, they would, they told them "Don't take anything, only what you can pack on your back." So they left a lot of their belongings there; they just left. Many people cried and we came here as poor people because of that, and that's what my grandmother would tell my mother. So today we are here. We are still poor but someday it'll be changing, I'll go back to that again. So not necessarily owning the land, but we own the spirit or the spirit owns us. That like, you can remove a person from a country but you can never remove a country from a person, so that's what taken place. And that's what that old lady was talking about when I said that's why it is. There are names that are attached to some of the mountains and some of the places. So those places still remain there. So our grandmother is talking about that, said there were those places and the plants were still there, the sacred plants that grow there like, when I'd eat Indian tobacco, I go to the mountains in Colorado and it's there. We don't have that here, so our sacred plants are still over there, that's what we going after. So that's, that's what was meant by those saying that we'll come back and we're poor. That was a story of my grandmother's.

FORREST CUCH: With getting pushed off our land in Utah and Colorado, with all of the war and bloodshed, there are some who say this country is built on the blood of our ancestors. Is that true, is this country built on the blood of the Indian people?

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CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Well, you could say that. We all would agree to that and not only through military actions like war. Say, beginning in 1825 there were trappers that were coming into this country. They brought with them disease and their wrath, the people began to fall. They began to die because the Native Americans never hears of that disease. In fact it's started from day one when Christopher Columbus landed on a shore on an island. A year later a count was made and ninety percent of those people died. The blood is there. So it was kind of like a germ warfare but nobody knew that. Later, when they issued blankets, which was infected with smallpox, the government gave it to the Indians, say "Here." The Indians took it because they didn't know what smallpox was. They died. Up to nineteen hundred, ok, there was a case of smallpox throughout the Indian country. Here same thing happened. So we gave that through, like you're saying blood, blood is there.

That's why I think those people back there like Minnesota, they have these pipe stone. They get their stone and they carved that into a pipe and it's red colored. The red then is labeled as being the blood of our people. That's what we smoke. So if the symbol of red is that which is there and in some powwows we have marking with red paint and that is also part of it. I think today we have problems that can make it a racial thing. But when you look at it, is it? Or what is it, really? I think it's - history is not taught in a way that it could be viewed from both sides. What we understand, what is on this side and that side, I think would be better for all of us. But they, they keep pushing it, like a school systems or like, out here, you know where they hide this, like history's written in such a way that this never happened. So we have to bring it into here, say "Ok, here's the real picture." And then bringing the real picture into that. My mother used to put this this way: white man is *nomawedge*. *Nomawedge* means "I want to be first, always." They want to be first. You drive down the road, they want to be in front of you. You're getting in line at the grocery store, they put their cart in front of you. They want to be the first one in the food line. Everything is like that. You watch. So but that attitude's got to change, you know. So that was one thing that was there.

I think that's still there. You feel the differences close to the reservations, like here. Like you go to Roosevelt, you'll find that there. Where you notice that is near reservations. You have attitudes that are different and I think too, it's because we live in the same place and we want to be first. Like here, I live in a checkerboard area. My neighbor is not Indian so we fight over the use of water. I want that water. So we have turns so we have to be there in order to get that, otherwise they're not going to turn it my way. So those kinds of things happen. The further away you get from the reservation, you don't notice that. The racial attitudes are like upfront attitudes. Indians will notice that quick, real quick. During the war, it was, it was really bad. We went into a restaurant in Wyoming. After sitting there for ten minutes, finally the waitress came up to our table and said, "We don't serve to Native Americans in this restaurant." So we had to go. We don't do that here. Out in Salt Lake in 1947, I was going to rent an apartment on east side of town. The lady told me this: "We do not rent to Orientals and

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Native Americans.” That was it. That’s in 1947 in Salt Lake City. So I left [chuckles]. So that’s it.

FORREST CUCH: Is there anything you’d like to add?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Well, I think, one this I would like to kind of bring out is that there is nothing in our schools or like out here that teaches about Indians. There’s nothing there. Which reminds me like a college in Navajo land, the president at one time was asked, “What is different between this college and other colleges or universities?” And the man said this: “In this school, we do not teach Columbus discovered America.” So that’s a good statement. We do not begin with Columbus. We were here thousands, thousand, and thousands of years so we have the right to be upfront to, we’re going to be *nomawedge*. Teach about who was here first, like the Utes and their earlier groups that lived within a framework that was the Fremont people. Teach about that and put it all back together. Then say ok, then we arrived. I think that would be the best way to teach that. And as a parent, a grandparent, we try to do our best, like here. I learned one thing when my grandson was two years old, I keep talkin’ to him in Ute. Every time I give him water I said, “*Baa*.” One day he was staggering over to me, grabbed me, he said “*Baa*.” And went to that where I kept the water, he wanted water. If we can teach our young kids before we teach them English, I think it’s gonna work. Between year one and year six. Because we really don’t lose anything. We can learn English when we go to school and that’s it. I think we’re starting at the wrong end when we teach them over here, when they are clear out, that they don’t want to learn that any more. It sounds funny. Bring it back over here; reverse it you know.

FORREST CUCH: I’ve been talking to these people about that Dances with Wolves. I told them I said, “Do you know that that, that book about Dances with Wolves was based on the Comanche culture not the Lakota.” And I said, “Our people and the Comanches were the first to come up to have the horse and so Hollywood kind of likes the Lakotas, you know?” But it was really our, our people in that area had the horse first is what I tell them all the time. So maybe you could speak to that.

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Well, we still have horses. A few families have horses, you know. Got to tie in with the past. Way before horses you know, our people they travelled by foot, till about 1600 or thereafter. When the group from the south, they begin to emerge with the Spanish people and then they acquired the horses from them. And they’re the ones that actually as expansion of horses to other tribes and after that, then all the tribes that were in plains had horses. So it was after that they’d begin to move faster. But along with that was a spiritual aspect of like animal or life with nature, this was a new animal. It was a gift. So they would use it in ceremonies to like interpret songs or interpret certain movements, say the horse is making this, is carrying this with the ceremony. So it was like that, you know.

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Certain ceremonies are still like that today.

FORREST CUCH: Tell me about ceremonies...

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: You know our ceremonies, it's always seemed to center on light, like the sun is the main source of energy or where the power is. So like it's embedded into our sun dances and other ceremonies, and even bear dance. And the old way that was there was the ghost dance, so everything then is connected to that, like plants, birds, even the water and the air is then connected to that. But the main one is the sun. The light, that's still here today. We did not put that away or didn't go away, you know it's something that we didn't lose. It's embedded into an Indian's thinking.

In our ceremonies, which are still here, like sun dance and others, even sweat lodges, our bear dance. We have this source of power and that power is the sun itself. Light, we always look at the highest level of spirituality to be that, the light. So when the sun rises in the morning, in our ceremonies, we look toward the light...And then we say our prayers, that's how we're connected. That is still here today. Our people several generations back had that and beyond that. So we're not, we didn't lose anything and we still have it.

FORREST CUCH: Clifford, what would you say the main difference is between our spirituality, *Nuche*, our spirituality and mainstream, say Christianity, their belief system? What's the main difference there?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: The main difference is that could be explained several ways but the simplest way would be like everyday I'm connecting to the spirit. Like every morning we do a morning ritual whereas over here the only that they are connecting to that is on Sunday. So like Sunday is a time that they go to church but the rest of the time they can be whatever they want. So there's a difference there. Whereas the Native Americans they live that from day to day. Every minute of the day. So that becomes like it's, you can see that. So when I try to explain that to another person, I have to go back again. Say ok, let's start with day one again. So I think that's the main thing that's different. And too, prophets seem to control groups like churches, they're all geared to this one or that one or that one. Like Far East, we have the Buddhas and Christianity have theirs and other have theirs too. Whereas Indian, Native American is putting that in nature. Like the sun and everything that you see: water, air and the earth that you stand on, those are the four elements that we know...That contains all of that. Whatever that you're gonna be. So that is the difference I think.

It's our prophet is the light, the sun is our prophet and that is, that's the way I look at it.

FORREST CUCH: So nature is our religion and mountains are our steeples?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Yeah. But I also would look at it this way, Forrest. The reason why we have bands or we have family units is because we, we

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interpret the same but it fits into smaller family units, so you could interpret what I was saying into your situation, to your family unit. It might appear different but the bottom line is always the same, you have the light, the water, the air and the land, so everything kind of goes around and around. So religion has a tendency to appear like it is different, but Native Americans hold that, it is as one. I think that's one way of explaining that, too. And it may be centered in a person rather than out here, it's inside. Native Americans have their spirituality down the center of each one of us and that's what it coming out of, you know, I think.

FORREST CUCH: I get the feeling the non-native folk wish we would have gone away or not been here [laughs].

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Well you think this way, Forrest, when they put us on the reservation they were pushing us away. But each time they do that, we would be attached to that place and it kept expanding. So we think the same way. Our people would think the same way. When are they going to go home? So that was, I think that was part of that whole thing too. Eventually the Indians begin to look at the whole thing like they're not going to move away. So let's treat them like strangers so they begin to treat each other like strangers. So that became war because these other people were intruding. But you know it's always there. Just like they pressure to move away and we do the same with them. You know when the tribes actually did that prior to the European's arrival; they pushed the other tribes out. The strongest held their place, that's why Utes were never removed from the mountains because they were solid. That's why we're still mountain people. I think the Utes as a whole were really a strong tribe. They tried to come in from the east, from the south, from the north into the mountains but they never could push us out. And that was another reason why you know we were kind of up at the upper level. We knew how to deal with that. So they didn't remove us, we're still here.

FORREST CUCH: So what was life like for our people before the Europeans arrived?

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: When we study about Indian life ways, say before the Europeans arrived here, we always picture them by like being out in the valleys or up on the mountains during the summer. And they're hunting or they're gathering seeds. Women folks were out there. The picture appears like the woman is doing more work than the men. But it's really not true. It balances out. They had plenty of food, so like during the summer, they hunt the deer, the elk, then they have drying racks. They dry the meat and in the fall you have a lot of this meat in sack, it's dry. Same way with the berries. So they used that sometime like mortaring or like they're buying things with it too. Like they could trade that for something that you need or something that was different, it's not totally for just themselves.

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FORREST CUCH: And we've been here thousands of years. Whereas Navajos, you know, they—and the Apaches—they're recent comers. Only been here about thirteen, fifteen hundred years and they came from Bering Strait down west coast, down into this area.

CLIFFORD DUNCAN: Our people, the Utes... when we talk about history, the thing that's always there, but we don't know how to put it, is that we never came from anywhere else. Like we don't say well, they came in on the boat, like the Europeans. But we do know that they were in separate groups and they had different names and now days we say bands. Bands of different ones, and that changed too. When they records them they record them in such a way that it would easier to record like, it was easier to say White River band instead of Yampatika. Or Parianuche. If you look at them, see, those are the two bands within that Yumpatika. And the same way with Uncompahgre, when we say Uncompahgre we're talking about a river. So they named that band Uncompahgres, they're actually Taveewach. So those kinda things are there but, studying history we kind of get away from, looking at things and - got to have a new page, we look at new pages. We can learn more, you know, when we do that, you know. So that's why I'm looking at Ute history. Ute history is not complete yet. One day, there'll be a Ute that writes that and more in detail.