



# THE UTES

## **AT A GLANCE: THE EVOLUTION OF UTE LEADERSHIP**

*NOTE: This portion of the teacher materials addresses the evolution of Ute leadership models from the periods of pre-contact to Mormon settlement. For a description of the specific events covered in this lesson, see the Annotated Timeline of Ute History.*

Before the Ute tribe acquired the horse they lived very much like the other tribes in region: they traveled with the seasons in small family groups, meeting up with larger bands for hunting and celebrations. This way of life necessitated a dispersed form of government. Each small group was responsible for meeting its own needs, and the larger family groupings and bands would have a leader to handle specific needs or events. For example, there may have been a leader for the rabbit or antelope drives and a leader for buffalo hunts. Some bands also may have had a spiritual guide or a healer. All of these people led using their gifts and skills, and the legitimacy of their leadership was based on their respected position in the community. Though the people of Ute tribe recognized themselves as distinct from other tribes, they were not ruled over by one tribal “chief.”

The introduction of the horse to Ute culture allowed larger groups to travel together over greater distances. As the number of people living together grew, so did the need for leadership. Bands started to look to those they respected for guidance on more diverse issues. Someone with a gift of power was called a shaman or “Poowagudt.” The Poowagudt was a leader who could serve his or her people by bringing them good health, good luck in hunting, and safety. Other leaders were looked to for their hunting skills, intelligence, or ability to negotiate with others. Better leaders acquired larger groups of followers, not through any political dealings or shows of force but because people chose to follow them.

As non-Indians began to enter Ute territory, the Utes required different skills in a leader. For example, the ability to speak multiple languages became a valuable skill, and the Ute people looked to leaders who could translate their needs and concerns to European and American newcomers. As conflict grew between the Utes and non-Indian groups, courage in battle and intelligence in planning attacks also became useful leadership skills. However, as non-Indians came in greater numbers and (often with the backing of the U.S. military) took over more and more territory, some Utes turned to leaders who could negotiate peace. Indeed, some former war leaders became negotiators and signed peace treaties. Ute leaders were sent to Washington D.C. to negotiate with the federal government. Eventually the Utes had been militarily overpowered by the Utah settlers and federal government, and they negotiated for reservation territories, some of which were later taken away by the federal government and some of which they still occupy today (for more information on the dispossession of Ute territory, see the “Ute Sovereignty and the Competition over Resources on the Uintah-Ouray Reservation” lesson plan).

Modern Ute leadership is based on elections and appointments to positions that are established through a constitution. Modern leaders are elected or appointed to different positions based on the respect they have earned among their people. They serve the people for limited terms and may serve in many different positions over the course of their lifetimes. The changing circumstances of Ute life over time have led to their changing ideals of leadership and the uniquely skilled and gifted people who have served them.