

Ute Indian Bear Dance: Related Myths and Bear Glyphs

Lynda D. McNeil



An interdisciplinary approach is used to reconstruct bear-complex symbolism underlying the Ute Indian Bear Dance ceremony and myth. Interpretation is thereby attempted for two rock art panels in the Uncompahgre Plateau region of western Colorado. The first panel (5ME228) has been relatively dated as Uncompahgre Style (Numic) Archaic Mountain Tradition or "proto-Ute" (1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000), and the second panel (5MN5) has been similarly dated as Late Historic Ute (A.D. 1830–1880). Age of the second panel is reconsidered in the light of narrative and stylistic similarities between the two panels, in addition to superposition and possible reuse. Both panels appear to reflect narrative elements and symbolism associated with the Ute Bear Dance ceremony and myth, although Ute ethnography has not, to date, shed light on their possible ritual use.

This paper develops a line of inquiry raised in a previous paper concerning the role that iconic narration played, and continues to play, in the evolution of human discourse (McNeil 1996). Iconic narration, in the form of pictographic texts (petroglyphs and pictographs), presumably developed in tandem with gestural, kinesthetic, and later oral (40,000–35,000 B.C.) narration. While, admittedly, it is difficult to interpret historically and culturally remote pictographic "texts," this paper argues that by using an interdisciplinary approach, it is possible to reconstruct, at least in part, prehistoric beliefs and symbol systems that underlie associated rituals and ceremonies. Such reconstruction has the potential to contribute to interpretation of specific rock art panels or glyphs.

Specifically, the cognitive origins of bear-complex symbolism in human prehistory are examined as well as the relation of selected Ute (and presumably proto-Ute) bear glyphs to the Ute Bear Dance and myths relating its origin. I will first discuss bear hibernation symbolism; secondly, how that symbolism informs the Ute Indian Bear Dance spring restoration ceremony; and, finally, how the Ute Bear Dance and a related Ute myth shed light on two rock art panels in the Uncompahgre Plateau of western Colorado.

Lynda D. McNeil

Boulder, Colorado

*University Writing Program,
University of Colorado*

Bear Hibernation Symbolism

By using the tools of cognitive semantics and linguistics (Armstrong et al. 1994, 1995; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Langacker 1991; Turner 1987, 1991), this article reconstructs the bear-complex symbolism believed to underlie Northern Hemisphere beliefs about bears, bear ceremonialism, and bear glyphs. A cognitive approach can help reconstruct underlying meanings of Ute bear symbolism from what we know about the geographic distribution of bear species in North America and from what we can infer from the appearance, behaviors, and seasonal habits (hunting/foraging, mating, and hibernating) of Eurasian (cave, brown) and North American (grizzly, kodiak, and black) bears.

Old and New World hunter-gatherers demonstrated the ability to learn observationally and to construct symbolic meanings, first by reading signs in the natural and human worlds. Later they communicated symbolic complexes of meanings derived from these experiences into a multimodal form of communication: iconic (pictographic text), kinesthetic (ceremony, ritual, dance), and oral (myths, legends) (Hewes 1994; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; McNeil 1996; Marshack 1972; Mithen 1990; Seton 1925; Turner 1987, 1991).

The *bear hibernation cycle* describes an event pattern imbued with symbolic meanings that begin with the bear's ability to cross the liminal boundary between the land of mortals and the Land Beyond, the land of the nature deity and deceased ancestors (Figure 1). For example, the hibernation cycle pre-narrative script includes characters, settings, sequence of events, and outcomes (Turner 1991:19–20, in McNeil 1996:335). In the fall, the bear disappears into its den or cave (symbolizing death). Over the winter, it returns to the forest or mountain deity (discussed below), apparently accessed through the den/cave as liminal boundary. In the spring, the bear emerges from its den, restored to life and, in the case of females, often with offspring. Hence, the actual hibernation cycle forms the foundation for the symbolic hibernation cycle of prenarrative scripts of ceremony, dance, and pictographic writing, as well as oral narratives.

The symbolism inherent in the bear hibernation cycle seems to form the basis of the bear-centered ritual script of many Northern Hemisphere peoples (Hallowell 1926; Rockwell 1991). Moreover, bear hibernation and bear-centered ritual or ceremony share the event pattern of death of the old self and rebirth of a new one, combining fertility and hunting magic in the more inclusive concept of Increase Magic (McNeil 1998a). In this productive stage of proto-narration, performance acts of “retelling” events would occur in a social (ritual or ceremonial) context, finding expression iconically in rock art, carved figures, body decorations, masks, etc.; kinesthetically in dance, mime, impersonation, or event-reenactment; and *gestural* or *vocal* expression.

The Ute Bear Dance and Its Symbolism

The Bear Dance is considered one of the most ancient and important of Ute ceremonies. Other Numic peoples (Shoshonean speakers) who enact a Bear Dance ceremony believe it originated with the Utes in ancient times (Lowie 1915, 1924; Spier 1928). From Reed's (1896) first-hand study of the Southern Ute Bear Dance, Steward's (1932) observance of Uintah Ute's Bear Dance, Stewart's (1942) extensive ethnographic study of twelve Ute bands, and Rockwell's (1991) overview of North Amerindian Bear Dances, we learn that the Bear Dance ceremony is often (though not always) associated with myths and ceremonies that emphasize the spring restoration of the bear from its long winter hibernation.

The Ute Bear Dance enacts hibernation symbolism evident in ceremonies, myths, and glyphs.

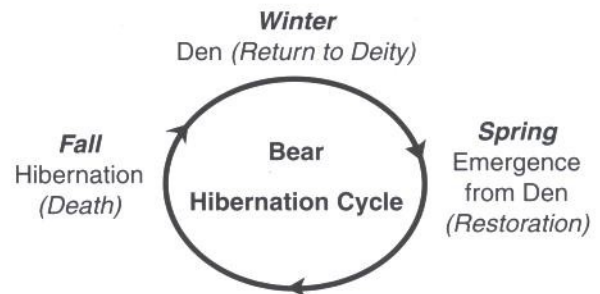


Figure 1. Bear-complex symbolism.

In Ute bear festivals this symbolism appears in the following elements: (1) seasonal timing, (2) imitation of bears, (3) ancestor veneration, (4) ideas of death-resurrection, (5) health-prosperity, and (6) courtship-marriage. Of these, seasonal timing, imitation of bears, and ideas of death-resurrection are most applicable to the bear glyphs discussed here.

The timing of the Bear Dance reflects similar symbolic associations of the bear with restoration. It generally takes place in February or March, a harbinger to spring prior to the peoples' movement to a summer campground. The Bear Dance apparently is associated with spring restoration rites, (health, courtship, marriage, and procreation). In respect for the bear as spirit helper, the Utes want to return the favor by helping restore the bear to good health (food and a mate) after the winter hibernation.

The typically four-day ceremony combines mimetic elements (that is, the bear's appearance, habits, and habitat) with mythic elements that emphasize bear-human kinship (Opler 1941). The most striking mimetic element pertaining to Ute bear festivals involves dancing like bears. Like certain Eurasian celebrants (McNeil 1998a, 1998b), Ute dancers imitate the movements of a bear, moving three steps forward and three steps back as bears appear to do with trees in the forest. This "back and forth" dance, possibly the original line dance, is related to Ute myths about the origin of the Bear Dance, a gift from their bear ancestors (Figure 2). Females choose partners and are the sexual aggressors, as are female bears. Some dancers also move their arms in imitation of the motion made by the forepaws of bears, while others put their arms around each other imitating hugging bears. According to Steward (1932:272), "the bear 'comes out,' a man and a woman impersonating bears" and at Myton, the Ute "are said to have bear skins which are worn by the impersonators."

Other ceremonial elements of interest include the setting and props used for the Bear Dance. For example, the circular enclosure for the dance is referred to as a "cave of sticks" with a southeast facing entrance. A circular hole is dug in the center to resemble an underground cave, and a drum is placed over the hole to transport the noise to the caves of the bears and to transform it into thunder. Singing sticks (*moraches*), rasps made to resemble

the jaw of an animal, are used during the dance ceremony; and rattles are made of rawhide, hooves, or gourds.

Finally, the Ute bear ceremony is related to the belief in a cycle of death and resurrection, symbolized by the restoration of the bear after its symbolic death in hibernation. With the idea of resurrection in mind, the Ute Bear Dance acts to assist bears in recovering from hibernation, in finding food, in choosing a mate, and in casting the film of sleep from their eyes. The process of restoring the bear to full health is enacted symbolically over the four days of the dance. By the last day of the festival, the "bears are believed to have fully regained the use of all their faculties and to have found food and a mate" (Reed 1896: 244).

Interpreting Ute Bear Glyphs

In addition to reports that bear glyphs (particularly paw prints) functioned as tribal or totemic markers for many Great Basin people, glyphs carried the rich complex of symbolic meanings discussed above. I propose, therefore, that the nature and life cycle of the bear, which provides the symbolic and mythological meanings underlying bear ceremonialism (and shamanic ritual), in turn, informs the meaning of specific bear glyphs. Ute or proto-Ute bear glyphs fall into three general



Figure 2. Bear Dance painting on buckskin. (On display at Ute Indian Museum, Montrose, Colorado.)
Courtesy J. A. McNeil, photographer.

categories: (1) paw-prints, often in Uncompahgre Style (Cole 1990:9–10), believed to indicate tribal territorial markers (totemic); (2) typically pecked petroglyphs of bears in silhouette (often left-facing), either standing on all fours or standing upright on back legs (“dancing”); and (3) therianthrope bear-anthropomorph petroglyphs, possibly representing bear shamans in a robe with an attached bear head.

With this understanding of bear hibernation symbolism, ceremonialism, and myth in mind, I will offer the interpretation of two bear glyph panels, the first of which I believe to be associated with proto-Ute peoples. I use this term, proto-Ute, to designate the ancestral Utes who originated from the eastern migrations of Great Basin-based populations and arrived in western Colorado around 9,500 to 9,000 B.P. (Cole 1990:11–12). They became the peoples associated with the Archaic Mountain Tradition (7500 B.C. to A.D. 1300), which included the Uncompahgre Complex (7000 B.C. to A. D. 1300). Therefore, as distinguished from the sedentary Formative cultures (Fremont and Anasazi) who occupied the region around A.D. 1 to A.D. 1300, these Numic-speaking Great Basin-based peoples, called “proto-Ute” here, would evolve into the Utes and other related Numic-speaking or Shoshonean peoples of the Colorado Plateau and adjacent regions. In addition, they would demonstrate continuities in geographic habitation and material culture, as well as cultural affinities, such as ceremonial and mythological practices and beliefs associated with the Bear Dance.

The second panel is associated with Early Historic Ute Indian Style (Cole 1990:225) in the western Colorado Uncompahgre Plateau region. This is a region long occupied by Ute bands, where numerous bear paws of unknown cultural affiliation exist and where at least half of the proto-Ute and Ute rock art includes some form of bear glyph: paw print(s), bear silhouette, or narrative (mythological or historic) scene involving a bear (Buckles 1971; Cole 1990).

Two of these latter, narrative types appear in Ute-affiliated rock art sites in the Uncompahgre region. They are consistent with the Ute Bear Dance myth and ceremony, perhaps having served an educational function in transmitting this important myth to the next generation. The first panel,

at site 5ME228 near the Gunnison River in west-central Colorado, contains petroglyphs of the Uncompahgre Style (Cole 1990:82–96), presumably associated with hunter-gatherer groups of the Archaic Mountain Tradition and dating 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, and perhaps extending back as much as 1,000 years earlier (Sally Cole, personal communication 1998). The panel (Figure 3) portrays a bear facing right, with Uncompahgre Style paw prints, in what appears to be a narrative context involving two male anthropomorphs. Behind the bear (to the left) are elk-like quadrupeds, portraying a large food animal whose return may also signal the arrival of spring. One of the humans may be shaking or holding a rattle-like object in front of the bear, perhaps in the process of awakening it from its winter sleep (Figure 4).

Marvin Opler (1941) relates variants of the Ute myth about the origin of the Bear Dance. One of these has striking parallels to the narrative represented on the two rock art panels, as well as to portrayals on Ute Bear Dance flags of upright bears alone or near trees (Figures 5–7). Opler recounts the myth as follows:

A long time ago, at the beginning, a Ute man [in some versions two brothers] went to hunt early in the morning. It was spring and he had his bows and arrows with him. As he was going over a high hill to get the game [note elk in both panels] he noticed some rocks over to the east on that hill. Pretty soon he saw a large bear



Figure 3. “Awakening Bear” petroglyph panel at site 5ME228 near the Gunnison River in west-central Colorado (Cole 1990: 85). This solid-pecked panel is considered Uncompahgre Style of the Archaic Mountain Tradition (?1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000) (Cole 1990:82). Illustration reprinted from *Legacy in Stone*, copyright 1990 by Sally J. Cole, with permission from Johnson Books, Boulder, Colorado.

coming out of a cave in the rocks. That bear had been in the cave all winter long. Well, the man watched that bear closely because he was a little afraid it might come that way. Then the sun rose over the mountains and everything became clear [Opler 1941:25].

The second panel (Figure 5), at site 5MN5 in the Uncompahgre drainage of west-central Colorado, depicts two distinct bears climbing trees along with a larger, more deeply and perhaps more recently re-pecked, higher third bear standing

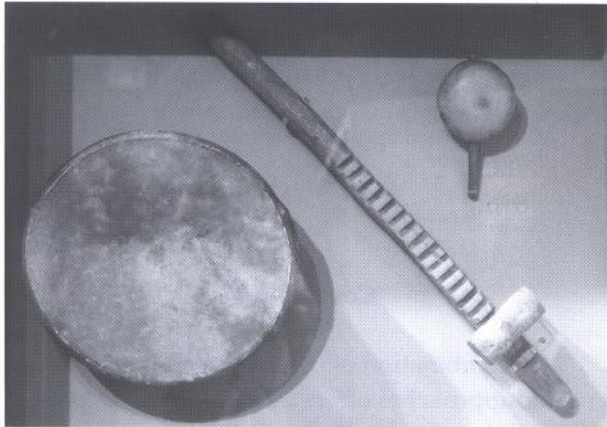


Figure 4. Drum, morach, and gourd rattle (left to right). (On display at Ute Indian Museum in Montrose, Colorado.) Courtesy J. A. McNeil, photographer.

upright (“dancing”). This bear has distinctive Uncompahgre Style paw prints that resemble the proto-Ute Awakening Bear panel (Figure 3). The myth related by Opler continues,

It was clear as in a dream. There was an old black tree standing over there. The bear stood up just like a person as if he was trying to show something or do something specially for this man. The black tree was right in front of the bear, so he went up to it and danced forward and back facing the trunk. That man just sat and watched the bear dance, knowing it was meant for him to see. He studied it very closely and it was like the Bear Dance of today. When it was over, he decided to go back and tell the people [Opler 1941:25].

William Buckles (1971:1072–1074) reports that the imagery of the Climbing Bears panel (Figure 5) is “duplicated in a painting of Ute Bear Dance by an Uncompahgre [Tabeguache] Ute Indian. The painting ... [dates to about 1900 and is] ... said to depict a scene in the Bear Dance legend.” The scene uses imagery that is “consistent with the content of Northern Ute legend that relates ... [the story] ... of a hunter [who] ‘saw a bear dancing back and forth to a pine tree, and on his return



Figure 5. “Climbing Bears” petroglyph panel at site 5MN5 in the Uncompahgre drainage of west-central Colorado. This solid and stipple-pecked panel is considered Late Historic Ute Indian Style (?A.D. 1830–1880) (Cole 1990:235). Photo by J. A. McNeil.

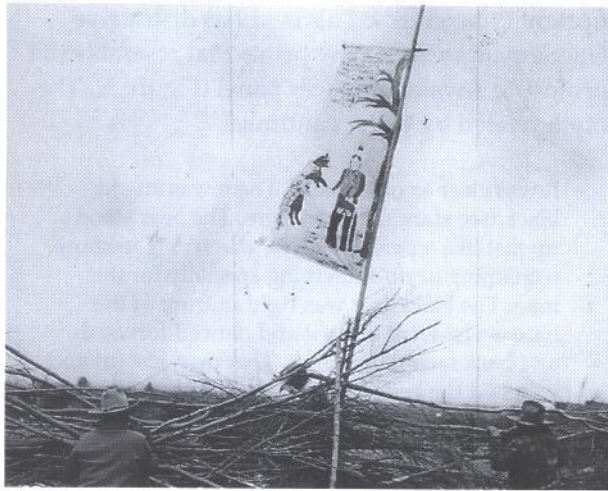


Figure 6. Uintah Ute Bear Dance flag, Whiterocks, Utah (date unknown, but presumably around 1900±). Courtesy of the University of Utah Library, Special Collections, photo #1322A.



Figure 7. Ute Bear Dance flag. (On display at Ute Indian Museum, Montrose, Colorado.) Courtesy J. A. McNeil, photographer.

home the hunter taught his people to do the dance'” (Buckles 1971:1072–1074, quoting Smith 1974:221; also cited in Cole 1990:238, Figure 108). While the connection of these two glyph panels to Ute myth or legend seems apparent, Cole’s attribution of this panel as Late Historic Ute Indian Style (A.D. 1830–1880) is problematic upon close observation of the panel.

An alternative interpretation might take into account the following observations. (1) This panel (Figure 5) has strong stylistic and narrative similarities to the Awakening Bear panel (Figure 3), attributed to the Uncompahgre Style, Archaic Mountain Tradition hunter-gatherer (Cole 1990:85). (2) Based upon dramatic differences in repatination of glyphs on this panel, one could argue that these differences suggest Late Historic reuse of an Archaic panel. Superposition of the more lightly repatinated climbing bears over the more darkly repatinated forked path and hiker/hunter (actually, comparable in patination and style to the Archaic Awakening Bear, Figure 3) suggests that the bear dance painting to which Buckles refers could itself be based upon ancient myths and iconic imagery found in other Colorado Plateau bear glyphs, as well as those on Ute Bear Dance flags (Figures 6 and 7), which are similar to this panel and to the painting in question.

Conclusion

The combination of cognitive and ethnographic approaches offers assistance in interpretation of Colorado Uncompahgre Plateau Ute and proto-Ute (Uncompahgre Complex of the Archaic Mountain Tradition) bear glyphs, grounded in bear hibernation symbolism and expressed in Ute Indian ceremonial dance, myth, and rock art. While possible connections among the Ute Bear Dance ceremony, related myths, and specific rock art panels have been suggested here, precise ritual or educational purposes for these glyphs remain to be discovered in Ute ethnology or oral tradition.

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