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The Ever-Changing World of the Paiute

Joseph Lent¹

In the early days of creation the earth was covered with water...

This is the beginning of the oldest known origin history which was orally passed down among the Paiute and Paiute-related people. It mysteriously seems to be in line with the biblical genesis of creation, but lies on a very different plane of cultural understanding and belief. The Paiutes did not possess any known form of writing to document such histories, and thus the way we relate our origins are through the passing down of “oral history.” Many times this history has been referred to by non-Native people as, “stories, tales, myths,” and “legends.” These types of words denote fiction and a falsification of real events; which is why we, as Native People, attempt to no longer use such terms when relating our history.

Although there was no written account of creation, as a person who comes from the so-called “western education” may view as such, there were however many localized monuments which denote creation origins and oral history. Mountains, canyons, valleys, and lakes all reflect points of contact of such origins; for instance: the mountain where this happened, the lake where such and such originated, the canyon that was carved out by so and so, and the valley where the people once congregated before such and such took place. The entire landscape within Paiute country was rolled out like a monumental history scroll, and the people knew how to read it. In the winter time, month long histories were recited little by little, one piece at a time, night by night. Before the coming of the whites and the disruption of this culture took place, all children were well educated and informed on the ties between their race and the homeland in which they dwelt. The tie between the people and the land was of such intimate bonding that it continues to remain a hurtful subject when our people remember their forceful removal from it; all the while witnessing the destruction and imbalance imposed upon it through development projects and mismanagement.

Paiute?

When we say “Paiute,” we are actually referring to the *Numu*; the accurate title of ourselves for ourselves. *Numu* is a singular/plural pronoun which translates to the word used for people, person, and is used as well in any reference to a human being. We have come to accept the term Paiute when speaking English so that those with whom we work and are in the process of educating will not get confused. When we say, “Paiute related people,” it is understood that the Paiute have preceded from a larger body of ancient people all which hold a connection to what has become a vast language family. Non-Natives have classified this family as Uto-Aztecan, and within this language body there are yet more categories, or stocks, such as Numic, Takic,

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Tubatulabal, Hopi, and many, many more; including the Aztecs which once inhabited modern-day Mexico. These classifications, however, are not recognized by the Native people themselves, who do not desire to be placed in such categories by their conquerors, and who do not wish to be viewed as “stock.” Each Native Nation holds a specific identity within its own rights as people within their traditional territory; all being well known among the surrounding nations of Native people. When we use these non-Native classifications, it is only for the purposes of keeping Euro-Americans, who for the most part do not possess an accurate cultural understanding of the Native people, up to speed on what we are attempting to teach.

Within the classification of “Numic,” a branch of the “Uto-Aztecan” family, there are the Northern Paiute and Bannock which refer to themselves as *Numu*; the Shoshone and Comanche which refer to themselves as *Newe*; the Ute and Southern Paiute which refer to themselves as *Nuwuvie*. These separate, yet related, nations of people remain closer in language and history than the rest of those contained in the broader classification of “Uto-Aztecan.” Though their languages are unintelligible, they seem to reflect many root forms of vowels and verbiage, which evidently show the linguistic relationship. The closeness of early origin histories further establishes such proof of their oneness in origination. These six nations of people almost exclusively inhabit what is known as the Great Basin; the area that lies between the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range in California and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Of course these nations extend beyond this landscape, but the majority of their homelands lie within it. Many more nations outside of “Numic” which are classified under “Uto-Aztecan” prehistorically filled southern California and Mexico.

The majority of these Paiute and Paiute-related peoples’ early creation histories all seem to stem from the same root. Another handed down early historic epic is that at one time all the people lived together in one large band. The people had become too numerous for the land to contain and so it was decided that they were to split and that each band would become their own nation of people. From that point the people that went north became the *Numu*, the Northern Paiute; the ones that went northeast became the *Newe*, the Shoshone; and those that went east became the *Nuwuvie*, the Southern Paiute. Those that stayed in the land where the rest left from became the weakest of these related people, and some believe that they did not survive the onslaught and holocaust imposed upon them by the Euro-Americans; which were very possibly the Kawaiisu. This area and point of migration may very well have been what is now known as the dry China Lake; the area in California where the city of Ridgecrest sits. It may have also been a little further south in the Mojave Desert. The evidence to suggest China Lake as such a place is the wealth of ancient cultural resources such as rock writings. The lake, now dry, seemed to be a foundational point of cultural and spiritual connection. The Coso Hot Springs area, which borders China Lake, is also another esteemed focal point that held much honor and prestige among many of these related people; this same respect continues to the present.

Keep in mind the origin histories of these Paiute people teach of a northern spread; at one time they travelled to each nation’s current respective territories from the south. Western white education teach of a southern spread; nomadic hunters from Asia crossing the Bering Strait at different intervals during the ice age. Although there are proofs of such a crossing, it is not a sound holistic truth for all indigenous inhabitants of the pre-Americas; it is very racially egotistical of such theoretical promoters to suggest such. There are indigenous people inhabiting both sides of this strait, on the Russia side as well as on the Alaskan/Canadian side that speak

similar languages; this reflects strength in the theory. The Athabaskan-related tribes are known to have migrated in from the north, but how far north; modern day Canada, Asia? It is hard to say. Such truths of this migration are archived in the traditional knowledge and history of many earlier established tribal Nations. Their invasion displaced many northwest coastal nations and even purged into the southwest, forcing nations such as the Southern Paiute, Hopi, Pueblo, and possibly the Anasazi, to relocate from traditional areas, reducing their homeland and populations. Such migrations and recessions did occur in the distant past, but they are not all inclusive of every Indigenous nation.

Why did these Paiute related people move north and northeast?

It is very easy for interpreters of ethno-history and culture to look at a people at a certain place and time in history and suppose they had always lived and existed as currently observed. This, however, is inaccurate. The land is always changing, and for those who lived in a primitive culture, their life ways had to adapt to the conditions of nature surrounding them. Many times throughout the millenniums there would be population increases while at other times there would be population decreases. People had to move and adjust depending on resources. Some species would become extinct while others would arise and thrive. The aboriginal people of this country were of no exception. It is believed that such regressions and processions of life happened multiple times since the beginning of creation. These types of occurrences are almost impossible to track historically, which causes large grey areas to develop in Western Civilization's move to master history and its mysteries.

Primitive people?

The word primitive is not to be construed as something lacking or less than, although many early explorers, pioneers and conquerors viewed the Indigenous people of pre-America as such. We currently live in a world where the most civilized group of people are seen as the most intelligent. The pride and supposed intelligence of mankind has led to a moral decline of its people. In primitive culture the people were closer to the earth. They appreciated family, upheld chastity and condemned immorality. Men were to be men and women were to be women, all working together to uphold the balance of family and community. Primitives further had a closer relationship with their Creator as well as with all the elements that surrounded them. They were more active and ate more healthily. Putting the two in the scales of overall balance, which side would weight out to be the most beneficial, civilized or primitive? Both have their strengths and weaknesses, but is one actually better than the other? I am not ashamed nor do I feel less than someone else if I assume the title of primitive.

Viewing what is known of early geological ages and weather patterns, it is believed that the northern hemisphere of pre-North America was enveloped in an ice age until sometime around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. The majority of the northern half of the modern-day United States was as a tundra, being frozen and covered in ice, full of glaciers and deep snow packs. This made existence exceedingly difficult for any type of biological life forms dwelling in these frozen areas. But now let's look at what the southern half of what is known as the United States was like during this same time; it was a lush paradise. Vast lakes and inland seas; rivers and marshes, filled with many different types of animal, bird and plant species; many indigenous people inhabited these lush lands and thrived. A completely different culture and way of life was being

promoted and sustained. A rise in industry, arts, trade, inter-marriage and sharing of traditions and resources would have been a prominent feature of the time. Songs, stories, oral histories and technology would have been recited and shared. A renaissance of cultures would have reached its climax. But then climate slowly begins to change and the cultural elements of the people begin to slowly change with it.

With the heating up the environment, the glaciers of the north began to melt and recede leaving vast pluvial lakes and rivers, especially within the Great Basin. This further may have possibly led to the formation of the Grand Canyon and other monuments, a long-lasting erosion which left behind the beautiful rock formations in the southwest. As the southern hemisphere began to slowly dry up, the northern hemisphere began to slowly come alive. This change did not happen overnight, but gradually occurred throughout the millennia. Cultures changed and adapted through an extended process of time. As the lushness of the southwest began to be replaced with drought and loss of resources, the indigenous people also conformed to the changes of the environment around them. Many began to move and follow the recession of the glaciers to the north. This is more than likely when and where the modern Paiute people began to separate and develop as a distinct nation of people.

The “Numic Spread”?

Modern academics, anthropologists and researchers have coined the phrase, the “Numic Spread” to classify this procession of Paiute-related people throughout the Great Basin. This so called “Numic Spread” is in line with traditional knowledge and history; however, the many theories associated with this view have corrupted the truth of the matter. The problem with anthropologists is not the study of languages, culture and life ways; these are great truths which documented factual evidence among Native peoples. The main problem is when certain theories get published which are built upon fractured and incomplete foundational knowledge. These types of errorful assumptions have led to a degradation amongst academia, whom continue to build off of the same erroneous dissertations, discourses and documentations. Many of these proposed theories have distorted much of the truth of ancient pre-America.

The “Numic Spread”, which was first recognizably hypothesized by Sydney Lamb in 1958, states that “the distribution of Numic languages in the Great Basin and its fringes was the result of a population expansion originating in southeast California.” He further hypothesized this expansion beginning in A.D. 1000. Lamb came to his conclusions through the study of related languages and much of which he hypothesized is built off fact, however, traditional knowledge was not a factor in the supposition of his theory. The majority of anthropologists such as Lamb had previously been indoctrinated by previous theories such as the Bering Land Bridge Migration, which theorized that all inhabitants of aboriginal North and South America crossed into the Americas from Asia via Beringia some 18,000 years ago. All other hypothesis built off this theory were not allowed to contradict it but were forced to fit and build into it. Thus, the creation of an inaccurate supposition caused a fractured house of American Anthropology to be erected. Yet the inaccurate portrayal of the history of Native inhabitants in this country held no bearing on what the Natives themselves believed. We still continue to hold to our own history, culture and traditions, regardless of how “primitive” modern academia may view us.

The Original History of the Eastern Sierra

So during this age, known as the early Holocene, while the great glaciers of North America continued to recede into the north around 10,000 years ago, some of the oldest origin histories of the Paiute and Paiute related people emerge. One must attempt to imagine these histories being acted out during this time period; at the same time when ice, floods, and the dispersion of human beings were taking place.

Idza'a, the Coyote, who was not an animal but was a supernatural person, was attracted to a woman whom lived with her mother on an island amid a vast sea. Though many turns of events (which shall be omitted), he was able to secure her as his wife. They consummated their union and eventually the woman became pregnant. Coyote's wife, however, never showed any sign of being pregnant, her belly never grew. The woman and her mother began to make a large basket, the kind that resembled a water tight jug. When the women had finished their construction of this magnificent basket, somehow through the use of their power, they caused the unborn children of Coyote and his wife to be placed within the jug, and then they sealed it. Coyote was commanded to take the basket to a special place before he opened it, to a place where its contents would thrive and be well adapted to. Coyote began his journey but soon his curiosity overwhelmed him and he opened the jug. A vapor shot out and into the sky spreading out in all different directions. These were his children. They became the different nations of surrounding people. Coyote began to weep; he was so upset with himself for losing all of his children. Then he began to hear a noise coming from the jug. He dumped it out and there were two children which had been left; a boy and a girl. They were the weakest and ugliest of the bunch but Coyote was very proud of them. They remained there in that land.

This oral history is not only recited by the Northern Paiute but also among the different branches of Shoshone, Southern Paiute and even neighboring unrelated tribes. Of course there are many different adaptations of the event, but all continue to keep such a source of origin.

Now as we move north along the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Northern Paiute begin to narrate their own history since the great separation as they begin their procession as an individual people. One adaptation of the last history shows a very interesting note not contained in any others. It tells of a great wall of ice encountered which prohibited any more travel to take place into the northern sector. This same wall of ice is encountered in many other oral histories of the Paiute. This is not to be confused with the Sierra Nevada mountain range which continued to be glaciated on a large level until the recent past (recent in geological terms).

There was a lone beautiful woman which travelled from the south to the north. She travelled because she was desirous to escape the misfortunes of her past which lay in the deep south. She travelled until she came to a very large lake, in the center of which was an island. On the north side of this lake there was an enormous wall of ice which she could not cross over, so the woman was forced to stay there. The woman made herself a raft of tules and floated across the waters to this island and there she stayed, safe from the scary things that lived beyond the

lake. There were coyotes that lived near this wall of ice. She eventually married one. He was Coyote, but he was a man.

From this account of Paiute history arise many more branches of how this woman and Coyote began to populate this part of the country, as well as the many adventures their children faced. The lake in this citation is always referred to as modern day Mono Lake by the Paiutes. As life proceeded and time continued on, the children of this union became a larger body of people. This was also during the days when many spiritual beings, which the Paiute refer to as types of animals, lived amongst the people. During this great climax of procession a catastrophic event took place that wiped out almost all of life. The history is related as follows:

Rain came and continued to come. The waters of the river began to rise and rise higher and higher. The lakes began to fill with runoff and also rose higher and higher. People began to drown and to die, being carried away in the flood. As many people as were able to, ran to the tops of the hills. Many of these hills where the people sought refuge were also eventually flooded, and they all died. Only *Koodaggwa*, the sacred mountain of the Paiute, remained above the waters. The Sage Hen was there on this peak protecting the last of the flame from being extinguished. She covered it with her breast, which caused her feathers to be singed; there continues to be a black spot upon her breast from this event. The waters splashed upon the mountain and also caused her tail feathers to be pushed up; and they are still that way to this day. Many others had also escaped to *Koodaggwa*; their lives were spared. Eventually the rain ceased and little by little the waters went down. The animals and people which were saved aided the Hummingbird, which held a prominent role at this time, in the dispersing of seeds and the re-planting of the world. From this point on, many of the people remained in the high mountains for they feared to live in the valleys.

Koodaggwa is modernly referred to as Mount Grant. It continues to hold a prominent role in the creation histories of the Northern Paiute; all of which extensively go beyond this single account. Once the waters from this flood had receded and people had increased in population, more histories begin to arise. The people, for the most part, continued to live in the higher up hills. During this period, cannibalistic giants begin to emerge on a greater level, which held a dominant authority over the majority of people; also, histories relating to pine nuts, the seed of the *pinus monophyllia*, begin to show up. It was told that a large body of these spiritual animal type beings had set out to find pine nuts and bring them back to their own country. And so this large group headed out with *Isha*, the Wolf, as their leader. They travelled for many, many days until they arrived at an un-crossable wall of ice. It took the use of supernatural power for this group to move beyond this wall of ice and procure pine nuts and from there bring them back to this land here today. Scientists believe that pinion trees became established in the Bodie Hills around 5,000 years ago. Even though the exact date and times are extremely difficult and almost impossible to pinpoint, it does give us some sort of time frame to consider. Another time frame to keep in mind is that the biblical account of Noah's flood occurred some 4,500 years ago. Science and tradition rarely seem to agree. A humorous note is that science seems to be continuously updating their theories while oral, and documented, history remains continuous.

This next historic reference originates in what is now known as the Bodie Hills. It is an extremely cut version, as are the rest, for the sake of time and space. Not only have the Paiute people of modern day Bridgeport preserved the integrity of this history as well as the others, but Paiute bands extending far into the north along the Sierra Nevada and beyond have also preserved it.

Coyote's children were gathered together after harvesting many pine nuts. They set in to celebrate. They began to gamble and to play the traditional Paiute stick game within a large house. They were full of joy and excitement, making much noise. There was one lady who sat outside because she was on her moon. She heard in the distance a cannibalistic giant approaching. She attempted to warn the gamblers but they ignored her; they continued to make much noise. The woman hid outside. The giant known as *Tsanahoho* came to house and killed all of the people. The woman escaped and travelled north into Sweetwater where she was encountered by another giant named *Puuwihi*. She escaped, through many avenues, as she followed the East Walker north. She encountered the vast land of mass bones lying around; victims of the ancient flood. She came to a large lake (within modern day Mason Valley NV) and there made a raft of tules and sailed away continuing north. She sailed through *Koosi-baa'a* (ancient Carson Lake) and eventually arrived at *Wani-koodaggwa*, a mountain east of present day Fallon Nevada. There she landed and began to walk. She came upon the home of a very powerful man, a great hunter and provider. The two were married and produced children, all of which grew to become the great Paiute nation. She was henceforth known as the Mother of the People and the man as the Father of the People.

From *Wani-koodaggwa*, Fox peak east of Fallon, the Paiute people began to spread into the surrounding country; north into Oregon, northeast into Idaho, east to the Shoshone Mountains, south to Mono Lake and into Owens Valley, southwest into Bridgeport, Antelope Valley and Yosemite, and west to Carson Valley, Truckee Meadows and Honey Lake. They began to fill the valleys that the ancestors had been afraid to inhabit; they lived along the great rivers and large pluvial lakes. There has not been an inch of earth which has not been touched by the presence of a Paiute for their knowledge and experience was vast in the early days. Take note in the history how the woman made a raft to float across a lake that once covered modern day Mason Valley. The antiquity of these histories is great. All people that originated from this first man and woman (of course not the very first), are the progenitors of the Paiute.

Aboriginal Nations Other Than Paiute

In the course of the Paiute expansion from Mount Grant and Fox peak, no other races of Indigenous people were encountered such as the linguistically different Washoe and Pit River nations. In the west and southwest, the Yokut people of the western Sierra Nevada in modern day California were known since ancient times. There were however another group of people in the Great Basin which the ancient Paiutes referred to as their brothers; these were the *Sai*, or *Sai-dukadu*; the Cattail People. These brother people were said to have been the bad seed from the first mother and father; bad meaning they were very destructive, violent and warlike, some were even cannibalistic. Many of these people were said to have reddish colored hair also. In the beginning when the Father of the People separated his children, he placed one group near

modern day Lovelock Nevada; these were the *Sai*; the other group he placed near modern day Fallon Nevada; these are the Paiutes. These two groups grew and became large nations, they also became great adversaries of each other; many wars were fought amongst them. Eventually the Paiutes conquered the *Sai* and inhabited all the northern lands which the *Sai* had previously occupied. Some of these lands included the Truckee Meadows, Pyramid and Winnemucca Lakes as well as the Humbolt Sink (Lovelock Nevada) area. Even the Washoe, in their early creation histories, speak of these red haired people of modern day northern Nevada. Since the destruction of the original *Sai*, their name has been handed down to all northern area enemies of the Paiute. The name *Sai* is applied to the Pit River and Modoc nations of people in northern California and southern Oregon as well as to Umatilla and Nez Perce nations in northern Oregon and Washington.

Concerning the Washoe, they may have entered the Great Basin from the west at or near to the same time period after the Paiute expansion from Fox Peak. The center of their world was Lake Tahoe. The evidence of this Washoe intrusion into Paiute territory is the seemingly lack of singleness of origin histories; while at the same time they speak a very isolated language. Many of their oral citations are adapted Paiute histories such as “Coyote and the Water Bottle”, the “Woman and the Giants,” as well as the “Procession from Mount Grant.” Many of their oral histories lack antiquity and thus reflect a shortage of long lasting presence in the area. Some researchers have suggested that the Washoe were the original inhabitants of the western Great Basin and that the Paiutes pushed them farther and farther west as they expanded; one of the reasons being is the singleness of their language. But this is not reflected in aboriginal oral histories. The Paiutes contain no creation of the Washoe and neither do the histories reflect any encounters with them in the early days. The Washoe creation histories however, speak of the Paiute always being present.

It may very well be assumed that when foreign tribes from the northwest began to intrude into northern California displacing many earlier settled people, the Washoe may little by little have been pushed east into the Sierras, as were the Maidu and Pit River tribes further north, where they survived and defended their stronghold of Lake Tahoe. This intrusion by northern tribes is very well reflected in the language diversity of California as well as in the oral histories of the earlier established Natives. One must also consider the time era when the Sierra Mountains began to become un-glaciated and were traversed and inhabited by people. All these geological events play a major role in the establishment of Indigenous Nations. The Washoe are known to be the aboriginal people of Lake Tahoe as the Paiutes are known to be the aboriginal people of the Eastern Sierra and the western half of present day Nevada. Of course Paiute borders went west beyond the Sierras and into the foothills near the Central Valley, but they circumvented Washoe lands. Any claim beyond these boundaries rely solely on suggestion and lack sufficient proof to be substantiated and published. The Paiute are the aboriginal people of this land.

One must truly consider the ground on which we walk and live; it holds a deep history that did not simply begin when Euro-Americans stepped foot on this Native soil. The expanse of our traditional land and vastness of our existence which has been integrated into the archive of the earth itself extremely predates the thoughts and developmental understanding of those who desire to categorize a living force into the four walls of western science’s imagination. To visualize the truth, one must desire it and look beyond what has only been gazed upon through a clouded lens. One must look beyond self and pride to realize that everything one desires of

knowledge and wisdom cannot be procured solely through one's own understanding and interpretation of what has been presently unearthed. The aboriginal people of this country desire the truth of who we really are to be known and properly regarded by those who have falsely documented us and disregarded us as though we are something intellectually less because we are different. May the essence of *Tammi Naa 'a*, the One True God, lead us in our quest for truth and guide us in the protection and preservation of our homeland in which he has allowed us to live in as we also learn to respect each other during this process.

Poohwa