

SOUTHERN PAIUTE PILGRIMAGE AND RELATIONSHIP FORMATION¹

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Southern Paiute religious specialists make pilgrimages to powerful places and landscapes. These religious events create new relationships and community that are not bounded by normal social constraints. While Turner's *communitas* focuses on people, this research argues that for Southern Paiute people, *communitas* actually is created between people, places, and objects with bonds of expectations and commitments. Southern Paiutes believe that the world is alive and all elements have agency and must be respected. (Southern Paiute, pilgrimage, *communitas*, cultural landscapes)

During the past 50 years, many social scientists have focused their research on communities' religious practices, and particularly how and why people engage in pilgrimage. Pilgrimage involves a person or a group of people traveling a great distance to shrines and prayer places to prepare for their ceremonial destination place to seek spiritual enlightenment. These journeys can be long and difficult, and the participants endure some hardship. In Southern Paiute culture, for example, pilgrimage participants formed relationships not only with each other (people-people) but with the places they visited (people-place), and the ceremonial objects (people-object) used in ritual during their journey. Southern Paiute people have long asserted that these relationships need to be considered in order to understand pilgrimage and the places that comprise its landscapes. It is important to note that due to a near total loss of their traditional territory, Southern Paiute people have not been able to engage in pilgrimage as they did prior to colonization and encroachment. Despite this, Southern Paiute still possess deep cultural understanding about pilgrimage ceremonies, places, and relationships.

Southern Paiute pilgrimages traditionally were unique ceremonial and ritual actions occurring beyond normal worship and were not a part of daily cultural activity, like prayers said to greet the morning sun. In Southern Paiute society, only a select group of shamans (*Puha'gants*) made pilgrimages, which they did on behalf of the entire community, as well as for themselves. Those who went on these journeys were medicine men or medicine men in training. These spiritual journeys were not to be taken by everyone because there were great physical and spiritual risks involved. While ceremonial activities such as ritual cleansing and daily prayers occurred in a pilgrim's home community, most of the ritual associated with pilgrimage took place far from daily living space in controlled settings along the trails.

This frame of understanding pilgrimage is different from the current discussions of pilgrimage studies. Scholars such as Coleman and Eade (2004), Dubish and Winkelman (2008), and Margry (2008) regard pilgrimages to religious and secular places as common practices open to all members of a society and occur frequently. While this may be true for many groups around the world, it is not true for societies like the Southern Paiute. In Southern Paiute culture, pilgrimages are best understood through Victor Turner's (1969, 1974) model that focuses on people's transition physically and spiritually from a secular existence into a heightened spiritual or sacred state by traveling to special places for knowledge and guidance to achieve a sort of balance for the individual and the community. As Turner noted, it is important to examine relationship formation in order to understand pilgrimage ceremonies. While Turner's (1974) concept of *communitas* focuses on community formation with pilgrimage participants, it does not account for the importance of people's relationships with places and ceremonial objects, which are key components for the Southern Paiute. The research presented here builds on Turner's work and expands the community definition to include all aspects of pilgrimage in Southern Paiute culture. Southern Paiute people stipulate that when Paiute *Puha'gants* sought *Puha* (power) and knowledge, the people-people interactions were not the only important component to pilgrimage. People-place and people-object interactions were equally important and necessary for pilgrimage completion.

This essay draws upon ethnographic data collected between 1998 and 2012, during six federally funded ethnographic studies. The analysis is based on 740 interviews with tribal representatives from all eight Southern Paiute tribes.

SOUTHERN PAIUTE EPISTEMOLOGY AND PUHA

Tilley (1994) holds that people are immersed in a world of places and aim to understand and preserve places as recorders of human experiences. These experiences are constructed in movement, historic memory, encounter, and association (Tilley 1994:15). Cultural narratives that link people to place are at the core of ontological and epistemological understandings, historic memory, and traditional ecological knowledge (Tilley 2004, 2010). For Southern Paiutes, places retain memories of human interactions in the same manner that people retain memories of places and associated interactions. The memories held by both places and people influence how socio-ecological interactions take place.

Understanding the relationships between people and their environment is fundamental to understanding the cultural logic involved in ritual performances like pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are important to a society's cultural

connections to the local environment, and “the incorporation of pilgrimage into ritual sequences affirms the collective valuation of particular places and the social memories inscribed in the landscape” (Carroll 2007:70).

The ways in which societies relate to their environments are grounded in their epistemologies. In Southern Paiute society, relationships and deep connections with their environment were formed during creation. To Southern Paiutes, the universe is alive and everything is interconnected. The universe is alive in the same way that humans are alive, and possesses most of the same anthropomorphic characteristics as well. The universe has discrete physical components, such as power and elements.

Southern Paiute people’s belief that everything has Puha shapes how they engage with the landscape and how they approach pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is based on Puha acquisition, spiritual transformation of Puha’gants, and building relationships and communities. Puha is like the movement of water in a watershed, it flows from the point of creation to every corner of traditional Southern Paiute territory. When Puha is dispersed, it clusters in narrow and constricted places, stone water tanks, mountain peaks, caves, and where hydrological systems converge. Puha also is found at places associated with volcanic activity, such as hot springs, basalt lava flows, and volcanic mountains. The presence of volcanism indicates that the earth is being reborn through Puha traveling to the surface from deep inside the earth.

SOUTHERN PAIUTE COMMUNITAS FORMATION

Types of relationships relate to how Puha is distributed to places and objects and how Southern Paiutes view themselves within the universe. This keeps the universe in a state of dynamic equilibrium (Bean 1976). Humans, in order to engage with a place or resource to use in a ceremony or in daily activities, need to respect that resource or the place’s Puha by praying to it and leaving offerings. Southern Paiute *communitas* is formed from the establishment and maintenance of these synergistic relationships through movement along pilgrimage trails. Time and movement are essential components in a discussion of pilgrims engaged in ritual performance during pilgrimage and in *communitas* formation.

Time

For Southern Paiute people, time determined when ceremonies could occur and when pilgrimages took place. Tribal representatives state that, traditionally, pilgrimage activities took place during the warmer times of the year, which allowed for access to the high mountain peaks (Van Vlack 2012). In addition to the seasonality of pilgrimage, Puha places had to be visited

during specific times of the day. They had to be visited during the early morning hours in conjunction with the rising sun because it is the time of day when the Puha of a place is the most intense. When visiting a place in the early morning, pilgrims not only prayed and left offerings to the place, but also prayed to the sun as part of their morning rituals.

Movement

As human interaction is the most important aspect of *communitas* formation and the maintenance of cultural landscapes, Southern Paiute pilgrims needed to engage places to develop a cognition of them and the spaces surrounding them in order to have access to sacred places. Trail networks provided people with the most direct links to places, resources, and communities. They facilitated the movement of people to secular places and those associated with pilgrimage. For Southern Paiutes, and other indigenous groups, trails were and continue to be closely associated with the sacred.

Tilley (1994) describes movement along trails as equal to reciting a religious text in a ritual, and that if a ritual text is not spoken, then it is not recalled, and thus a trail is not traveled. Walking and spiritually moving along the trail is an enactment of the synergistic relationships between places, resources, and people, which combine to produce something greater than its individual components. He also notes that repeated use of trails represent "spatiotemporal linkages," which serve as templates for all movement and for relationship formation and preservation (Tilley 1994).

Traveling along trails had ceremonial and medicinal aspects to it because movement constitutes part of the *communitas* formation. As Southern Paiute pilgrims traveled along the trail and interacted with places, they might have received a song or a spirit helper, which were present throughout the journey and later. The song and spirit helper became central to the pilgrims and linked them to places forever.

Communitas formation developed from relationships built with pilgrims and their ceremonial landscape. The relationships pilgrims formed with each other and with place carry the expectations and commitments to persist. From a Southern Paiute perspective, when Paiute people visited places and interacted with them, the places remembered the stories, prayers, and songs of thousands of years of visits and use. Offerings found at these places were the physical manifestations of those interactions and Southern Paiute people established *communitas* with these locations. The ceremonial interactions with the place, the landforms, the rocks, the animals, plants, and other natural elements were parts of the pilgrimage, and community formation.

Movement along trails was both physical and spiritual. Trail travel also is associated with pilgrims' spiritual transition from daily life into a ceremonial

existence, and is referred to as liminality (Turner 1969:94–6; Van Gennep 1909). Southern Paiute pilgrims moved into a liminal state throughout the three dimensions of the Southern Paiute world. There are moments during pilgrimage when pilgrims leave the physical world and enter into a spiritual one. This transition most frequently occurred at petroglyphs and rock paintings. For example, during a pilgrimage to an old volcano in southern Nevada, pilgrims sought the Puha from a mountain sheep-head petroglyph by entering into the image through a hole in the rock where the mountain sheep's eye was located. Pilgrims inserted their finger, covered in red paint (*oompi*), into the eye hole. This act transitioned them into the rock and its spiritual dimension. Objects and places also moved between dimensions. Southern Paiute people explain that Puha places are dynamic and connect the different levels of the universe to the physical present. Places such as the Spring Mountains have been described by Southern Paiute religious leaders as moving between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

Prayers associated with visiting places, leaving offerings, and vision questing connect the people to each other, to the places, and to the objects used. As the pilgrims traveled and visited places together, and engaged with objects along the trail, the bonds of *communitas* grew, strengthened, and remained forever.

People-People Relationships

The Southern Paiute group pilgrimages were important moments when young Puha'gants were able to interact with each other and gain knowledge from older and more experienced Puha'gants during ceremonial events. These groups were small, with as few as two or as many as six people. An older, more experienced Puha'gant led the group and took responsibility for guiding the younger ones through the pilgrimage. They also taught the youth how to engage with places along the trail. A Southern Paiute leader described this interaction:

The men who were taking them to teach them and to oversee that they were safe. I'm sure that they had their training. Preparing these males for that and whatever they were coming up on, and these men who were taking them. In ceremony, you know when you're going into ceremony, and the males in charge [are] there to watch over everything, whether you get sick or even maybe you went into a say, what we would call a trance, or something of that nature; they're there to make sure you're okay. In any sense of whatever may have happened or occur, whether you come upon, say you may come upon spirits, they have to deal with that. So the men in charge, or the medicine men in charge or the leader, he would have to be prepared to deal with a lot of different situations. Even say, you came upon a rattlesnake ... there's certain ways to deal with that, there's certain prayers to be given. There's certain messages to receive and he would be trained to deal with all of that. So as far as the leader,

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definitely, he would have the knowledge and the training of how to deal with the different situations. (Van Vlack 2012:296)

There were instances when larger groups needed to embark on pilgrimages. One Southern Paiute elder suggested that these groups contained 10 to 20 people. He believed the larger group provided pilgrims with physical and spiritual protection, but the exact roles and functions of the larger group during pilgrimage are unclear.

The large group pilgrimages of other native communities in the southwest provide a sense of how these activities operated with the Southern Paiutes. For example, the Tohono O'odham sent young men from each village on an eight-day pilgrimage to the Gulf of California. They followed a trail across the desert and stopped at various places to perform ritual activities that assisted in preparing them for their destination. The older religious leaders who traveled with them spoke words of encouragement to the young men. As part of their ritual performance, the pilgrims used a dialect of the Tohono O'odham language reserved for such ceremonies. When the pilgrims reached the Gulf of California, they collected sea salt and performed a series of ceremonies to ensure that the ocean winds brought the vital summer rains. The rains signaled a period of renewal and the start of the O'odham year (Underhill 1997).

Younger Southern Paiute Puha'gants learned ceremonial knowledge from the older ones in small increments. A contemporary Southern Paiute religious leader described this mentoring process:

A great medicine man like that, he would mentor a boy. And he would spend one or two nights with him, telling him different stories about how the Coyote did this or the Coyote did that, and the wolf did this, and somebody else did that. And they got here. They went to this place, they went to that place. And he acquired this there and did this there. And the medicine man would give that boy the knowledge and he will to go to these places and see if he could acquire the power. (Van Vlack 2012:297)

The younger Puha'gants needed to be taught how to properly handle and use the Puha they were acquiring during pilgrimage. If not, the Puha could cause serious physical and spiritual harm. There were times when the experienced Puha'gants aided the younger ones in understanding a song or *tumpituxwinap* (rock peckings and paintings). There were times when the youth experienced things during the journey that they did not understand, and the experienced Puha'gants would explain what had occurred.

Experienced Puha'gants would first introduce the group to places upon arrival. The experienced ones led the group in prayer and left offerings. While doing so, the Puha'gants showed the others how to properly respect and enter a place. This action was sometimes given to the younger Puha'gants when the older ones believed that it was appropriate. For young Puha'gants, pilgrimages

provided the opportunities to learn how to engage places and use Puha properly. The young Puha'gants learned how to prepare medicines for use along the trail and how and where to leave offerings such as red jasper, obsidian, pottery, or water.

Pilgrimages provided experienced Puha'gants with opportunities to acquire songs, medicines, and spirit helpers that are more powerful, especially during times when they were unable to correct problems facing their communities, districts, and nation. Since power acquisition is a life-long process, as Puha'gants aged they were better able to use and control Puha. For example, only the most experienced Puha'gants could acquire a water baby as a spirit helper because they knew how to handle this very powerful and dangerous spirit being.

When the pilgrims reached their destination, the ones seeking a vision needed the group's support to be successful. The group would supervise a vision seeker from a distance to make sure he did not become physically ill or injured. The group also prayed for the seeker so a vision could be achieved. Afterwards, the group would help the vision seeker off the mountain top and prepare him for the return home.

The journeys to high mountain peaks were difficult treks that required abstaining from water and food and required intense physical and spiritual purification. This was a group-learning experience that taught how to interact with places, handle Puha, and acquire knowledge to use in ceremonies. Some Southern Paiute people today liken this experience to extreme endurance events. Pilgrims had to physically suffer to prove they could handle not only the journey but also the Puha and knowledge of it.

People-Place Relationships

The relationships people form with places during pilgrimage was an aspect of Southern Paiute *communitas* formation. The pilgrim-place relationship influenced how people ceremonially interacted with stopping places along the trail and what the pilgrims took from or gave to such places during these ceremonies. The meanings given to places are formed through people's acknowledgements of their special environmental properties, and places become reshaped through the production of meaning given them through unique events (Tilley 1994, 2010). In Southern Paiute culture, Puha is dispersed in a complex network of relationships among all elements of the universe. At various points in this network, Puha gathers and creates powerful places that people identify with and commemorate during ceremony. Places are constructed because they are at the nexus of human interactions with both the physical and spiritual worlds (Zedeño 2000). Puha'gants acquired Puha through spiritual and physical interactions with places, similar to that of other

groups (Stoffle and Zedeño 2002). Powerful places are identified by Southern Paiute people by its geological composition and shape, its location in relation to other powerful features, and the presence of ceremonial symbols such as rock peckings and paintings and ritually deposited items.

People-Object Relationships

The relationships pilgrims formed with objects used along the trails are a third component of Southern Paiute *communitas* and contributed to a successful pilgrimage (Van Vlack 2012). Objects were meant to describe the plants and animals used, offerings deposited, water, and minerals collected for use. Objects used during pilgrimage had many functions and assisted the pilgrims in acquiring knowledge and *Puha*. Pilgrims, as a result, formed complex relationships with all the objects used. The connections people have to objects are in both thought and action, and objects must be experienced in the same manner socially and culturally as places and people. How materials or objects are used in places is fundamental because objects exert their agency or authority in relation to how people engage them (Tilley 2004).

Offerings

One aspect of the pilgrim-object relationship is the process by which pilgrims left ritually deposited materials along the pilgrimage trail. There were places where pilgrims left pieces of obsidian, red and yellow jasper, broken pottery, chert, and other cultural objects. The times when the pilgrims chose to leave these offerings were key moments in the ceremony. These included the times when the pilgrims saw their destination for the first time or when they encountered the trail's water source. These moments were critical for place making and gaining *Puha*. Pilgrims placed offerings at a chosen spot and prayed to the creator and to the surrounding places (particularly their destination). These offerings served in the past and serve today as the physical representation of the pilgrims' prayers and are a link between people and place.

According to Southern Paiute belief, the offerings contain the prayers forever and continue to emit their *Puha* long after the pilgrims finished the pilgrimage. The offerings left at these places mark Southern Paiute history and cultural memory.

Plants

A relationship between pilgrims and traditionally used plants was another part of the people-object relationship established during pilgrimage. Plants are

believed to have human qualities and should be treated with great respect. The way plants are treated can influence how they chose to use their Puha. For instance, if a plant felt that it was not respected, it could decide to not offer its Puha and medicine to someone. In some cases, a plant or a group of plants can decide to leave an area. To show their respect to the plants, Puha'gants talked to them, explaining why the plants were needed in a ceremony. Then the Puha'gants left offerings to the plants. Water was the preferred offering because water provided sustenance for plants to grow. If the plants approved, they offered themselves to the pilgrims. The plants were then used in medicines for purification and vision questing. Sometimes plants, like Indian tobacco and sage, were gathered along the trail and later used as offerings at trail stops. Plants were brought back to the pilgrims' home communities to be used in doctoring ceremonies.

The relationships formed between pilgrims and plants are based on respect and the acknowledgement of each other's Puha. When plants gave themselves to pilgrims for medicine, they bonded. The plants recognized the importance of the pilgrims' journey to acquire Puha and that the journey was needed to keep everything in balance. The pilgrims also knew that their journey would fail without the Puha obtained from the medicine plants.

Animals

As the pilgrims moved along, they depended on various animals, physically and spiritually, to aid them in handling certain types of Puha and conducting certain ceremonies. Puha'gants had beings known as spirit helpers, known as *tututuguuvi*, to aid them in certain ceremonial practices such as curing or rain making. They are generally non-human, animal, and visible only to those who possess them. A medicine man's area of expertise was usually linked to his spirit helper. Spirit helpers are summoned through song. Puha'gants called upon different spirit helpers depending upon the types of ceremonies that were being conducted. For example, the mouse and the packrat were most helpful in doctoring because they were able to "steal the disease away." Mountain sheep spirit helpers were associated with rain making. The medicine men having mountain sheep spirit helpers dreamed of the mountain sheep, the associated songs, and how to perform the particular ceremony.

Water

Water connects places, people, and objects through flowing across a landscape. Southern Paiute people frequently used water in ritual cleansing, medicine preparations, and as offerings. Water must to be respected or else it

can become upset and the water source can dry up; thus hurting everything that depends on it for survival. Water being the fundamental element for all life, pilgrims respected water sources by bringing offerings to thank the water for being there and providing its medicine to the pilgrims. This was evident when pilgrims visited hot springs for purification ceremonies and when they visited water sources along the trails.

Each water source along pilgrimage trails had ritually deposited items in its vicinity. Pilgrims cared for these water sources. When they visited springs, they cleared away brush and overgrowth to sustain the flow. This ensured that plants and animals would continue to return to that place in the future. In some cases, rock tanks along the trails were filled with sediment and debris preventing water from collecting. As part of their stewardship responsibilities and the relationships they have with the water sources, pilgrims cleaned out the tanks so the water could return and be drinkable.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Cultural landscapes is a concept explaining connections and relationships human societies form with their environment; that is, the complex intersections among people, material culture, and geography (Hicks, McAtackney, and Fairclough 2007). For many American Indian people, these intersections are grounded in their epistemologies and oral traditions (Anyon, et al. 1996; Basso 1996; Deloria 2003). Cultural landscapes develop from a people's historical memory. Their cultural understanding of the land is transferred over generations (Hicks, McAtackney, and Fairclough 2007; Stoffle, Toupal, and Zedeño 2002) through oral traditions and ceremony. Value is given to places because of the type of experiences or interactions people have with them (Zedeño 2000).

The pilgrimage and its cultural landscape are part of a ritual performance directed towards the transformation of a pilgrim and the world around him or her (Turner 1969). Each ritual that takes place along a pilgrimage trail is a performative and transformative act aimed at communicating and enacting a greater truth (Tuan 1997). Walker (1995, 1999) adds that ritual involves an action or a sequence of actions designed to achieve an observable or measurable transformation that will have a lasting effect. Pilgrims perform such rituals in special places. Sequential prayers, songs, and activities must be performed at specific places and times on the pilgrimage trail for pilgrims to be properly prepared to reach their destination. Pilgrimage destination places or centers are physically and socially separate from pilgrims' home communities, and are sacred areas that only select individuals are allowed to visit and use.

For the Southern Paiutes, places in their traditional homeland are connected through songs, oral history, human relations, ceremony, and both

physical and spiritual trails. Pilgrimage ceremonies in Southern Paiute society depended upon *communitas* formation in order for the pilgrims to gain knowledge and Puha. The relationships formed are based on respect and in understanding that pilgrims need to draw Puha from each other, from places, and from objects in order to handle what they might receive from their destination place. The Puha'gants traveling together needed each other to endure the long and difficult journey and to learn together.

For Southern Paiutes, every event happens for a reason and not by chance. They believe that every movement, action, and reaction has a purpose. The movements along the pilgrimage trail, the prayers, offerings, and pilgrim bonding were part of what Puha'gants embarking on this journey anticipated and planned in order to acquire *communitas*.

In Southern Paiute epistemology, the universe and all its elements are alive, have agency, and influence how people interact with those elements. A person's behavior determines how a place or an object will respond. During pilgrimage, Puha'gants knew that places and objects are key factors in ritual due to their Puha, so Puha'gants need be attentive and respectful of the places visited and the objects used. The ways these relationships were negotiated through prayers and depositing offerings affected the success of the pilgrimage and the ceremonies performed by those with the newly acquired Puha. Places and objects knew that the outcomes of a successful pilgrimage would benefit all the people who used them. These synergistic relationships caused the formation of deep spiritual connections and bonds, which are required in order to keep the world in a balanced state.

NOTE

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