

Tribal Identities in Petroglyphs of the Western United States

Carol Patterson

Tribal identities are often based upon what primary food substances were harvested and eaten most readily. Though many tribes of prehistoric indigenous people are put into general categories such as “hunter/gatherers” and “agriculturalists,” there are distinctions within these generalities that distinguish one tribe from another. Many tribes use their food base as a means of identifying themselves as a culture. In today’s society there are food groups that are associated with certain cultures, like those who eat primarily pasta, or beans and chili, or rice and fish, or fried chicken and mashed potatoes. What is preferred as a staple becomes a cultural identifier for a tribe or nationality.

Shoshone

For the Colorado Plateau, several linguistic groups were generally hunter/gatherers. The Paiute, Ute and Shoshone distinguished themselves by different food groups that were their staple food source. Figure 1 is a map of the nineteenth century territory. The labeled arrows show seasonal movement and acquired food resources. Modern reservations and major reservoirs are indicated in tone. Camas Creek is located in central Idaho. The Northern Paiute and Shoshone harvested the camas plants in Idaho particularly where the first panel is located. The petroglyphs found at this site date around A.D. 1100-1400 with archaic sites as well as historical panels mixed together. In this remote area, there are few trees, mostly rough and barren hills with scattered springs that create marshes and refuges for game and waterfowl. Camas Creek is named so perhaps for its abundance of camas growing along the creeks, springs, and hill sides. The blue, edible camas favors the low marsh land, while the white, poisonous plants prefer the dry hillsides. If not in bloom, it would seem difficult to determine one species from the other. The following petroglyph panels describe many aspects of harvesting and processing the camas plant. The plant itself is not depicted realistically, but instead is described in “words.” The words create a unique image that, to a non-reader, is entirely unrecognizable.

From my rudimentary knowledge of sign language, I was able to identify many of the “words” in these panels. There is a high degree of repetition, showing the same symbol over and

over in variation and in a slightly different context to allow the reader to fully understand the meaning of the symbol. I was further convinced, a year later, by several other Indian people who were also able to recognize the “words” from their knowledge of sign language. The validation of the interpretation of these symbols comes also from the geographical context with beds of camas plants, the archaeological evidence of camps used over hundreds of years for harvesting camas and historical documentation of the tribes who frequented these sites to harvest camas.

Figure 2 is a panel describing the camas harvest.

Figure 3 is another explanation of the camas plant. Here it is described as something that grows, “the same” or repetitively over and over again (every year). Figure 3a is a graphic of this concept of “growing up.”

Figure 4 is a panel that simply identifies the camas plant using the words “emerging out,” which combines “leaves” and another symbol, “crossing over,” according to Paiute idioms means to come to maturity. (Ibid.) Figure 4a is a graphic representation of this image.

The symbol breakdowns are given in Table 1 along with a contextual explanation for a few of the basic symbols discussed in this paper. The first column is the graphic found in the Shoshone camas petroglyph sites. The second column is a description of the symbol. The final column is the sign language basis for the symbols.

Figure 5 is a camas plant shown growing above a crack that represents the ground line. Below the ground is the bulb of the plant. The arced lines are wider apart in this panel and refer to “separate,” a process involved in harvesting the camas. One must separate the leaves from the bulb before it is prepared for eating (Martineau conversation 1996).

Figure 6 is a panel that depicts a person with arms in the sign language gesture of “lifting out.” The legs are in the gesture that shows “stepping up” from below the ground line (crack) to indicate that what the person is holding came from below the ground. The image in this panel is of a person lifting something wet and dripping from the earth. Figure 6a is a graphic depicting the body gestures and relationship to the crack.

In the marshy areas in front of these panels are fields of camas growing. All were in bloom, like pools of blue everywhere, ready for harvest. Figure 7 is a color photo of these fields of camas at the foot of these panels.

Table 1

Image	Explanation	Sign language equivalent
	Something that grows like a bulb below the ground. The ears are separated from the bulb.	sign language "separate" "ears, leaves" bulb below the ground
	Something that emerges out from the ground. It crosses over, or makes a transition from one form to another	Sign language: "emerge out" "cross over" "mature" "transform"
	Something that grows up from the ground. A person sits among them and with hands that get muddy, digs them up.	Sign language: "Growing up" "sitting among them" "muddy or bloody hand"
	Ground line is distinguished by the crack. Spatial positioning and rock incorporation help to clarify what the image represents.	Sign language: "emerge out and separate" "ears" "leaves"
	Ute panel north of Green River, Utah shows the "wild carrot" and the concept of tubers as well as layers of skins.	Sign language: "emerge out" "arms" & "feet" extensions "layers of skin"
	Two Ute panels have similar symbols that represent something emerging out of the horizontal ground.	Sign language: "emerge out" from the "ground"
	Two Ute panels have similar symbols that represent something "emerging out" and growing upward. The "leaf" on one side indicates a plant.	Sign language: "grow" "plant"

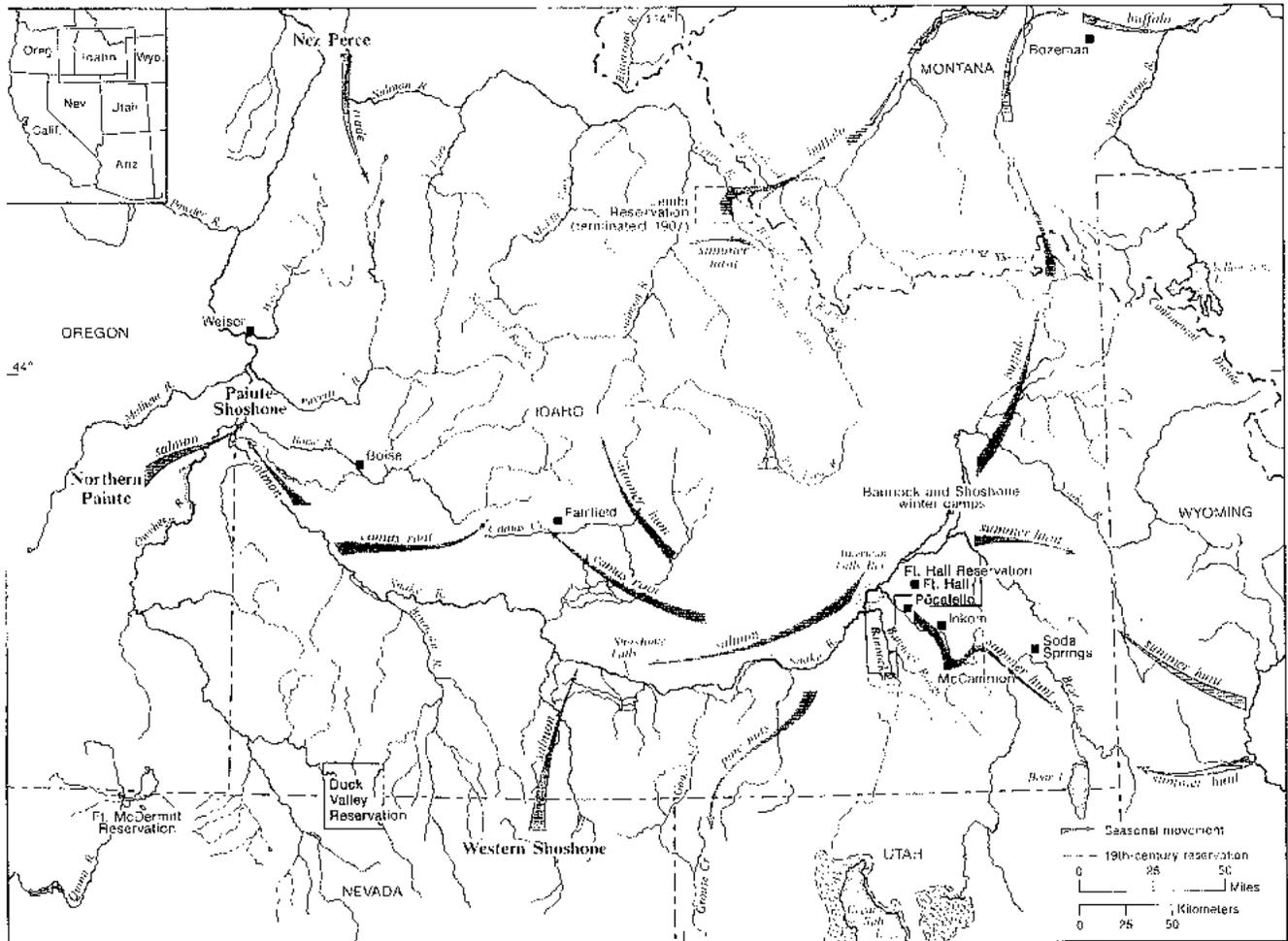


Figure 1. Nineteenth-century territory of the Western Shoshone showing seasonal movement for food resources.(after HNAI 1986:286)



Figure 2. Camus Creek harvest panel.

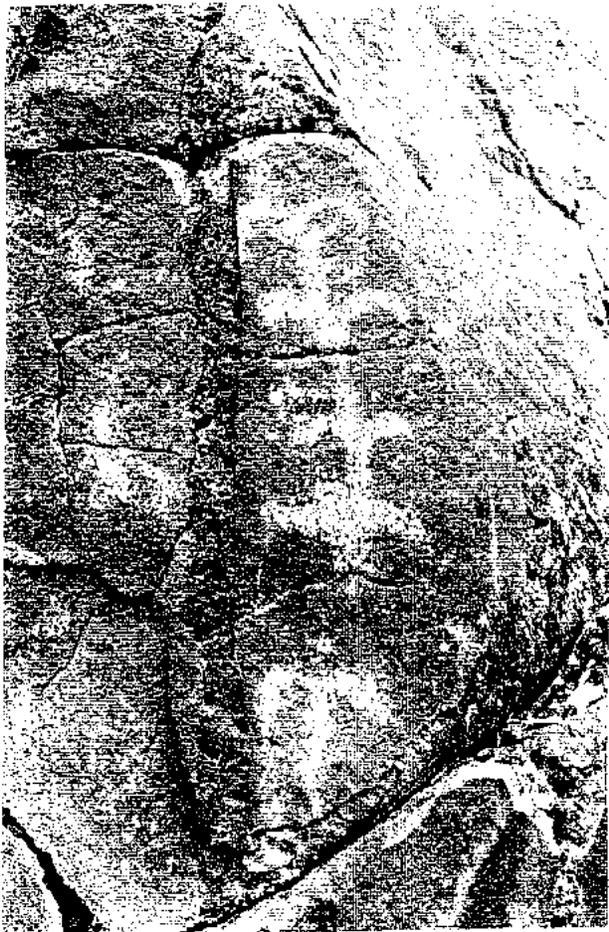


Figure 3. Camus plant growing back each year.

Ute

The Parusanuch and Yampa Utes originally occupied the river valleys of the White and Yampa Rivers and North Park and Middle Park in the mountains of northern Colorado, with their territories extending westward to eastern Utah. Under the 1868 treaty the Parusanuch and Yampa bands, then called the Yampa and Grand River Utes, came under the jurisdiction of an agency at Meeker, Colorado, called White River. These two northern Colorado bands later came to be known as the White River Utes. In the 1880 treaty council the White River Utes, who had participated in the Meeker Massacre, were forced to sell all their land in Colorado and were moved under armed escort to live on the Uinta Reservation (Callaway, Janetski, and Stewart 1986, 339).

The Utes developed a taste for buffalo and are identified with many of the cultural aspects associated with this food source. Ute petroglyph panels that date from the late 1700s into the mid-1800s depict Ute horsemen and buffalo. Each Ute band was named after something characteristic of the landscape or identified a particular plant that they liked to eat. Among the Ute names are *Kumoo* 'tuhkuts, Rabbit Eaters; the *Pawguh* 'utuhkuts, Fish Eaters; and the *Yumparika*, of White River are the Wild Caraway Eaters. The *Yumparika* are said to have originally lived in eastern Utah in the Green River area and up in through Nine-Mile Canyon, northeast of Price. They favored the White River areas for hunting in the summer and were eventually settled there permanently on the reservation by the American government. Figure 8 is a map showing the range and migrations of the Utes at the time of contact.

The Utes at the time of contact inhabited the greater area of Utah and western Colorado. Figure 9 is a petroglyph from a site north of Green River. Figure 10 is a detail of the central image that depicts something that has several layers of skin and “emerges” out of the ground. It has multiple extensions as well as “feet.” These are characteristics of the tubers harvested by the Utes. The panel also depicts a buffalo that was hunted by the Utes and appears in many Ute panels. (See Table 1.)

Figure 11 is Warrior Ridge in Nine-Mile Canyon. These panels identify the Utes of the White River bands, *Parusanuch* and *Yampa*, Wild Carrot Eaters. These bands claim the White River area and now reside near Meeker, Colorado. The symbol for “emerge out” is again used to describe a plant that grows out of the ground and has a bulb at the bottom. Figure 12 is the image



Figure 3a. Graphic of the camus plant conveying the idea of repeating growth year after year.



Figure 4a. Graphic of a camus plant using the “emerging out” symbol. “Ears” represent leaves, and cross bar represents “crossing over to maturity.”



Figure 6a. Graphic of a figure holding something wet. One foot is below the crack, the other is stepping up.



Figure 4. A camus plant described by the “emerging out” symbol.



Figure 5. Camus plant with the bulb “underground”. The crack is utilized in this panel to indicate the ground line, and the lightly pecked “bulb” is drawn below the crack.



Figure 6. Is an image of a person carrying something wet and dripping



Figure 7. Camus plant in bloom.



Figure 9. Ute panel from a site north of Green River, Utah



Figure 10. Close up of central image in Ute panel.

of a plant and human with arms and a head that indicates the tuber may be a name for the "people." The panel also shows a shield figure of a Ute surrounded by enemies of another tribe with shields.

Figure 13 is the wild carrot depicted in these panels, *Cymopterus acaulis* and *Cymopterus montanus* of the Colorado Plateau. *Perideridia gairdneri*, Yampa was known to be a favorite tuber of the Eastern Ute, eaten raw, baked in earth ovens and dried, ground on a metate, and stored in buckskin bags. *Cymopterus spp.*, biscuit root was eaten raw in spring but peeled, boiled, baked or roasted and ground in summer.

The transition to the horse culture is evident from the petroglyphs found in the Book Cliffs, and these Ute panels depict historical events as well as containing signatures of their tribal identity. Figure 14 and Figure 15 are Ute panels that make reference to their tribal identity with the "emerge out" plant symbol placed on or inside the horses. Figure 16 and Figure 17 also contain the wild carrot symbol. (See Table 1.)

Plains

The Plains tribes east of the Rocky Mountains hunted buffalo as well, calling them and driving them off cliffs as part of their livelihood. This panel at Hickland depicts the Buffalo Cult, describing a buffalo jump and prayers to the great spirit to bring back the buffalo. Figure 18 is a panel found in Hickland Springs, along the Purgatoire River in southeastern Colorado. It dates around 1600-1800 A.D. Figure 18a is a graphic representation with the following explanation:

The large figure in this panel (a) is depicted with the hand gesture for "calling" or "doing." In context with the buffalo, this refers to "calling" the Buffalo. This figure is found in several areas associated with buffalo jumps in southeast Colorado. The buffalo with the arrow going inside (b) to the heart is symbolic of asking or praying that the arrows of the People find the heart of the Buffalo. But this buffalo is backing off. The front feet are braced forward in a gesture to indicate reluctance to come to the People.

A second figure (c) has been pecked over the leg of the large figure. Both arms are raised and the penis is exaggerated, representing fertility. Underneath is a water symbol to convey the idea of fertility of the land, "rain that brings the grass will bring the buffalo."

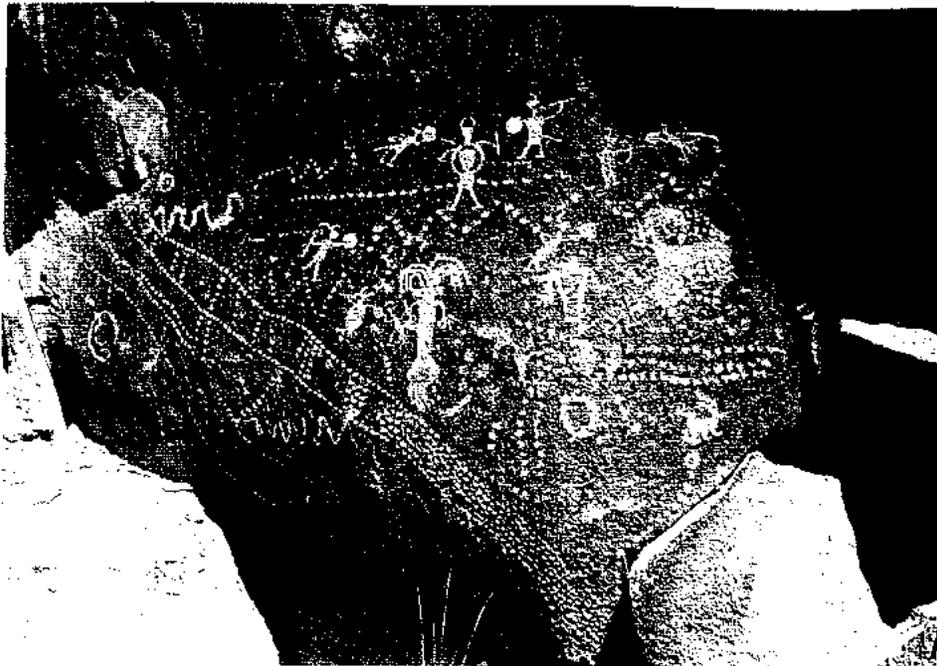


Figure 11. Carrot/human figure in a Ute panel on Warrior Ridge, in 9 Mile Canyon northeast of Price, Utah.

Figure 12. Closeup of carrot/human figure in Ute panel on Warrior Ridge.

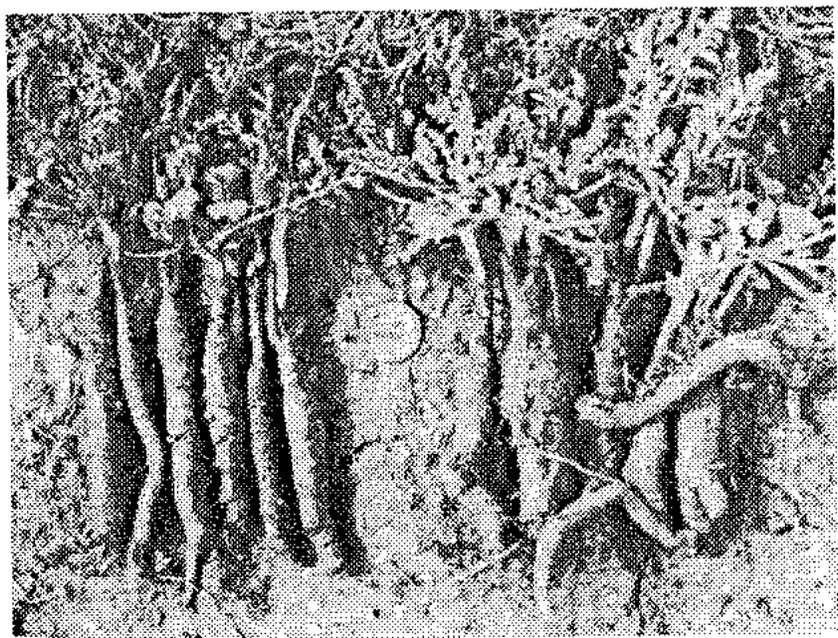
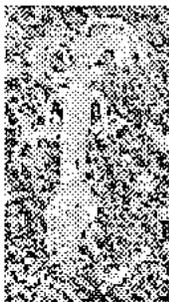


Figure 13. Photograph of the wild carrot.



Figure 14. Ute panel from the Willow Creek, Book Cliffs area of Utah, showing the “emerge out” symbol that refers to the wild carrot.



Figure 15. Ute panel from the Willow Creek area of the Book Cliffs, showing the “emerge out” symbol that refers to the wild carrot.

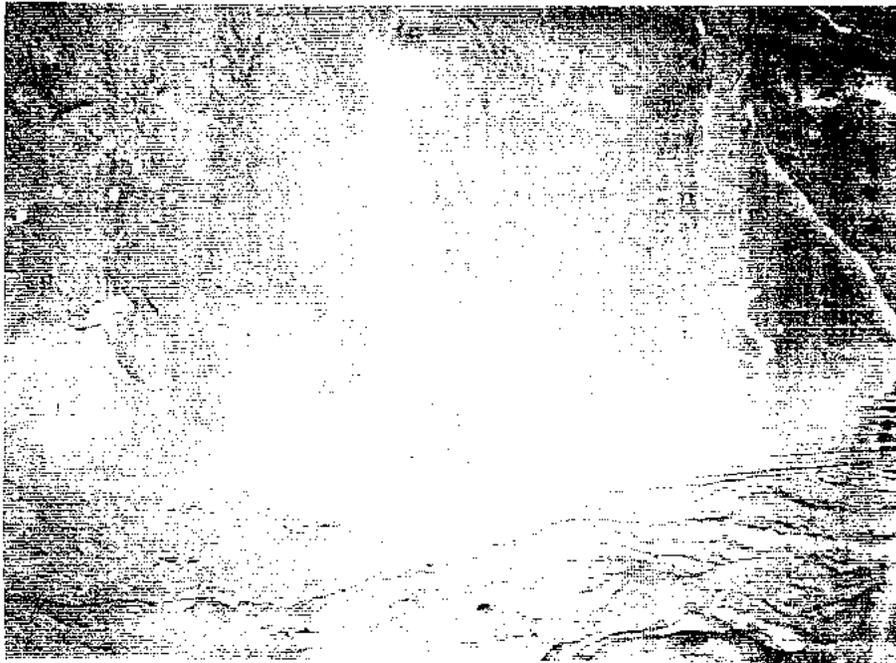


Figure 16. Wild carrot symbol on Ute panels in Willow Creek, Book Cliffs, Utah.

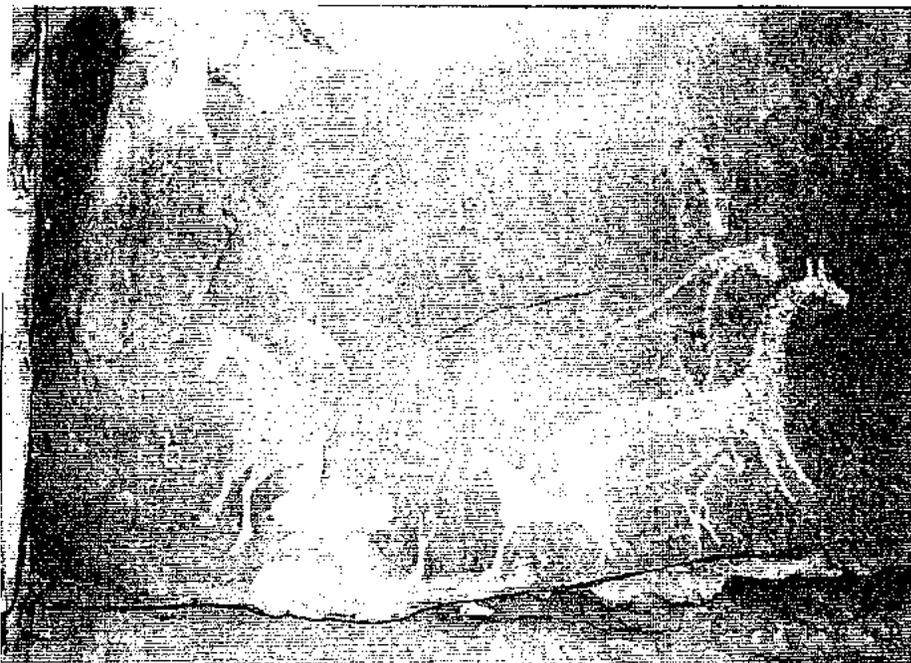


Figure 17., Wild carrot symbol on Ute panels in Willow Creek, Book Cliffs, Utah.



Figure 18. Farrington Springs, Colorado depicting a buffalo drive over a jump.



Figure 18a. Farrington Springs, Purgatoire River, SE Colorado. 1600-1800 A.D. Plains Indian Buffalo Jump.



Figure 19. San Cristobal, New Mexico, showing corn planting and corn growing.

The small horned anthropomorph on the right (d) is connected with a line to the back of a buffalo. This indicates that the "strength" of the people is "carried" on the buffalo. They depend upon the buffalo for strength and prosperity. They are "People of the Buffalo."

On the left side a buffalo (e) is standing on a curved line that represents a "high hill." At the bottom of the hill is a combination of a diagonal line and up-and-down line (f). The diagonal line means to "get up" or "depart," and the up-and-down line represents "rough" or "difficult," commonly used to describe canyons. These two lines incorporated together convey the idea of "difficulty getting up." Combined with the "high hill" it describes a Buffalo Jump. The buffalo are broken by jumping over the edge.

The panel contains many upraised arms and hands (g). These upraised arms refer to many people hiding in the brush along the route to the jump. By suddenly raising their arms, they scare the buffalo enough to stampede over the jump.

Pueblo

The Pueblo people in the Southwest were known as Corn Eaters, and distinguished themselves from other tribes by their agricultural produce. The following two petroglyph panels from San Cristobal Pueblo, New Mexico, date around 1600-1700 A.D. Figure 19 shows corn planting and the growth of corn from mounds of earth. It simply shows the relationship between planting and producing life-sustaining corn. Figure 20 is a corn shrine, showing the corn incorporated with a natural water basin.

Conclusion

The panels discussed in this paper are just a few examples of food that carry a social and cultural significance that binds the people together in a single identity. These people "are what they eat." It is a simple way of identifying by display what food staple is most important to them. Along with survival from these sources of food comes ritual and ceremonies that accompany food procurement either in planting and harvesting, or hunting and gathering. Cultures are made up of people working together who collectively produce enough food to survive. These food-gathering habits tie them together as a family, band or tribe, and become their cultural identifiers that are displayed visually in the petroglyph panels.

References

Handbook of North American Indians, Great Basin, Vol. 11. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1986.

Callaway, Donald G., Janetski, Joel C., and Stewart, Omer C. Ute.

Murphy, Robert F. and Murphy, Yolanda. Northern Shoshone and Bannock.

Martineau, LaVan. *The Southern Paiutes, Legends, Lore, Language and Lineage*. Las Vegas: KC Publications, 1992.

Trenholm, Virginia Cole and Carley, Maurine. *The Shoshones, Sentinels of the Rockies*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964.



Figure 20. San Cristobal, New Mexico, Corn shrine depicting the corn plant and water catch basin.