

## Cultural Significance of Recent Homicide of 7-year-old Ute Mountain Boy

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### Shory Story

Around 2AM on December 10th, 2024, 7-year-old Zamias Lang was sound asleep to the left of his father, Zackieus Lang, in the bed they shared since his birth. At least twenty-four bullets bursting from an assault-style automatic rifle rang out into the cold night air on the Ute Mountain Ute Indian reservation located in southwest Colorado, United States ... and into the home of sleeping Zamias and Zackieus, hitting Zamias in his small child's body. The shooter, who had previously vowed revenge to his drinking buddies for an earlier yet unknown drunken slight by Zackieus, had wrecked his carnage on the quiet Lang home. The cowardly shooter, who would later tell Federal Bureau of Investigation agents he "planned to "shoot up Zackieus Lang's house," would run and hide from authorities, while Zackieus held his dying son. The shooter, identified by the FBI as Jeremiah Hight, would be captured days later on December 27<sup>th</sup> while hiding on the nearby Diné (Navajo – *The People*) Nation reservation atop a Mesa (a mountain with a flat top), while Zackieus buried his young, now-deceased son. The shooter currently awaits trial in a Colorado federal court for murder and other offenses committed in Indian Country (Slevin, 2024; Sarlis, 2024).

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Above: Suspect 23-year-old man  
Photo by Navajo Nation Police Department



Above: Victim: 7-year-old boy  
Photo by Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

The tragic murder of 7-year-old Zamias Lang, an enrolled member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, was terrible and horrific, every parent's worst nightmare in this age of mass shootings across the country, and indeed the world. The arrest of a 23-year-old-man in connection to Zamias' death was just as dreadful because he was identified as another Ute Mountain Ute tribal member.

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While Zamias' family grieves the death of their beloved baby, perhaps lessons can be learned from this tragedy that make this situation less heartbreak and more prophetic.

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Council met in an emergency meeting to discuss a formal tribal response to the shooting, which unnerved and angered every individual who lives in the Native Towaoc community and surrounding area, a place with a large American Indian population concentration in the Four Corners region of the United States. Tribal Chairman Heart revealed in a Facebook announcement to the tribal membership that the Council had discussed various formal tribal responses, including removal of abandoned homes, additional lighting to the area, banning discharge of guns on holidays and during celebratory events. More significantly, and the purpose of this writing, it was mentioned by Chairman Heart, the Tribal Council discussed invoking the Removal and Exclusion Clause of the Constitution of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and, possibly, disenrollment for the perpetrator(s) of Zamias' homicide. Yes, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Council is taking the homicide of one of their youngest members to the most extreme level possible. And this is good for many reasons I wish to share in this writing.

In the matrilineal style of this tribe, it was told to me - a Yaqui woman by many different Ute elder women - that in the beginning of Ute history, Ute people (*nuunu'agaat*) reserved the most extreme punishments for the worst tribal offenders. The individuals who committed the worst acts of cultural offense would be subjected to banishment and out-casting, for actions such as killing a sacred white buffalo or colluding with the enemy during war time. These types of cultural crimes affected the safety and well-being of the entire tribal community and would be met with the most severe punishment. The future well-being of Ute people was *threatened with extinction* if these actions were committed by any Ute. The Creator, it was inferred, would punish the entire Ute people if these actions occurred. This is why these types of actions were punished so harshly by the entire tribe. The Ute war sub-chief would be responsible for carrying out any punishments ordered to the offender by the entire Tribal Council on the advice of the tribal Medicine person (a traditional healer who would interpret the spiritual significance of the transgression to the entire tribe) (Abril, 2009). To protect the entire tribe, it was incumbent upon every single Ute person - male and female, young and old alike - to obey certain cultural laws surrounding treatment of white buffalo and staying together as one group during war time. The very survival of Ute people depended upon obedience to Ute cultural laws and ways of life.

Some Native cultural behaviors, such as talking to the trees and grass and rocks, ensured the Creator a Ute person was following the right path for a Ute - and would do what was required to bring health and prosperity to all Ute people, now and into the future for forthcoming Ute people who are to take one's place in the tribe. It is believed that failure to follow the path set for Ute would lead to bad times for Ute, such as drought and famine and other bad circumstances.

The shooting death of Zamias, although horrible without measure, revealed the opportunity for Ute people to reaffirm their commitment to Ute ways and Ute cultural values. In the deep pain and freshness of the wound caused to Ute people by Zamias' death, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Council realized the harm and threat posed to the future of the entire Ute Mountain Ute Tribe from within their own tribe by unsafe individuals who take dangerous actions that harm **the entire tribe**. Harm to tribal children, especially, is a direct, immediate, and unforgivable threat to the future well-being of the entire Ute Mountain Ute Indian tribe, as it is to other tribes across Indian Country and around the world. Tribal children face threats to their future survival - indeed survival of their entire tribe is doubted - from actions as drug sales and other harmful adult behaviors, like the senseless shooting of Zamias.

The death of Zamias - a horribly painful event - **is the threat** Ute people were warned about so long ago. Protect other tribal children to protect the future of all tribal people. Using the most severe form of tribal punishments available - Removal and Exclusion from the reservation community and disenrollment from the tribe - will protect the future life and well-being of all tribal people.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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