

## **The Hopi Kachina Cult: Religion and Ritual as Elements of Cultural Identity Preservation**

Meldan Tanrısal

Ozymandias has fallen on his face,  
but the Hopi kachinas still stand erect in their ancestral kivas.

Watson Smith

### **Introduction**

The descendants of the prehistoric peoples who lived in the Southwest of the United States fifteen hundred years ago, the Pueblo Indians have to this day preserved their identity and rich culture despite the assaults of Euro-American civilization. If certain traditional forms of Pueblo life seem to have changed little from, for example, ten centuries ago, it is because, for the Pueblo, religion and ritual have been inseparable from social life. Their religion has protected them from the encroachment of outside influences.

Among the Pueblo Indians, the Hopi have changed least of all. It is generally agreed that the Hopi have been able to preserve their way of life due to their creed, known as the "Kachina cult." While this Kachina cult on the one hand reflects the Hopi's dependence on agriculture for survival in a dry and rugged climate, it has functioned, on the other hand, as a crucial element in the preservation and assertion of their identity and culture.

This article takes a closer look at the Kachina cult, through a discussion of its beliefs, of the artifacts such as masks and Kachina dolls, of the nature of the Kachinas as spiritual beings and as fertility providers, and of the Hopi Kachina ceremonies that make use of these artifacts and philosophies.

### **Kachina cult of the Hopis**

The Hopi way of life survives today in thirteen villages, spread over three mesas in northeastern Arizona, and their religion constitutes the strongest bond among the populations of these villages. The Hopi religious system presents a complicated picture because, in addition to the basic and universal elements followed by all practitioners, each Hopi village has the autonomy to carry out religious practices on its own. Thus, the timing of the ceremonies, the precise rituals involved, and even the philosophical responses to the underlying concepts of the Kachina more often than not vary among the Hopi villages, as the Hopi have no written tribal language that would set a standard. Yet, the lack of writing works to the advantage of the culture: since the Hopi do not have a written language, it is the ritual performances and ceremonies that serve as a means of preserving it. Moreover, throughout the

land of the Hopi, the religious mission is the same: to promote and achieve unity in the universe. In fact, as some of the oldest inhabitants of the continent, the Hopi believe they have a sacred purpose on earth as caretakers of the world.

Despite local variations in detail, certain principles of the Kachina cult emerge. Foremost is the Hopi belief that some people die and are reincarnated again in another form in another world, while others die and become spirit-beings, or *kachinas*, as they are referred to in Hopi tradition. As well as being the spirits of the dead, Kachinas also can represent the spirits of the animals, plants, minerals, stars and natural forces. Consequently, there is a specialized, particular Kachina for everything under the sun. The word “kachina”—derived from *ka*, meaning respect, and *china* meaning spirit (Versluis 37)—has come to embody the religious beliefs, social structure and moral values of the Pueblo people and the ceremonial rituals which have evolved over thousands of years to help these people survive the harsh environment in which they made their homes (Dockstader, “Foreword” 4). The Kachina ceremonies thus occupy an essential place in both the social and intellectual life, and this way of life is passed down to younger generations as their cultural heritage.

A Kachina exists in three forms: one, as the supernatural being of an anthropomorphic nature; two, as the masked impersonator of the supernatural being who takes on the spirits of the Kachina it represents and enacts esoteric rites and ceremonies in the kivas and plazas; and, three, as the small wooden doll carved in the same likeness through which Indian children become familiar with the Kachinas and learn about their religion and cultural history (Dutton 40). The Kachina dolls, called *tihu* by the Hopi, are not perceived merely as carved figurines or brightly decorated objects, but believed to be the personifications of the Kachina spirits.

### **Kachinas as spirits**

According to the Hopi, life and death, day and night, summer and winter are counterparts in a system of alternation and continuity. Death is not an end, it is birth into a new world. This world and the world of spirits are transformations of each other. Put in another way, according to the Hopi, the spiritual world is reflected in the physical world. They believe that there is no clear division between human beings and the spiritual world. As Barton Wright explains, “The basic concept of the cult is that all things in the world have two forms, the visible object and a spiritual counterpart, a dualism that balances mass and energy. Kachinas are the spirit essence of everything in the real world” (2).

For the Hopi, the spirits of the dead return to the material world as Kachinas. As these spirit-beings can come to the human world and even leave it again, it is possible, therefore, for spirits, once they are in the physical world, to contact human beings and affect their lives. Spirits can even take possession of human beings for certain sacred times. This is the esoteric meaning of mask dances, for during these performances, dancers who wear masks are considered to become Kachinas and acquire supernatural qualities. These Kachinas are believed to be the manifestation on earth of the beings represented by the masks.

## Masks

The mask, as the focal aspect of the regalia of the Kachina, holds a sacredness and power of its own. As animate objects, masks are treated with reverence and regularly fed with cornmeal and other sacred substances. The donning of a mask by an individual transforms that man into something much greater, and transports that being from the specific time and space of the village to an other-worldly dimension (*Handbook of North Americans* vol. 10, 764-766).

Although no actual masks survive from pre-Hispanic times, it is apparent that some form of masking existed in the Southwest during that period. Kiva paintings, petroglyphs and pottery all provide conclusive evidence. Considering the perishable nature of the materials with which contemporary masks are made, this lack of earlier evidence is not surprising. Moreover, among the present-day Hopi, masks are neither buried with their owners nor are they left behind at abandoned sites. Rather, they are used until worn out and discarded in unrecognizable condition.

The masked deities of the Southwest were most likely introduced into the area from elsewhere. The striking similarities between various aspects of the ceremonial material culture of the Pueblo area and that of Casas Grandes, Chihuahua (Mexico) point strongly to a probable connection. Although more archaeological work is necessary to determine the full story, there is a strong possibility that a kachina-like cult of masking spread into the Southwest after 900 A.D., probably from Casas Grandes, Chihuahua and most likely a nearby Pueblo became a secondary distribution center later on. Certainly, when they arrived in the Southwest, the Spaniards found masks—recognizably kachina masks—being worn by the Pueblo Indians.

Harold S. Colton (12) describes the five types of masks manufactured by the Hopi: a face mask made of leather, a half-mask for the upper half of the face; a circular mask; a spherical sack mask; and a helmet mask. This latter type, as the most characteristic kachina mask, is a cylinder formed from rawhide with a circular top piece sewn on to the top. The painting of each type is different and such various accessories as ears, noses, snouts and horns are attached. Most are ornamented with feather headresses. No attempt is made at realism when painting a mask that represents an animal or plant Kachina because the mask does not represent the object itself but the spirit of the object that is visualized as having a human form. Paint color is significant as it is symbolic and indicates the direction from which each Kachina came. Hence, Kachina masks painted yellow, green, red or white denote one of the Hopi six directions:

- a. Yellow refers to the North or Northwest;
- b. Blue-green refers to the West or Southwest;
- c. Red refers to the South or Southeast;
- d. White refers to the East or Northeast;
- e. All the above colors taken together refer to the Zenith or (the direction) “up”;
- f. Black refers to the Nadir or (the direction) “down.”

Furthermore, symbols serving as important distinguishing marks are often painted on the forehead or cheeks of the mask. The principle symbols can be classified as:

- a. Animals and bird tracks;
- b. Celestial symbols such as clouds, lightning, sun, moon, and stars;
- c. Vegetable symbols: corn, flowers, cactus, etc.;
- d. A pair of vertical lines under the eyes represents the footprint of a warrior;
- e. An inverted “V” over the mouth indicates certain kachina officials;
- f. Phallic symbols represent fertility.

Once assembled, the combination of specific features on each mask aids in the identification of the individual kachina spirit being represented.

### **Kachina dolls**

Kachina dolls are carved from wood in the likeness of the kachina spirits. These dolls are given to children not as toys but as instructional religious items to be studied and revered so that the recipients become familiar with the worldly manifestations of these spirits. Prior to the beginning of the ceremonial season, fathers and uncles carve and paint these cottonwood miniatures which they present to the children during the ceremonies. Although early examples were less detailed than are contemporary ones carved for the tourist market, the requisite symbolic information was sufficient to teach the children about the individual kachina spirit.

### **Importance of rain**

When they are not circulating among the Hopi villages as masked dancers, for six months from the winter solstice to the middle of July, the Kachinas are the Spirit Beings who reside in the San Francisco Peaks (near Flagstaff, Arizona) in the clouds. They are also considered to be the ancestors of the current Hopi people, for the Hopi believe that when a person dies his spirit is carried up to the clouds and falls again as rain. Therefore, they return to their descendants in the form of snow and rain, that is, as moisture for the land and crops.

When a person dies, a cotton mask or a “white cloud mask” is placed on his/her face. The Hopi believe that Kachinas take on the form of clouds and become Cloud People. Their spiritual essence, or *navala*, is, however, a liquid that is manifested as rainfall. This is of prime importance, as according to Kachina belief, rain, combined with Mother Earth, is the essence of everything (*Handbook of North Americans* vol. 9, 577).

It is this dual spirit/rain nature of the Kachinas that is the most salient feature of the cult. For Frank Waters, while they are “the invisible forces of life—not gods, but rather intermediaries,” their “chief function is to bring rain, insuring the abundance of crops and the continuation of life” (166). Indeed, “To survive in this waterless land the Hopi developed a complex religion to secure supernatural assistance in fulfilling their needs,” affirms Wright. “Through the ages rain ritual was elaborated and joined to planting ritual, the growth of corn and Hopi melded, the successful rites of neighbors were added to further compound ceremonies until the present complexity of Hopi belief was achieved” (2). Thus Kachinas are

both spiritual beings and providers of water and abundance, and their identities reflect this.

## Major Kachinas

Ten major Kachinas are defined in the following manner:

1. The most frequently presented of all Hopi Kachinas is Long-haired Kachina, *Angak'china*, bringer of gentle rains and flowers (Figure 1). The dancer's long hair worn loose down the back resembles the falling rain, with the eagle breast plumes rising like clouds above it. His songs are melodic and the dance is the favorite of the Hopi (Wright 86). Waters describes the otherworldly appearance of the Long-haired Kachina and includes a song:

In the summertime we will come again. We will come as clouds from the west, the south, the east and the north to bless the Hopi people and to water their fields and crops. Then the Hopis will see their corn plants majestically growing. They will be so happy they will joyfully sing praises to the spirit-beings who brought moisture. At the edge of the cornfield a bird will sing with them in the oneness of their happiness. So they will sing together in tune with the universal power, in harmony with the creator of all things. And the bird song, and the people's song, and the song of life will become one. (172)

As the song illustrates, the Kachinas play an important role in the regeneration and rebirth of nature by bringing water, thus enabling the Hopi to continue and preserve their way of life without any alteration.

2. *Ahola* (Figure 2) is a Germ God and a *Mong*, or Chief Kachina, associated with corn and its abundance. Besides also being a Sun Kachina, *Ahola* is the Solstice or Return Kachina for the first and second Mesas. He visits each of the kivas to open it for the return of the Kachinas after their absence. Before departing he offers prayers to the Sun for a long life, happiness and health and abundant crops for the people of the village (Wright 36).

3. Crow Mother—also known as *Angwusnosamtaka*, Crow Bride, or *Angwushahai-i*—is considered by many Hopi to be the mother of all Kachinas, and appears during the *Powamuor* Bean Dance, one of the rituals aimed at guaranteeing abundant crops for the next season by promoting germination and fertility, in which she supervises the initiation of the children into the Kachina Cult (Figure 3). Later in the same ceremony, she leads other Kachinas into the village bearing in her arms a basket of corn kernels and bean sprouts to symbolically start the new growing season properly (Wright 30). The Crow Mother reflects the strong belief of the Hopi in the regenerative power of nature.

4. Children occupy an important place in the cult. Even if they are uninitiated, children receive gifts at the ceremonies and are educated in Kachina lore. Since a child's mind is clean and pure with no inherent evil, children can carry prayers to the spirits. The children learn to respect and obey the Kachinas. In keeping with their role to help discipline children, the Kachinas frequently give them presents of bows and arrows, with feathers with which to send prayers to the spirits. In particular, the ogres (Figure 4 and Figure 5) are disciplinary Kachinas. The Black Ogre, *Nata-aska*, and the White Ogre, *Wiharu*, carry a saw or a knife. Children are told the ogres can swallow them whole, unless they are good little children. Finally the ogres are driven from the village. Whites would call them the "boogeymen."

5. *Koyemsi* or Mudhead Kachina is a clown. (Figure 6) He appears in most dances in multiple roles. Sometimes he is a drummer; at other times he announces dances, or just clowns around to entertain, or plays games with the people who have gathered to watch the performances (Manley 3). The clown satirizes Hopi life by acting out and exaggerating improper behavior. He plays tricks, acts out absurd pantomimes, or cleverly mimics spectators. Like the more serious Kachinas, but in a humorous way, the clown helps maintain community harmony by reminding the people of acceptable standards of behavior within the Hopi community.

6. That the *Koshare* Kachina (Figure 7) is known by various names, such as Clown, Glutton, Hano Clown, or *Paiyakyamu*, indicates that he may be found in different Pueblos. He is both sacred and profane; and his actions, while highly amusing, prove embarrassing to the gathered people. He is often pictured with watermelons, which symbolize gluttony (Wright 82), and exaggerates everything he does.

7. *Mongwu*, the Great Horned Owl Kachina (Figure 8) is a warrior who disciplines the clowns when their behavior becomes too outrageous (Manley 28). Toward the end of the ceremony, the clowns who have fallen further and further from the Hopi way are warned by the Owl, who chastens them with Kachina whips and brings them back to the true path.

8. The Zuni warrior Kachina (Figure 9) is a Guard Kachina, as partially indicated in his yucca whips. When he appears as a group in the *Powamu* Procession he surrounds the more sacred Kachinas as a ferocious protector (Wright 38).

9. The White Bear Kachina, *Hon* (Figure 10), is a warrior who appears frequently in the *Soyohim* or Mixed Dances of springtime and is believed to possess curative powers.

10. The presence of Mickey Mouse—an icon of American popular culture—as a Kachina reveals an underlying feature of the Kachina cult. Accordingly, if the Kachina cult has remained the same for centuries, enabling the Hopi who observe it to remain the same, this has been achieved by sometimes adapting to innovations, rather than remaining static. A Kachina can lose popularity and disappear from the repertory, but it is replaced by a newly introduced one as result of individual dreams or by borrowing from other Pueblos or non-Pueblos. Bertha Dutton finds that the cow, the sheep, and the horse, introduced to the Southwest by Spaniards, have come to be represented by Kachinas; more recently, Mickey Mouse has been portrayed (51). Thus, continuity is achieved and the cult is preserved. The innovations, the subtle changes in practice, and the material adjustments that have been incorporated in the ritual and have been included in the ceremonies, have not destroyed the integrity of Kachina religion and its value.

## **Kachina ceremonies**

The Hopi ceremonial calendar, still used today, divides the year in half, based on the visits of the Kachinas (Figure 11). They first arrive during *Soyalwini* in December, appear in greater numbers during the *Powamuya* ceremonial season in February, and return to their spirit world after the *Niman* ceremony in July. All Hopi ceremonies are held well in advance of the actual event to enable the prayers for rain to reach their destination. As mentioned above, Kachinas function as the messengers or intermediaries between men and gods for such prayers. The preparation for the coming events and the anticipation activate Hopi life. Men spend days

preparing for the ceremonies in the seclusion of the kiva, while women prepare food for the ceremonies to feed the Kachina and other villagers.

During the period of preparation, the Hopi pray and perform cleansing rites each day before altars are erected in the kivas. In order to receive the benevolent action of the gods and the beneficial powers of the sun and rain, it is important to be cleansed in thought and body. Dancers wash their hair before ceremonials. As the public performance draws near, the dancers must also purify themselves spiritually. They must be pure in thought and deed, avoid women in order to be sexually continent, fast from salt and fat, and pray to ensure a “good heart” for four nights before the event. If the ceremonies do not achieve the desired result, the fact is usually attributed to the human failure of the impersonators to observe the taboos (Dockstader, *The Kachina and the White Man* 10).

One of the aims of the Kachina ceremonials is to achieve communal solidarity. Even though the individual may be initiated, he or she gains only secondary benefit from the rites performed; the primary good goes to the clan or tribe as a whole. Indeed, the Kachina cult is no individual matter; the Kachinas bless the whole group, not the individual. The Kachina cult is the only phase of Hopi religious life to which all belong. There is no sense of exclusiveness or limited privilege; all become members of the Kachina society through initiation and take part in the activities. A Kachina may bring gifts to a particular child or adult, but his or her major gifts—“life-giving” rain and assurances of good crops—are given to the village at large. This strengthens the bond among the people and serves to reassert tribal identity. Nevertheless, by enabling the individual to prove his devotion to the Hopi religion, the ritual helps the individual to reassert his or her Hopi identity. Dockstader states that no other Hopi ritual gives the individual the chance for personal expression of faithful dedication to the Hopi religion. This is a religious activity that enables the Hopi individual to prove his personal piety and devotion, while ostensibly working for the public good (*The Kachina and the White Man* 8).

Another aspect of the Kachinas that should not be underestimated, for it befits the Hopi character, is the humor involved in the ceremonies. Contrary to general belief, the Hopis are prone to laughter, which is another assertion of Hopi identity. The Hopi choose to deal with the harsh realities of life with black humor, irony and parody, rather than be vanquished by them. Clowns often provide comic relief between dances and songs. The parody and impersonations they perform enable the Hopi to strike back at their oppressors, that is, the white man, which affords a psychological release.

For the Hopi, the Kachina ceremonies provide the “regeneration” (Sando 32) of Hopi identity. *Powamu* is the major one, a nine-day ceremony with several functions of varying importance, including that of being a fertility ritual, as well as initiation into the Kachina cult. Another ceremony that signifies rebirth and regeneration is the *Niman* Dance. It is also called the Home Dance, for that is when the Kachinas appear for the last time before they return to their legendary abode in the mountains. Gifts are distributed during the *Niman* ceremony and the *Hemiskatsinam* dance on the big plaza. The Hopi spirits sing for rain, health, long life and fertility. The hope for the whole community is embodied in the long hours of singing and dancing.

During the seven-month period of constant ritual activity between the *Powamu* ceremony and the *Niman* dance, the Kachinas are the principal caretakers of the Hopi people. They appear early enough in the season to begin sending the Hopi’s prayers to the deities, and equally

important, to police the Hopi themselves so that their behavior and minds are pure and honest (Washburn 44).

## Conclusion

The power of the Kachina religion can be easily discerned in the assertion of the Native traditional way of life as a result of the Kachina observances. The Kachina religion involves every man, woman and child. The fact that by age ten every Hopi child is initiated into the Kachina cult creates more than merely a shared experience. All the members of different clans and religious societies are thus united. Individualism is underplayed, and the interest of the community is always placed before that of the individual among the Hopi. The ceremonies have a unifying effect on the whole community. Kachinas, being benevolent spirits, transmit a peaceful attitude; aggressive behavior is not tolerated among the people.

The Kachina ceremonies meet the spiritual needs of the Hopi. Underlying these ceremonials is the fundamental recognition that human beings have a role to play in mediating between the spirit world, the human world, and the natural world which are profoundly interrelated. Thus, the human beings who act as the masked impersonators of the supernatural beings transcend the border between the material world and the spiritual realm. They fulfill their duty as mediators between the two worlds. According to these Native traditions human beings have an obligation to recognize, revere, and even personify the spirit-beings who inform the natural realm. This enables them to renew connections to nature and to the divine realm. Joe S. Sando, from Jemez Pueblo, asserts: "Through dance and song one can realize a sense of rebirth and rejuvenation" (32).

The Kachina cult constitutes a fundamental strength within the tribe and remains a major element in the awareness and appreciation of what it means to be a Hopi while forming the cement of the Hopi way of life. Even during the early overt pressures of the Spanish to suppress Hopi religion, the Kachina cult went underground figuratively and literally (Waters 101). This tenacity and the adaptability of the Kachina cult has contributed fundamentally to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Hopi to this day and remains the strongest guarantee for their maintaining it in the future as well.

## Works Cited

Colton, Harold S. *Hopi Kachina Dolls with a Key to their Identification*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949.

Dockstader, Frederick J. *The Kachina and the White Man*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

Dockstader, Frederick J. "Foreword." *Kachinas, Spirit Beings of the Hopi*. 4-5.

David, Neil. *Kachinas, Spirit Beings of the Hopi*. Albuquerque: Avanyu Publishing, Inc. 1993.



Dutton, Bertha P. *American Indians of the Southwest*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983.

*Handbook of North American Indians*. Volumes 9 and 10 Southwest. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution. 1983.

Manley, Ray. *Ray Manley's Hopi Kachinas*. Text by Clara Lee Tanner. Tucson, AZ: Ray Manley Publications, n. d.

Sando, Joe S. *Pueblo Nations*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1992.

Smith, Watson. *When Is a Kiva?: And Other Questions About Southwestern Archeology*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990.

Versluis, Arthur. *The Elements of Native America Traditions*. Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, Inc., 1993.

Walker Bryce, ed. *Through Indian Eyes*. New York: Reader's Digest Association, Inc. 1995.

Washburn, Dorothy K. ed. *Hopi Kachina : Spirit of Life*. California Academy of Sciences, 1980.

Waters, Frank. *The Book of the Hopi*. New York: Penguin, 1963.

Wright, Barton. *Hopi Kachinas: The Complete Guide to Collecting Kachina Dolls*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Publishing, 1977.

## Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

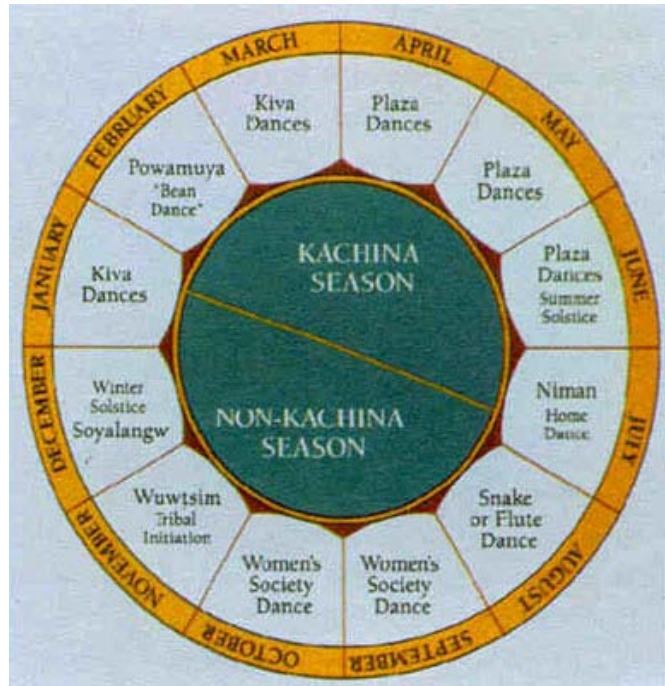


Figure 11