

# TURQUOISE, THE MAGICAL STONE AND THE ZUNI INDIANS

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## **Abstract**

This brief study illustrates how turquoise occupies such an integral part in the lives of Zuni Indians. The magical mysterious blue stone of religious significance is used extensively in ceremonies, for adornment, and investment. It has played an important role in the everyday and ceremonial life of these people from historic times to the present. In today's world Pueblo Indians consider turquoise to be sacred. There are many references to turquoise in Zuni folklore and myths. At present, turquoise is used extensively as the main decorative element in silverwork.

**Key words:** Turquoise, sacred stone, Native American jewelry, Zuni silverwork.

## **Sihirli Taş Turkuaz ve Zuni Kızılderilileri**

### **Özet**

Bu çalışma turkuvaz taşının Zuni Kızılderilileri'nin yaşamındaki önemini anlatmaktadır. Dini önemi olan bu sihirli ve gizemli taş törenlerinde kullanılır, takı olarak kullanılır ve yatırım yerine geçer. Geçmişten günümüze bu insanların günlük ve törensel yaşamlarında önemli bir yer tutmuştur. Günümüz dünyasında Pueblo Kızılderilileri turkuvaz taşını kutsal sayarlar. Zuni folkloründe ve mitlerinde bu taşta pek çok referans vardır. Gümüş takıların ana ögesini oluşturan turkuvaz günümüzde yaygın olarak kullanılır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Turkuaz, kutsal taş, Kızılderili takıları, Zuni gümüş işleciliği.

The word *turquoise* comes from the French *pierre turquoise*, meaning stone of Turkey; in the past most turquoise was sold in Turkey. It occurs in nodules and veins of green or blue. Copper makes it blue; iron makes it green (50).

The above is information found in EYEWITNESS BOOKS: CRYSTALS AND GEMS on turquoise, the magical stone. The blue-green stone has occupied an important place almost in every aspect of the lives of most Southwestern Indians, both prehistoric and modern. Although some were more influenced than others, almost all tribes made use of this stone. Many of the Indian myths and legends centered upon this gem. Their gods used ornaments, weapons and paraphernalia made of turquoise. They used it in fetishes and charms and their medicine men and caciques<sup>1</sup> could not do without it. Other than being an ornament without rival, there were few ceremonies in which turquoise was not utilized in some way.

In TURQUOISE AND THE INDIAN, Edna Mae Benett states several reasons for the popularity of this stone. Firstly, it was found in the region they lived, that is, the Southwest, and since it occurred near the surface of the ground, it could be acquired easily with the tools they had. Secondly, it was a stone that could be worked easily because it was soft. It was attractive and had the color of sky and water. Finally, some of their beliefs played an important role in the popularity of turquoise (9).

The earliest Spanish explores and missionaries were the first to write reports about the gem and record the Indians' appreciation of beautiful jewelry. The Spanish reported that when they came to the Southwest, they were met by people wearing feather headdresses, strings of beads, bracelets and ear pendants. In 1539, Fray Marcos de Niza, a Spanish missionary, wrote of "the number of turquoises worn as ornaments by the people. Some had as many as three or four strings of green stones around their neck; others carried them as ear pendants and in their noses" (Jacka and Hammack 2). These people were the ancestors of the Pueblo<sup>2</sup> Indians who live in the Southwest today.

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<sup>1</sup> Cacique is a religious leader who has the authority to make decisions; he oversees all the tribal council both religious and secular; he is comparable to the Plains Indians' tribe Chief.

<sup>2</sup> The name "pueblo" was used by the Spanish to designate all of the Indians who lived in similar permanent towns unlike the Indians of the Plains. There are different groups of Pueblos, that is tribes, who speak widely differing languages and worship distinct gods.

This brief study illustrates how turquoise occupies such an integral part in the lives of Zuni Indians. However, knowledge pertaining to religious ceremonies and prayers has not been included in this paper because it is esoteric knowledge. In the past, this information has been published contrary to the beliefs and desires of the Zuni people. Today, it is important to respect the beliefs that are sacred and that are not meant to be shared or publicized. Therefore, it should suffice to know that this magical mysterious blue stone of religious significance is used extensively in ceremonies, for adornment, and investment.

The modern Pueblo of Zuni is in the high desert country of the Colorado plateau in the vicinity of the great Sandstone mesa of Corn Mountain. This settlement is located in McKinley County, western New Mexico, 44 miles south of Gallup. Among the Zuni Indians, who create marvels with turquoise, the widespread use of the gem and the art of carving it go back many hundreds of years. This precious stone has played an important role in the everyday and ceremonial life of these people from historic times to the present.

The Hohokam, Mogollan and Anasazi are the three main divisions of the prehistoric cultures of the Southwest, prior to Spanish contact in 1540 A.D. Agriculture, irrigation, pottery, basketry, weaving and stone and shell jewelry were found among all three.

Turquoise was highly prized among these groups. The Anasazi worked turquoise mines in the area of Cerillos, southeast of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Cerillo turquoise, noted for its color, was found in prehistoric sites far south in Mexico. The Hohokam had access to many mines, such as Bisbee and Kingman in Arizona. Besides using it to make pendants, beads and earrings, these people were fond of incorporating this stone into overlay.

The fact that jewelry has usually been included as grave offerings with both burials and cremations shows the importance prehistoric Indians attached to jewelry. The dessicated remains of Anasazi arrayed in strings of beads, bracelets, earrings and pendants were found in Southern Colorado caves. Hohokam cremations usually contained at least a few burned beads. Their burials were extremely rich for they contained particularly intricate overlay items of turquoise and shell. Along with tools, food and clothing, prehistoric Indians considered jewelry essential to a good life in the afterworld.

Chaco Canyon, one of the great Anasazi ceremonial centers in New Mexico, is proof of the special religious significance jewelry had for these

people. Ceremonial structures were blessed by deposits of turquoise and necklaces sealed in niches around the walls.

In today's world Pueblo Indians consider turquoise to be sacred and bless their shrines with it. Its blue is one of the sacred colors, a gift from the gods. There are many references to turquoise in Zuni folklore. Everyday when the Sun Father returns to his home in the western ocean, he brings with him a bundle of turquoise and shell beads. These are the sacrifices of his "Children among Men." He scatters "the treasures of the bad and doublehearted" over the great waters while he keeps the rest (Hill 43). The Sun Father, or the Holder or Bearer of Light, is among the higher deities of the Zuni. He carries the sun as he travels over the road of day, seated on a huge turquoise, wearing earrings and necklaces of turquoise.

Zuni sacred meal which consists of ground corn, ground turquoise, and bits of shell was presented to the supernaturals as food during the ceremonials and rituals. In ancient times, a kind of sacred meal made from white seed corn mixed with fragments of shell, ocean sand, and finely ground turquoise was used in the ceremony of the hunt. It was sprinkled where the heart of the dead animal was believed to have rested. After the game had been killed, during the process of skinning and cutting the animal, the hunter made a ball of the tragus of the inner ear (the hairy part) of the game, blood from the heart, a few hairs from the game, corn pollen, turquoise dust or beads of turquoise, shell and coral beads to be placed on the spot where the animal died. This offering to the spirit of the dead beast was to insure a continuous supply of the game (Hill 44).

Turquoise is also mentioned in the Zuni Origin myth. Various characters in the myths and legends, like the dwellers in the Land of Spirits, are represented as possessing great strings of turquoise, turquoise loop earrings that often reached the shoulders, and bracelets made from the stone. The deep blue Mountain of Turquoise whose reflection gives the sky its color, lives in the Sky-world of Zuni mythology. The sun, the eagle and turquoise symbolize the Upper world. Blue is the color of the sky, green the color of the earth and turquoise symbolizes them both. Blue is also the color of the west, the shade of heavens at evening, and the tint of the great waters which lie westward from Zuni.

There are many interesting characters in the sky world. There is Bear, who was accidentally hit by a large piece of turquoise thrown by Elder Brother War God and thus got his humped back. There are Twin War Gods who have

rabbit sticks<sup>3</sup> of turquoise. One day while playing with these sticks, one of the boys accidentally split his brother open from head to toe. After remaining dead for a while, the live brother gave a war whoop and the dead brother got up as lively as ever. Later they reversed the roles and first brother went through the same experience and a war cry brought him back to life. The twins showed this trick to all the children in the village several times to show them it was fun. Then they killed the children with the turquoise rabbit sticks. However, the children could not be brought back to life (Stevenson 50).

The Zuni recount the story of turquoise that appeared to them in ancient times, metamorphosed into human form. Hli'akwa (turquoise), as the Zuni call it, left the pueblo of Santo Domingo to come to the Zuni because the Santo Domingos had used turquoise for immoral purposes. He journeyed to the Southwest to dwell within the high mountains beyond Zuni, protected by great black and white bears. The Zuni still travel to this mountain, the location of which is kept a secret, to get turquoise only by pleasing the bears with their sacrifices of plumes and sacred meal.

Another Zuni Origin story concerned Salt-Old-Woman. She also left her home on the shores of a Salt Lake "to the North," because she was displeased with the young maidens who were amusing themselves irreverently on her shores and then going out into the middle of the lake for fresh salt. She persuaded Turquoise Man, another higher deity, to go to the south with her, and she made her new home at Zuni Salt Lake, while he went to the east to make his home. Salt-Old-Woman, who is also a figure in one of the winter and summer series of dances, wore strings of turquoise beads about her head, with a turquoise pendant over her forehead.

Fetishes,<sup>4</sup> which play an important part in Zuni culture, are either made of or embellished with a bit of turquoise. These fetishes are believed to protect,

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbit sticks are weapons used to take small game.

<sup>4</sup> A fetish is an object which is believed to have magic powers. Fetishes may be of any form or material. Regardless of the form or material, the main purpose of a fetish is to assist man against any problems.

A fetish can be owned by any individual, a family, a clan, a kiva society or an entire tribe. Nevertheless, the care of a fetish is always the responsibility of an individual. The fetish has to be properly fed, admired, and cared for. Fetishes are believed to feed on cornmeal while they are kept in a special pot or pouch. Ground turquoise is often mixed with the cornmeal.

bring good luck and cure illness. The White Mountain Lion of the East, a hunting fetish, is made of white limestone or alabaster and has inlaid turquoise eyes. The fetish of the Mountain Lion of the Priesthood of the Bow sometimes has a minute heart of turquoise bound to the side of the animal and a strand of turquoise, shell, coral, and black stone beads about his neck. The Blue Coyote of the West has settings of green turquoise on either side of the body, along the back, and in the eyes; the Blue Wildcat of the West has small fragments of turquoise bound on an arrowhead on the back. Other fetishes such as the Speckled Eagle of the Upper Regions, the Many-colored Mountain Lion of the Upper Regions, Blue Eagle of the Western skies are also provided with turquoise eyes. Even the small fetishes the Zuni make for sale today carry pieces of turquoise tied to their backs and have tiny eyes of the same stone (Figure 1).

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A fetish is made and decorated with turquoise, arrowheads, coral, etc. as a means of adornment. This adornment is a show of affection and appreciation by its maker or owner. The better treatment a fetish receives, the better performance it is likely to provide.

Most fetishes relate to animals and most of the time these animals are animals of prey. These are acknowledged as the most powerful providers in life; so, they are likewise accepted as having the greatest fetish powers.

The Zuni Indians believe in six cardinal guardian fetishes. Each is symbolic of a direction and has a specific color which is synonymous with the direction. The guardian fetish of the North is the mountain lion (yellow). The South (red) is the badger, the West (blue) is the bear and the East (white) is the wolf. Additionally, the mole is the guardian of the Nadir or inner earth (black) and Zepath is the eagle (all colored bird forms).

The power and strength of a fetish is obtained by placing the nostrils of the fetish to one's mouth and taking deep breaths.

**Figure 1.** Zuni frog fetish embellished with bits of coral, mother of pearl and turquoise by Dan Simplicio from Zuni Pueblo.



All over Zuni country there are sacred shrines where turquoise, together with cornmeal, is used abundantly as offerings. The two Priests of the Bow visit a distant mountain shrine of A'hayuta, taking with them offerings of turquoise and sacred meal. A'hayuta, who is an important Zuni deity, is associated with wind, snow and cold weather. The wooden images of the deity are sheltered in the four war god shrines that are on the mesa three miles east of the pueblo. The one on the west side of the mesa contains a ceremonial bundle of prayer sticks,<sup>5</sup> the seven main ones of which are wrapped together in a piece of cotton textile and sprinkled with fragments of turquoise, white shell, and abalone. The sacred cave of Zuni, the location of which is carefully guarded, contains a shrine of the Ko-ko. The Ko-ko or Kachinas<sup>6</sup> are deities identified with the dead and especially associated with clouds and rain. Similarly, the prayer sticks, turquoise, and shell beads are deposited here too.

Likewise, pieces of turquoise, and turquoise-decorated prayer sticks are put into the walls of a house while it is being constructed. This is an offering to the House God for luck and protection.

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<sup>5</sup> Prayer sticks are religious paraphernalia often used in religious ceremonies as a means of sending messages to the spiritual world.

<sup>6</sup> Kachinas are spirits devoted to rainmaking who are impersonated by masked dancers.

During the religious ceremonies in the kiva<sup>7</sup> or plaza, all the impersonators of the Kachinas wear many necklaces of turquoise, coral and white shell as well as turquoise earrings. They wear a number of strings and bracelets of turquoise and shell around their wrists. The number of ornaments an individual could borrow limits the amount of turquoise worn on ceremonial occasions. Necklaces cover the chest and even the back. Necklaces both front and back indicate that the Kachina is an important one. Pautiwa, one of the deities in the winter solstice ceremony, wears numerous necklaces of turquoise and shell both front and back, as well on his wrists.

Turquoise-colored face, mask, and body paint was important in Zuni ceremonies for it represented Awonauilona, the supreme life-giving power of the sun.

The Zuni decorated the cradle board of a new-born infant with a round turquoise of good color inlaid into the wood under the child's head, and three others lower down close to his neck.<sup>8</sup>

Turquoise and its symbolism are closely related in Zuni daily life. Ornaments are often handed down from father to son as a family treasure and worn frequently. During the solstice ceremonies in winter, people proudly display their many turquoise, silver, coral and white shell necklaces for they indicate the wealth and prestige of their owners.

Long before the Spanish came to the Southwest, the Zuni were carving stone and inlaying it with turquoise as well as making turquoise mosaics and carvings that proved their outstanding artistry and accomplished workmanship. With the arrival of first Navajo, and later, Spanish and Mexican influences, the Zuni have developed the art of working in silver. From about 1830-1840, the Zunis did metal crafting in copper and brass; then in 1872, according to their first smith, Lanyade, they began using silver (Adair 122). Around 1890, turquoise was added to the silver and grew to be increasingly popular as a decorative material (Figure 2). Since turquoise jewelry does not depreciate as many other things do, it also is an important investment among the Zuni (Figure3). At present, turquoise is used extensively as the main decorative element in silverwork (Figure 4). The profuse use of small pieces of turquoise arranged in groups, known as needlepoint, has become one of the outstanding

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<sup>7</sup> Kiva is a ceremonial chamber.

<sup>8</sup> This is reminiscent of the Turkish tradition of attaching a blue stone to a baby or a child for protection against the evil eye.



characteristics of Zuni jewelry (Figure 5). Thus, it seems that the modern Zuni jeweler continues in the path of his ancestors.

**Figure 2.** Turquoise is used extensively in jewelry.



**Figure 3.** Squash blossom necklace.



**Figure 4.** Bracelets embellished with turquoise.



**Figure 5.** Zuni needlepoint brooch, earrings and ring.



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**Bibliography**

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