

Religious Beliefs of the Hopi Indians 101

By David Crockett

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According to "[Restoration](#)", a website run by Jack Lankhorst, and devoted to informing the public about the Hopi people and current events, the Hopi Indians have inhabited the same place for nearly one thousand years, and are one of the oldest dwellers in the American Southwest. They are a peace-loving and spiritual people, who have a tightly knit community based on clan relationships.

The Hopi live on and around three mesas that are located on the present day Hopi Reservation. The traditional villages Walpi, Sichomovi and Hano are on First Mesa, while Pollacca lies at its base. Sipaulovi, Mishongnovi and Shongopavi are located on Second Mesa. Third Mesa has Old Oraibi, the oldest continuously inhabited village in the United States, as well as Hotevilla, Bacavi and Kykotsmovi, the seat of the Hopi Tribal Government. Moencopi lies forty-five miles to the West near Tuba City.

In her paper, "[The Unwritten Literature of the Hopi](#)", published by the University of Arizona, Tucson in 1933, Hattie Greene Lockett writes that the Hopi were originally a nomadic people before settling down into their present day villages. Various groups wandered, joined up again and formed offshoots and re-gathering into new groups. These early clans took their names from the natural world and based on historical incidents that became part of clan legend. Typical clan names are the Bear Clan, the Bluebird Clan, and the Spider Clan.

Villages are composed of various clan groups. A typical clan comprises all of the descendants of a traditional maternal ancestor. Sons and daughters marry outside of their own clan. Husbands follow their wives into her maternal clan, and live with her mother until the new couple can build an addition to the structure. Hopi Children belong to the clan of the mother.

According to [Wikipedia](#), the women of the father's clan choose names for the child. There is a naming ceremony on his or her twentieth day of life, when the child is dedicated to the Sun with an ear of corn tied to its breast. Each woman brings a name and a gift. The child's parents typically choose one of the names offered during the ceremony. A young adult might also change their name upon entering one of the religious societies, such as the Kachina society.

This is only a modest background of the Hopi Indians where they live. It has always been a good life, but hard. A summer's drought means hunger during the winter. It is no small wonder that many of the Hopi ceremonies have to do with clouds, rain and fertility.

[Lockett](#) writes that the Snake Clan was one of the first to settle in the area, due in part because of the clan's "wonderful ceremonies for rain bringing, as well as other sacred rites". Other clans joined, then separated, then rearranged themselves as the present village structure became established. I believe this structure is sustained by the Hopi marriage traditions that encourage the formation of close inter-related ties between families, clans and villages.

These ties give the Hopi religion a uniquely tolerant and pragmatic flavor. Rituals that bring the rains are particularly "Good Medicine". Other rituals honor ancestors, or bring fertility and Spring crops. It is an oral tradition. Each Clan has its' own history and related system of Myths. There are clan stories that vary from village to village. There is no "wrong" version: each forms a part of the whole.

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The Hopi readily adopted new ideas and rituals if they brought the rains and crops. When the Spanish first showed up as missionaries in 1629, they had all SORTS of new rituals. [Lockett](#) writes, "In exactly the same spirit they welcomed the friars. Perhaps these priests had "good medicine" that would help out. Maybe this new kind of altar, image, and ceremony would bring rain and corn and health; they were quite willing to try them."

[["The Traditions of the Hopi"](#), H.R. Voth]

The arrangement worked well at first. There was rain the first four years, but it became dry on the fifth. The Hopi wanted to go back to the old ways and bring the rains, but the Spanish demanded mandatory Sunday worship at the newly built church, and forbade the old ceremonies. The Spanish wanted more food, belittled the Hopi religious beliefs and "would trample under foot the chastity of the Hopi women and maidens."

One day, most of the Spanish left Oraibi, leaving only the padre. The Hopi met in council. Some wanted to kill the remaining padre, and some were afraid of retribution. Finally, the Badger clan volunteered to go, and the padre was killed.

"The killing of the padre in Oraibi [was] the signal for the other villages to get rid of the padres that lived at those mesas also. The Hopi then waited, expecting that Spaniards would come and avenge their brethren, but no one came, so they destroyed the houses of the Spaniards, divided their logs and timbers, and used them for their kivas."

[[Rain makers from the Gods, Introduction](#)]

Hopi Katsina dolls are wooden effigies of benevolent spirit beings, who visit the Hopi for about half of every year. Katsinam is the plural of Katsina (or Kachina). Traditionally carved from cottonwood root by Hopi men, Kachina dolls (or tithu) are tangible evidence of the Katsinam's power and wisdom. Katsinam are both male and female, and can represent any natural phenomenon, ancestor spirits, plants, animals and demons. The Hopi recognize well over 200 different Katsina spirits. The term Katsinam also represents the human dancers, always male, who become the very personification of the Katsina spirit on earth.

According to Hopi tradition, the Katsinam once visited in person, but now come as clouds down from the mountains or up from the earth. Masked and costumed Hopi men assume their powers and prestige in ceremonies and dances held until the Katsinam depart in July. Both Hopi men and women belong to the Katsina Society.

All masks and ceremonial costumes are strictly traditional. The corn symbol is used on everything. More than just food, it represents fertility and beneficence. The Hopi speak of corn as their mother.

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[Rain makers from the Gods, Ceremonies](#)

The Katsina season begins in November when a chief Katsina, or *Soyalkatsina*, opens the main kiva, signaling that it is time for the Katsinam to come out for the season. This represents the emergence of the Hopi into the Fourth World. There are three main ceremonies with many social night dances and foot races scheduled in between.

Kyaamuya is in December, a sacred month when the gods return and the sun turns back on its way towards summer. The first few Katsinam of the new year appear at the beginning of Soyalangwu, the winter solstice ceremony that may last up to nine days. It involves the making of prayer objects, many prayers and rituals, and a rabbit hunt and feast at its conclusion. The prayers and rituals help the Hopi turn the sun toward its summer home and begin giving strength to all life for the growing season ahead.

The Powamuya ceremony, or Bean Dance, is in February. The last of the Katsinam arrive, and prepare the Hopi for the next growing season. Children are initiated into the Katsina Society, preparing them for growth as well. Youths between six and ten years old are initiated into the Powamuya Society, and allowed to participate in the Katsina performances. Beans are planted in a large pot under the careful supervision of the Powamuya officers, and kept warm inside the kiva by a fire. After sixteen days, the Katsinam give the mature sprouts away in a public ceremony accompanied dancing and the giving away of many gifts. Healthy bean sprouts are a good omen for the crops in the coming season.

Niman is a sixteen day going-home ceremony for the Katsinam, and occurs in early July after the Summer Solstice. A public dance is held after eight days of sacred activities in the kivas. The first green corn stalks of the year are carried to represent a good harvest, and presents are given to the children. At the end of the day there is one final ceremonial dance, and the Katsinam are thanked for their help in the past, and prayers that their help continue. At the end of the ceremony, the Katsinam slowly leave to return to the gods in the spirit world of the San Francisco mountains with the Hopi's gifts and prayers

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Every culture has an Origin Myth and the Hopi are no exception. The world we are in right now is the Fourth World. In the three previous worlds, people eventually became bad and fought amongst themselves. Eventually a goddess such as Spider Woman or a bird would lead the good Hopi up to the next world. The following is a paraphrased extract from "[The Traditions of the Hopi](#)" by H.R. Voth, and is about the origin of the First World.

In the beginning, there was only water except for two dry patches of dry land in the East and West. There lived two deities, the Hurúing Wuhti. The Sun rises from within the Kiva of the Hurúing Wuhti in the East dressed in a garment of gray fox skin. This he changes to a garment of yellow fox skin, which he dons as he rises over the horizon. When arriving in the West, the Sun announces his arrival to the Hurúing Wuhti of the West, and enters the Kiva through an opening in the North. He then continues his journey under the water to begin the next day in the East.

Between them, the Hurúing Wuhti created the dry land. The Sun saw no living beings as he traveled, and told the Hurúing Wuhti of the West. She sent word with the Sun to the Hurúing Wuhti of the East to come visit. The Hurúing Wuhti of the East complied, and flew to the west on a rainbow.

They considered their situation, and thinking that perhaps the Sun missed beings in the North or South, created a wren from clay wrapped in native cloth. They sang over the bird, which eventually came to life and asked, "Why do you want me so quickly?" They said, "Yes, we want you to fly all over this dry place and see whether you can find anything living." The wren flew all over and reported that no living being existed there, but as it turns out, the little bird did not see Spider Woman (Kóhk'ang Wuhti), who lived in a kiva to the Southwest.

The Hurúing Wuhti of the West then made all the birds of the world, singing over their cloth-wrapped figures of clay. These came to life asking, "Why do you want us so quickly?" "Yes, we want you to inhabit this world", said the two deities, and taught each bird the sound it should make. Then the birds scattered out in all directions.

Then the Hurúing Wuhti of the West made all of the animals of the world. These were brought to life in the same manner as the birds. The animals asked, "Why do you want us so quickly?" "Yes, we want you to inhabit this world", said the two deities, and taught each animal their different sound or language. The animals then proceeded forth to inhabit the different parts of the earth.

The Hurúing Wuhti of the East then made a woman, and then a man in the same manner as the birds and animals before them. The man and woman asked why they were wanted so quickly, and were told that they should live upon the earth and understand everything. The Hurúing Wuhti of the East then made two tablets and drew characters upon them that the woman and man could not read. The goddess of the east rubbed the palms of her hands against the palms of the woman and man, giving them enlightenment so that they understood the characters. The two deities then taught the woman and man language.

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In the meantime, Spider Woman, who was also a deity, heard about these goings-on and was not about to be outdone. She created two people who turned out to be Spaniards, taught them the Spanish language by rubbing their palms the same way as the Hurúing Wuhti of the East had done. She continued making pairs of people and teaching them their respective languages.

However, Spider Woman miscounted and made one woman too many. She told the woman, "There is a single man somewhere, who went away from here. You try to find him and if he accepts you, you live with him. If not, both of you will have to remain single. You do the best you can about that." The man and woman eventually found each other, and agreed about a place in which to live. It was not long before they began to quarrel with each other. "I want to live here alone," the woman said. "I can prepare food for myself." "Yes, but who will get the wood for you? Who will work the fields?" the man said. "We had better remain together." And so they did, but it was a stormy relationship, full of separations and reunions. The couple taught this behavior to the Hopi, which is why there are so many 'contentions' between men and their wives today.

The Hurúing Wuhti of the West heard about what Spider Woman was doing, and after a bit of thought, she called the goddess of the east to come for another visit. Both Spider Woman and the Hurúing Wuhti of the East had made people, but she had made none. "I do not want to live here alone," she said, "I also want some good people to live here." She then created a number of other people, and they lived in the West. These people were nomads at first, and only had problems when they encountered Spider Woman's people. Some men were better hunters than others, and could bring home more food. This led to 'contentions' between her people. The goddess of the west settled them in a village and said, "You remain here; I am going to live, after this, in the midst of the ocean in the west. When you want anything from me, you pray to me there." The Hurúing Wuhti of the East did exactly the same thing, which is why the places where these two live are never seen today.

Now those Hopi who want something from the Hurúing Wuhti make their prayer offerings in the village, and think of those two who live in the far distance...and remember them.

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