

Hopi Kachina Cult Initiation: The Shocking Beginning to the Hopi's Religious Life

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ABSTRACT

The Hopi kachina cult initiation has long been characterized by the whipping of the eight- to ten-year-old initiates. The whipping has been associated with receiving the disenchanting knowledge that the kachina figures are not "real gods, but merely masked impersonations made by mortal Hopi." The record indicates that it is the shock of disenchantment more than the yucca switch that leaves a lasting impression on the initiates, yet the religious significance of this response has not been taken seriously by observers of Hopi culture. Careful consideration of the initiation rites shows that disillusionment is treated by the Hopi as necessary to prepare the children for a meaningful religious life.

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For many generations the initiation into the kachina cult has designated the formal beginning of participation in the myriad events of Hopi religious life. The rites of initiation are performed only once every several years during the annual celebration of Powamu, the first winter ceremony in which the kachinas appear. It is commonly known as the Bean Dance. Children around the age of ten enter the kachina cult by being inducted into either the Kachina Society or the Powamu Society. The rites of initiation into those societies vary somewhat, as do the privileges of the members, but both take place during Powamu and until recently every child was initiated into one or the other.

It has been recognized for some time in the study of the history of religions that initiation to the religious life occurs in a series of events which open the shape and meaning of a religion to analysis. The Hopi rites are commonly cited as a classic example. A careful scrutiny of the descriptive accounts of this particular Hopi initiation reveals that the interpretation usually given is very limited and probably misleading. I will critically review the history of description and interpretation of these initiation rites. I will then suggest an alternative interpretation based on the point of view that the ritual does what the Hopi say it does, that is, initiate the children into their religious life by revealing to them the nature of the sacred kachinas (superhuman figures).

Descriptions and Interpretations

The earliest description of the initiation version of Powamu I have been able to locate was written by Alexander M. Stephen at the Hopi village, Walpi, on First Mesa in 1892 /1/. The core of the ritual process according to Stephen's description takes place when the children are conducted into the kiva (a partially subterranean ceremonial chamber) by their ceremonial fathers, whipped by Tungwup kachinas, and comforted by their mothers. Stephen advanced an explanation of this whipping rite and it has been maintained by most others who have had concern with it.

Stephen wrote,

The primary significance of the whipping (*wuvi'lawwû*) seems to be this: Until children have acquired some real intelligence or are, say eight or ten years old, they are made to believe that the kachina appearing at all celebrations are superhuman visitors, nor must such children even see an unmasked kachina. When they have grown old enough or are deemed to have sufficient understanding, then they are instructed that the real kachina have long since ceased their visits to mankind and are merely impersonated by men, but they must buy this knowledge at the expense of a sound flogging. (Stephen: 203)

Stephen revealed something in his interpretation that he didn't mention in his description. He indicated that the initiation is for the purpose of teaching the children that the kachinas no longer come to the villages, but appear only through the efforts of impersonation which the children, as new members of the cult, may now begin to perform.

A problem for Stephen, indeed, the primary problem to which he spoke, was to explain what motivates the whipping of the initiates. He indicated that it is a kind of payment for the secret knowledge which the initiates gain in the rites. Elsie C. Parsons, who undertook the task of editing Stephen's journal for publication, added comment on the basis of her considerable experience, although it does not appear that she had witnessed the initiation rites either.

The whipping of the children is interpreted by our Journalist [that is, Stephen] as a kind of expiation in advance for learning about the kachina. It is no doubt a ritual of exorcism but possibly it is an exorcism for the children against the evils of life and to promote growth and well being. (Stephens: 156)

Parsons places both the Hopi and Stephen within Judeo-Christian categories of meaning. Stephen's journal actually says nothing of atonement. Parsons' introduction of exorcism, unfounded in the descriptive accounts she used, was perhaps based on her view that Powamu is generally a ceremonial focusing upon exorcism /2/.

The only other description based on the witness of the initiation rites prior to the turn of the century that I have found is that of Heinrich Voth who was a Mennonite missionary at the Hopi village now known as Old Oraibi. Voth witnessed the initiatory form of Powamu in both 1894 and 1899. His account was published in 1901 and supplements the Stephen account. Voth described the whipping rite as separate from the initiates' education into the nature of the kachinas. He also clarified the distinction between the Kachina and Powamu societies in terms of the rites of initiation and the privileges enjoyed by the initiated. He shed further light upon the significance of the whipping rite by recording a relevant story.

There is a tradition among the Hopi that this flogging ceremony was not always a part of the Powamu ceremony. It is stated that on one occasion a boy who had been initiated into the Powamu fraternity had revealed the secrets that he had seen and heard. A council of the leaders of the fraternity was at once called and the question discussed as to what to do about it. All urged that a severe punishment be inflicted upon the perpetrator. Only the *kalehtakmongwi* (Warrior chief), now represented by Koyongainiwa, remained silent. After having been asked four times by the others as to his opinion about the matter, he first also expressed his displeasure at the occurrence and then suggested that the boy be flogged before all the other novitiates by Katcinas as a punishment and as a warning to the rest. This was done, and the custom was continued. (Voth: 105)

Voth recorded the whipping as occurring on the sixth day of the nine day Powamu ceremonial and indicated that the children are protected against seeing unmasked kachinas even after their whipping. According to Voth, it was not until the ninth night that the children learned that the kachinas were masked impersonations. Voth wrote,

On this occasion the Katcinas appear unmasked, a very rare occurrence. The new Powamu and Katcina Wiwimkyamu (from Wimkya, member) that were initiated on the fifth and sixth days are to learn for the first time that Katcinas, whom they were taught to regard as supernatural beings, are only mortal Hopis. (Voth: 120)

Stephen did not describe this event, but alluded to it two times by indicating that "the children are to be flogged this sunset in the court, after which they must not eat salt or flesh for four days, then they may look upon kachina and *wi'mi* in kivas" (Stephen: 198, 202). *Wi'mi* are ceremonies.

Several witnessed accounts are available from the early decades of the twentieth century, but they add little to these earlier accounts /3/.

Descriptions and interpretations made through the 1930's placed major emphasis upon the whipping rite. All of the secondary literature that I have seen has focused upon this aspect of the initiation, maintaining with Stephen that the major information learned during the initiation is that the kachinas are masked impersonators rather than being "real gods" as the children had been previously taught. Louis Gray in the article on the Hopi, for example, wrote, "previous to this whipping the children have believed that the kachinas are real; after it they know that they are in reality only personifications" /4/. None of the secondary accounts I have reviewed raises the question of how this learning takes place, and not a single one gives any indication of how the Hopi children receive this knowledge.

It was not until 1942 that more was written about the effect the initiation has on the initiates. In 1942 the autobiography of the Old Oraibi Hopi, Don Talayesva, was first published. Talayesva maintained a vivid memory of his own initiation into the Kachina Society. He recalled,

When the Katcinas entered the kiva without masks, I had a great surprise. They were not spirits, but human beings. I recognized nearly every one of them and felt very unhappy, because I had been told all my life that the Katcinas were gods. I was especially shocked and angry when I saw all my uncles, fathers, and clan brothers dancing as Katcinas. I felt the worst when I saw my own father--and whenever he glanced at me I turned my face away. When the dances were over the head man told us with a stern face that we knew who the Katcinas really were and that if we ever talked about this to uninitiated children we would get a thrashing even worse than the one we had received the night before. (Simmons: 84)

This Hopi account emphasizes the shock experienced upon learning that kachinas are masked Hopi. The whipping is described as a device to insure secrecy, a role quite consistent with the story recorded by Voth.

Dorothy Eggan interviewed a number of Hopi about their experience of the initiation into the kachina cult for her study of Hopi personality development. Her evidence shows that Talayesva's response is typical. She wrote that

at initiation the child learned that the Kachinas were not *real gods* but merely representatives of them, and that they were an endless duty as well as a pleasure. The traumatic effect of this blow to a young Hopi's faith in his intimate world must be emphasized. All informants questioned by the writer have drawn the same picture of their reaction to initiation; their emphasis is rarely upon an anticipatory fear of it, nor upon the physical hardships endured during it. Rather they stress a previous struggle against disillusionment in which the hints--not very specific because of the severe penalty for betrayal--of earlier initiates were dismissed; and finally the intense disappointment in and resentment toward their elders which survived in consciousness for a long time....For Hopi children there was a double burden of disenchantment and modified behavior, for while an altered concept of the kachinas eventually became a vital part of their lives, excessive indulgence by their elders had disappeared never to return. (Eggan: 372)

To exemplify this reaction Mrs. Eggan quoted a Hopi woman as saying,

"I cried and cried into my sheepskin that night, feeling I had been made a fool of. How could I ever watch the Kachinas dance again? I hated my parents and thought I would never believe the old folks again, wondering if Gods had ever danced for the Hopi as they said and if people really lived after death. I hated to see the other children fooled and felt mad when they said I was a big girl now and should act like one. But I was afraid to tell the others the truth for they might whip me to death. I know now it was best and the only way to teach the children, but it took me a long time to know that. I hope my children won't feel like that." (372)

On the basis of Hopi accounts it appears that the whipping is primarily an incentive for maintaining secrecy, but that the knowledge of the nature of the kachinas which is gained during the Bean Dance on the last evening of Powamu is experienced as a shocking disenchantment with the kachinas, Hopi ceremonials, and Hopi elders. This experience of disenchantment is vividly remembered throughout life.

Finally the most complete account based on an observed performance of the initiatory form of Powamu was written by Mischa Titiev. He and Fred Eggan were participants in the Powamu of 1934. Titiev's account, published in his important work, *Old Oraibi*, clearly indicated the distinction between the whipping part of the initiation rite and the moment when the initiates learn about the kachinas. Titiev described the initiatory element of the Bean Dance which is performed in the kivas on the ninth night of Powamu.

Then the dancers enter the kiva while one of their number stands by the hatch and calls down all sorts of jests at the expense of each man as he comes down the ladder. Inasmuch as the performers announce on entering a kiva that they are the real Kachinas, and as they are unmasked, it does not take long for the recent initiates to discover that the Kachina impersonators are their relatives and fellow villagers. In such dramatic fashion is the most important of all Kachina secrets revealed to Hopi children. (1944:119)

More details of this witnessed event are available in Titiev's recent publication of his Hopi field notes as well as the description of the rites which he observed in 1954 with comments on the observed changes during that period of time (1972:341-43).

Given the disenchanting nature of the secret learned by the kachina cult initiates, it is certainly not surprising that they respond with shock and displeasure. What is more shocking to me is that none of the observers has shown the least surprise at the anomaly presented by these Hopi rites. Not a single observer whose account I have read, has responded to the revelation of the secret

of the masked nature of the kachinas with more than passive acceptance. But in light of the fact that the Hopi have been commonly regarded as being almost excessively religious as evidenced by their constant involvement in religious activities, I feel that it is startlingly incongruous that Hopis introduce their children into religious life with the revelation that the kachinas are not "real gods, but men dressed as gods." Should this not raise the question of the motivation and meaning of all of Hopi religious practices which are associated with kachinas? Does it not seem utterly in opposition to the abundant references which attest to the Hopi belief that the donning of a kachina mask transforms a man into a god? (cf. Titiev, 1944:109) And finally it is hard to overlook evidence that the initiated Hopi follow with the utmost care procedures of deception calculated to bring about an experience of disenchantment. The mere fact of the intentionality suggests that there is more to it than appears on the surface. Hints of this greater significance are suggested by Eggan's informant when she said, "I know now it was the best and the only way to teach the children." Certainly a major element in the meaning of the mature Hopi religious life must stem from this shock of disenchantment. And I would suggest this may hold true for students of Hopi religion as well as for the Hopi children.

Disenchantment: Death to Naive Realism

The esoteric aspects of the kachina cult initiation will probably never be known to non-Hopis, but the surface structure of the events of the ritual of initiation strongly suggests certain deeper meanings. Prior to their initiation the children meet the kachinas in the villages with a wide array of associated experiences. Some kachinas present gifts to the children, while others frighten and discipline them. In all contacts the children are carefully guarded against either seeing an unmasked kachina or gaining knowledge that the kachinas are masked figures. In this way the children are nurtured in a perspective of naive realism; that is, that the common sense

view of the world is wholly adequate. They are raised to accept the kachinas exactly as they appear to them in the village, as superhuman beings who have come to the village to overlook and direct human and cosmic affairs. They identify the kachinas with their physical appearance and actions /5/.

During the kachina cult initiation rites, the final development of the perspective of naive realism is made through an intense period of contact with the kachinas. They are acutely aware of the kachinas' presence in the village; they watch them move about the village; they may be whipped by them; they are told special stories about them; and they are given special gifts, which they are told are brought from the kachinas' home in the San Francisco Peaks. While the children perceive the kachinas as beings of a wholly different category than themselves, they are not separated from these powerful beings. They observe the interaction of the Hopi people with the kachinas when they visit the village. It is this interaction which constitutes many ceremonial occasions. Further, the children are taught that upon death a Hopi may become a kachina and return in the form of clouds to work for the people /6/.

The nurturing of a perspective from which reality is viewed naively appears to lay the basis for the shock experienced at the conclusion of the initiation rite. This naiveté is shattered in the instant of realization that the kachinas are masked figures, impersonations perpetrated by members of their own village, even their own relatives. The loss of naiveté is always irreversible. The result, as is clearly indicated by Eggan's informant, is that the reality of the kachinas, one's destiny, and the whole basis for reality are called into serious question. The interaction between the Hopi people and the kachinas, which the children had come to know as essential to the continuity of the Hopi way of life, appears now to be impossible. The kachinas are shown to be only disguised Hopi and not holy beings at all. The disjunction between the kachinas and mankind, which had theretofore been rather easily bridgeable, has now become an abysmal

chasm. And perhaps the most remarkable thing in light of the expected initiatory structure, the rites of initiation end on this note of discord /7/.

While the new initiates must enter their new lives suffering this disillusionment, the privileges enjoyed in their new status permit them to participate in the affairs they have found to be disappointing. They may now participate in kachina cult activities /8/. They may be present in the kivas during rehearsal and mask preparation activities. They are eligible to be initiated into secret societies, in which they may gradually come to know esoteric dimensions of the kachina cult. The initiation is constructed in such a way that one's religious life begins in a state of seriousness and reflection, characterized by doubt and skepticism. The very nature of reality has become threatened. The children must search out a new basis for perceiving a meaningful reality. There is tremendous incentive to listen more carefully to the stories of the old people. Don Talayesva describes his increase in interest in these stories as stemming from his experience of initiation (Simmons: 85). It is apparently through the stories and through participating in religious activities that new initiates find the meaningful equilibrium which gives them reprise from the awful state of disenchantment. The kachina cult initiation is the formal introduction into the religious life of a Hopi. It does not culminate with the initiation of an individual into the core of religious life. Rather it severs an individual from the nonreligious life and provides the motivation for seeking religious awareness. It is the initiation of initiations.

Initiation Rite Parallels to Powamu

The process of nurturing the children only to cut off the growth which had been so carefully attended is not an extraordinary Hopi activity, for a parallel to it occurs in the Powamu ceremonial to which the initiation rites are attached. Powamu is distinctive as the ceremony in which the kachinas return to the village after their absence during the long winter. With the return of the

kachinas, thoughts are turned to the upcoming planting season, and Powamu focuses upon promoting fertility and growth. Beans are planted in the kivas and carefully nurtured by keeping fires continually burning so that the warmth will force the beans to sprout and grow even though Powamu is celebrated in February well ahead of the actual planting time. But these beans are not destined to bear the fruits normally expected of them. Near the conclusion of Powamu the sprouted beans are cut, tied into bunches, and presented as gifts throughout the village. Uninitiated children are told that they were grown by the kachinas in their homes and brought with the other presents which are given to them. The sprouts become an important ingredient in a pot of stew prepared in every household on the last day of Powamu (Titiev, 1944:117-18). The sprouting of beans, which is distinctive for Powamu, initiates the agricultural cycle in a pattern similar to the initiation of children into the kachina cult. The sprouting of the beans is a demonstration or adumbration of the activities to begin later. The beans are forced by heat and water into a state of growth before it is fully time for them to do so. The procedure forces the shift from latent to active, a shift characteristic of birth, initiation, and spring. For growth to come to fruition, the state of rest must be ended and it is in the warmth and light of the kiva fires in February that the perhaps cruel, but essential, shock is felt by bean seeds and children alike.

Disenchantment Opens Toward a Mature World View

There are other ways in which the surprising nature of the initiation rites might be considered. Alfonso Ortiz noted, as have others, that an important point in the Pueblo world view is that "all things are thought to have two aspects, essence and matter" (Ortiz: 143). Given this, one wonders what process gives awareness and credibility to the nonmaterial, the essence. For essence to be perceived at all, the more obvious "reality" of the material world must be recognized as somehow partial or incomplete in itself. I have shown that the initiation

into the kachina cult is accompanied by a discomfoting demonstration of the nature of reality when naively perceived. The children are confronted with the choice of accepting the position that the kachinas and all that they do are not real, or of perceiving and experiencing the reality of the kachinas, and hence the world, in a different way--as spiritual as well as material. In Hopi culture it appears that this experience is gained gradually through participation in various religious societies. Through a lifetime of participation and experience the initiated Hopi comes to learn the infinite interdependence of the material and spiritual. It is eventually possible for the initiated once again to observe in the appearances in the villages that these figures are the real kachinas. As Emory Sekaquaptewa wrote, when a Hopi "dons the mask he loses his identity and actually becomes what he is representing." Yet in manifesting the kachina the Hopi "tries to express to himself his own conceptions about spiritual ideals that he sees in the kachina. He is able to do so behind the mask because he has lost his personal identity" (Sekaquaptewa: 39). By being the instrument for the manifestation of the kachinas, the Hopi experiences the paradox of sacrality which Eliade described: "by manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain itself" (12).

By failing to share with the Hopi initiates this shock of disenchantment, most persons explaining the initiation have truncated the significance of Hopi religion. They have remained satisfied that the lesson of the initiation is that the kachinas are not *real* gods but merely impersonations of them. This places severe limitation upon the religious nature of the kachinas, a limitation which we can observe is repulsive to the initiates themselves. It seems that what is being taught the initiates is that the kachinas who appear in the villages are complex in nature having both the aspects of matter and essence (or spirit). Although as Eggan's informant said, the full lesson is some time in coming. For it is through a life of participation that a Hopi comes to realize that by donning the kachina mask, he not only makes present

the material form of the kachina, but the spiritual aspect as well. The material presence without the spiritual is but mere impersonation--a dramatic performance, a work of art. The spiritual without the material leaves no object for thought or speech or action. It must reside in some form to be held in common by the community. The view that the kachinas are "merely impersonations" fails, therefore, to recognize the fully religious nature of the kachina performances. If the kachinas are not present in both material and essential form, the events could scarcely be called religious /9/.

NOTES

/1/ It is not clear how much of the full initiation sequence Stephen observed. In Parsons' introduction to Steward, she indicated that Stephen had not seen the whipping rites in 1892, yet the account in his journal (Stephen: 198-202) certainly appears to be written on the basis of direct observation.

/2/ Parsons presents a very extensive comparative discussion of the whipping practice (1939:467-76), including various Pueblo peoples. Stephen's journal was not published until 1936, but an account based solely on his notes was published by Fewkes in 1897. Since Fewkes had not witnessed the initiation form of Powamu, he added nothing to Stephen's notes.

/3/ In Frank Waters' book (176-79), an account of the kachina cult initiation is given as described by White Bear based on the 1914 initiation rites at Old Oraibi. The odd feature of this description is that it appears that the children see the dancers in an unmasked appearance before they undergo the whipping rite. When Waters describes the Bean Dance which concludes the Powamu, he remarks, "all initiates know by now that the kachinas are mere men who impersonate them, and have full knowledge of Powamu" (182). In Parsons (1925) the account of the initiation into the kachina cult is described by the Hopi, Crow-Wing, who mentions the whipping and the appearance of the Powamu kachinas as being without masks, but does not connect either very closely with the initiation. Steward presents a witnessed account on First Mesa from his field work in 1927, but it does not add to the earlier accounts and does not make clear when the children learn the nature of the kachinas. Steward indicated that the audience for the Bean Dance was "made up entirely of women who bring children, even small babies" (Steward: 71), but he does not make clear that only the initiated children and very small babies may be present.

/4/ For examples of this emphasis, see Gray: 784; Fergusson: 128-29; O'Kane: 185; and Watts: 206.

/5/ For description of these events, see Titiev, 1944:118; Stephen: 224-27; Voth: 118; Earle/Kennard: Plates X, XI; Fewkes, 1923: Plates 2, 7; Fewkes, 1894:32-53; and Sekaquaptewa, who has a particularly clear description of the view Hopi children develop toward the kachinas.

/6/ This belief which is alluded to by Eggan's informant is documented throughout Hopi literature (cf. Eggan).

/7/ The "betwixt and between" state of liminality as described by Van Gennep and extensively explored by Turner (Chap. IV) may be applicable here. But instead of concluding the initiation by establishing a new equilibrium to resolve the state of liminality endured throughout

the initiation process, it appears that it is the state of liminality that the children are being initiated into by these rites. A related discussion of liminality as associated with Zuni ritual clowns is presented by Heib.

/8/ Although Titiev (1944:116) and others have indicated that they do not normally begin participating to any great extent for several years after their initiation.

/9/ I wish to thank Joseph Epes Brown for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I have discussed Hopi initiation to illustrate other concerns. In "Disenchantment" (1976a), I attempted to show that this process of initiation is not uncommon in the history of religions. In "The Shadow of a Vision Yonder" (1976b), I used it to illustrate the nature of the native American use of ritual symbols.

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