

## The Zuni Way

*Though they embrace computers and TV, the secret of the tribe's unity lies in fealty to their past*

---

By Virginia Morell

Two bridesmaids are helping Deidre Wyaco, a Zuni Indian, dress for her big day. She dons her tribe's traditional wedding costume—white moccasins and deer-hide leggings wound from ankle to knee; a black wool tunic layered over a white blouse; and four saucer-size turquoise-and-silver brooches pinned down the length of her skirt.

The bride's sister, Darlynn Panteah, fastens a turquoise-and-silver squash blossom necklace around Wyaco's neck and adorns her with so many turquoise rings and bracelets that her hands look as if they'd been dipped in blue-green water. Wyaco's niece Michella combs her jet-black hair into a tight bun and smooths each lock in place while a cousin places a scarf over her shoulders and fixes it with a turquoise-and-silver pin. Then everyone stands back to admire Wyaco, her dress as stark and eye-popping as the red-earth, blue-sky landscape of their home, Zuni Pueblo, on the Zuni Indian Reservation, 40-odd miles south of Gallup, New Mexico.

Zuni Pueblo has witnessed such wedding scenes for millennia. For most Zuni, who call themselves A:shiwí (the origins of "Zuni" are unknown), it would be almost impossible to imagine getting married any place other than here at Halona Idiwán'a, the Middle Place of the World, where, in origin myths, the tribe settled after many years of wandering. The Zuni have dwelled in this broad valley of golden buttes and red mesas for thousands of years, farming, hunting, gathering and practicing their communal way of life and ceremony-rich religion.

It's that religion, the Zuni say, that binds them together. It's what enabled them to withstand the hardships of drought and famine and their conquest, in 1540, by the Spaniard Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. He had been led to Zuni by a Franciscan friar, who'd seen the pueblo settlement from a distance and claimed it was one of the Seven Cities of Cibola, mystical places said to be laden with riches. Coronado's forces quickly realized that this small pueblo was not Cibola, but they plundered what they could—then claimed Zuni and 80 neighboring pueblos for Spain.

In other parts of the Americas, the Native peoples who had the misfortune to make early contact with Europeans often vanished completely. The Patuxet of New England are gone, as are the Pulacum of Texas and the J'akaru of Peru. The Zuni, for their part, also came perilously close to disappearing: in 1879, the tribe, believed to have had as many as 4,100 members in the middle to late 1500s, numbered barely 1,700, brought low by smallpox and measles. But today, there are 10,000 Zuni, and the tribal government estimates that 90 percent of them live at Zuni Pueblo, making this tribe one of the most intact in existence. "The Zuni's complex social web seems to hold people. Their religion and language provide a point of ethnic identity," says Dennis Tedlock, an anthropologist at State University of New York at Buffalo, who has published a book on the art of the Zuni storyteller. "And their isolation has worked for them, but against them economically."

Somehow, although they've lost many of their original lands (the reservation encompasses 700 square miles) and many of their cultural and religious objects, they've managed to preserve their core beliefs, even while adding elements from beyond their borders, the world of mainstream America. And so Wyaco, the perfectly dressed Zuni bride, incorporates a few outside touches for her wedding, marching down the aisle not to the beat of a Zuni drum but beneath a white awning decorated with white and pink paper wedding bells to a recording of "Here Comes the Bride." None of the guests—mostly Zuni, with a handful of outside *melika* (Anglos)—seemed the least surprised.

But they all also knew they were watching a special Zuni moment when Wyaco's sister pushed their paralyzed father down the aisle in his wheelchair so that he could give his daughter away to the groom, Randy Hooee.

"Everyone at Zuni has a role," said one guest, nodding in approval. "No one, no matter what, is left behind. That is—and always has been—the Zuni way."

How, in this era of the Internet, when the outside world with all its material goods and other temptations

calls so seductively, do the Zuni manage to maintain their way of life? What is it about the Zuni way that, despite 61 percent unemployment at the pueblo and problems above the national average with drugs, alcohol and diabetes, keeps most of those 10,000 souls at Zuni Pueblo?

"It's the salt," says Randy Nahohai, a celebrated potter in his 40s, with a wink and laugh. Yet his answer is only half-facetious. "I've been outside," he continues, "and I've done a lot of traveling, but it's always good to come home to good chili, and salt that doesn't roll off your food."

We're sitting at his living room worktable in the home he shares with his brother, Milford, also a noted potter, and their families. Like most Zuni today, the Nahohais no longer live in the multistoried adobe dwellings for which Halona, the old part of the Zuni Pueblo, was once famous. Most now favor modest adobe, stucco or mobile homes.

Nahohai hands me a small bowl of salt. "You'll see the difference," he says. The salt, which Zuni men collect on pilgrimages to their sacred Zuni Salt Lake (not to be confused with the larger one in Utah, some 600 miles to the north), has a soft, almost powdery, feel. "We've been collecting our salt at our Salt Lake for thousands of years," Nahohai says. "And that's another reason that we stay here: we're living where our ancestors lived. All these people who were here before you—it makes your head swell up with pride just to be Zuni. I try to show that pride through my work."

In a back bedroom where he and his youngest son sleep, Nahohai produces hand-built pots that he paints with abstract designs of the night sky or stylized images of leaping deer. Nahohai and his brother shape their pottery from clay they collect at a spot that has long been used by the tribe's potters. And they make their paints in the traditional way, by boiling certain plant roots until they gain a resin-like consistency, or grinding small chunks of ocher into a pliable paste. But they use an electric kiln and modern paintbrushes, instead of the old yucca-tipped ones favored by their forebears.

"I hate the taste of yucca," Nahohai says. "We learned everything about making pottery from our mother. For a long time before her, there were hardly any Zuni potters. That tradition died out with the arrival of metal pans. And then there was just too much Tupperware, so nobody made pottery."

Nahohai's mother, Josephine, who died last year, and other Zuni women revived the craft. In the process, they created one of Zuni's more important cottage industries. (Nahohai's pottery, which incorporates elements of traditional Zuni symbolism, is displayed at the National Museum of the American Indian.) The tribal council estimates that about 80 percent of all Zuni families earn at least part of their income through their arts, giving the pueblo something of the feel of an artists' colony. Inside every home, it seems, someone is bent over a workbench creating inlaid jewelry, carving an animal fetish (renderings of various animals said to possess their powers and spirit, much favored by collectors), sculpting a kachina doll (representations of spiritual beings) or making pottery. Most picked up their skill by watching their parents.

"My folks would let me help with the polishing," says Lorandina Sheche as she sits at a grinding wheel in a back bedroom of her family's home sculpting a bear that resembles those the Zuni made in the 19th century. "Then, one day, my dad went to the store for a while, so I took—well, I *stole*—one of his rocks." Sheche laughs at the memory. "I made a fetish from dad's rock, a big coyote like the ones in the anthropologist's book. My dad called it 'E.T.' and said no one would buy it. But an Albuquerque Native crafts store did. They paid me \$45 for it."

From under her workbench, Sheche pulls out a copy of Frank Hamilton Cushing's monograph, *Zuñi Fetishes* (1883). I'm surprised, since Cushing, a member of a Smithsonian Institution expedition that came to study the tribe in 1879, is held in low regard by many Zuni. Just 22 at the time, Cushing was disappointed when the expedition chose not to move into the pueblo, so, the story goes, he plunked his bedroll down in the tribal governor's house. "How long will it be before you go back to Washington?" the governor is said to have asked him. Cushing stayed four-and-a-half years, learning the Zuni language and their sacred ceremonies.

Among anthropologists, Cushing is regarded as a pioneering figure, one of the first professional ethnologists, and the original "participant observer." But to the Zuni, he is another in a long line of white betrayers. Most damaging in Zuni eyes, Cushing wrote in great detail about their religion and its sacred ceremonies, violating their trust in sharing secret knowledge.

"Yes, Cushing was that white man who was adopted by the tribe and became a Bow Priest," says Sheche. "And he learned many Zuni things and believed it all—but then he went home and published all our knowledge. My grandpa used to say that Cushing was a good guy and a crook."

Sheche laughs merrily, apparently unconcerned that she's drawing on such a controversial work to carve her own authentic Zuni fetishes. For Sheche, what matters is that selling fetishes—together with her husband's finely carved kachinas as well as some baby-sitting work—enables her to live at Zuni.

By the time Cushing invited himself into the pueblo, the Zuni had already suffered through years of Spanish and Mexican rule. Under the Spanish, the Catholic Church had ordered them to cease their religious practices altogether. They'd managed to protect their beliefs in part by pretending the prayer songs they sang in their cornfields were simply planting tunes and in part by outright rebellion. They resisted the inquiries of other anthropologists—and from melika in general—by adopting an icy, slightly hostile stance toward overly curious outsiders. Although I was invited to several Zuni ceremonies and dances, and was warmly greeted, I was also warned not to write about them. "This is our religion."

"People outside have the idea that knowledge should be shared," said Jim Enote, the director of the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center. "That's what universities are built around. But at Zuni we don't think that way. Some knowledge should be protected and not shared. There are things in Zuni you can know, and things you can't. And there are certain people who deserve to be the keepers of that knowledge. It's a privilege, and the rest of us respect them for that."

Those who follow the Zuni faith greet the morning sun with a sprinkling of sacred cornmeal and mark the yearly calendar with rituals and dances, all designed to keep not only Zuni but the world at large in balance and at peace. Thus "living at Zuni" means far more than simply being able to pass down artistic traditions or eat Native foods with Zuni salt. For the Nahohais and Sheches, staying at Zuni is almost a sacred obligation. Those who assume a religious position—among the Zuni devout that translates to at least one man in every family—do so for life, and they must be present for every ceremony.

"There's one key to understanding Zuni," says Edward Wemytewa, a former tribal councilman in his early 50s, who takes me on a quick tour of Halona, where the last of the pueblo's fabled multistory buildings still stand around a ceremonial plaza. "And it's that the dances that take place here in the plaza are the heart of who we are. All the movement and colors, the singing and the sounds of the bells and the drums echoing off the walls—all this touches your spirit. From the day you are born as a Zuni until the day you leave this world, this is within you."

Although some Zuni have converted to Catholic and Protestant faiths—including Mormonism—the Zuni religion remains so dominant in the pueblo that several members of the tribe told me that despite having elected officials, they feel they live in a theocracy controlled by priests. Tribe members who violate taboos—such as the publisher of the now-defunct *Zuni Post* who sometimes touched on religious matters—can expect a visit from a priest or to be summoned before the tribal council for questioning. Even speaking the word "drought" is thought to be dangerous because it might lead to one. "That's just the way it is," one Zuni told me.

A few miles beyond the central pueblo of Halona, Edison Vicenti and his wife, Jennie, have built a Spanish-style stucco home. For 30 years, Vicenti designed semiconductor chips for IBM in Tucson, while his wife worked as a nurse. When they retired in 1996, they moved back to Zuni. Today, the former computer engineer serves his tribe as head kachina priest, overseeing prayer meetings, certain initiation ceremonies and dances. (With his wife, he also makes the petit point turquoise-and-silver jewelry for which the Zuni are known.)

"I don't have any trouble flip-flopping between the two worlds," says Vicenti. "There was a time when I was more interested in science, but it was always a foregone conclusion that I'd be back. My family is in the deer clan, which is a small clan, and the duties of the head kachina priest are part of our clan's responsibilities. It's my turn to handle those responsibilities now."

One important responsibility is teaching Zuni ceremonial prayers to the youths initiated into his religious society. With other tribal leaders, Vicenti worries that Zuni is a vanishing language, like more than 80 percent of the remaining 175 Native American languages. Some scholars estimate that unless something is done, these threatened languages will be gone within the next 40 years. "If we lose our language, we lose the base of our religion and culture," Vicenti says. "And if we lose our religion, we lose what binds us together as Zuni. It is like the roots of a tree; if the tree is uprooted or the roots contaminated, then it dies. It is the same with us." Vicenti shakes his head. "And we can't let that happen."

To counter the English language heard in every home on radio and television (and in movies and in daily conversation), elderly Zuni join with Zuni teachers at the Head Start program at the elementary school to encourage children to speak the Zuni language. There are immersion Zuni language programs in the higher

classes as well, and programs conducted in Zuni at the A:shiwi A:wana Museum and Heritage Center. And there is KSHI, the Zuni radio station. "*Kesh shi. Lukkya shamle don a:wana hon dena: a:lashinna dap kya: kol dena: denabekkowa ik'osh na:wa,*" intones Duane Chimoni, KSHI's general manager and part-time disc jockey. "Hello. On this morning's program we're going to hear some songs that used to be played in the past."

The songs, however, aren't Zuni songs; they're Blondie's "Heart of Glass" and The Who's "My Generation." "We make our announcements in both English and Zuni," says Chimoni. "If we only do Zuni, then we get lots of calls, people saying 'uh, sorry, my Zuni isn't that good, could you repeat that part about....' But I like to think it helps, hearing us speak Zuni."

About three miles from Halona, close to the base of the sacred mesa Dowa Yalanne, to which the Zuni have fled in times of danger, a group of middle school children are learning to make traditional Zuni walled gardens, which are divided into sunken depressions, like a waffle iron. It's a way of Zuni farming not often seen now. In the early 20th century, waffle gardens edged Halona, surrounding the pueblo with low adobe walls and yielding a bounty of vegetables and fruit. But the Zuni River flowed freely then; it does not today, largely because of dams and droughts. The pueblo has few gardens; there's simply not enough water. At Dowa Yalanne, however, the children haul water taken from a spring 12 miles away, making it possible for Jim Enoto to teach them this kind of gardening. The children pour buckets of water onto their patches of earth, stirring up the mud and patting it into low walls. "Most of the time, we definitely don't get to play in the mud like this," says 12-year-old Rodney Soseeah, both hands coated with the wet, black earth. "So I like farming, and growing some stuff."

"I'm thinking of planting peppers," says Mary Quam, 15. "Then me and my mom can make salsa."

"We'll also be planting corn," says Odell Jaramillo, a teacher and adviser to this program. "For the Zuni, corn is our life, our protector. It's at the center of our religion and ceremonies." Every ceremony requires a sprinkling of white cornmeal.

Every young person I met hopes to live at the pueblo as an adult. But that means finding a job, which is not easily done. The Zuni schools, including a branch of the University of New Mexico, and a hospital offer employment possibilities. But there are very few businesses, aside from the Indian craft trading posts, a few gas stations and small convenience stores. There are no fast-food joints, no Burger Kings or McDonald's, no hotels.

"You really have to wonder why that is," says Darlynn Panteah, the CEO of one of the most surprising and successful of Zuni businesses, Zuni Technologies, the sole high-tech company in town. "I mean, the same three stores that I grew up with are still the only stores here at Zuni—30 years of the same stores! We all have to go to Gallup to do our shopping."

Panteah blames the lack of local enterprises on tribal policies that have tied up much of the land on the main highway, where hotels and restaurants might prosper. She also laments the tribe's reluctance to bring in outsiders and their businesses. (The tribe is debating whether to build hotels and casinos in their community.) "We lose so many of our young people to the outside. Yet we depend on them; they're the ones who must carry on our religion. So, it's up to us, the older generation, to make good jobs for them at Zuni."

Panteah leads the way from the parking lot outside Zuni Technologies, which operates out of a low-slung, white warehouse. Inside, 62 Zuni men and women sit in front of computers, typing and clicking as they scan stacks of military manuals, converting the heavy, printed texts into digitized forms for the Air Force, Marines and Navy. The business, started with assistance from tribal and government funds and later the Intertribal Information Technology Company, a consortium of tribes that promotes high-tech businesses on Indian reservations, is now three years old, and offering dream jobs to the mostly young people who work here.

"I honestly never thought there'd be a job here at Zuni in my field, management information systems," says Vinton Hooee, 25, and a recent graduate of the University of New Mexico. "It's given me ideas about starting my own business, like Darlynn, to help keep our young people here. It's very hard to be part of Zuni when you're living in Albuquerque. There's a ceremony here every month, and you can't really take part if you're here only on weekends. All of us young people, we're struggling to get the balance right."

Wilton Niiha, a carpenter and kachina leader, drives with me down a sandy road toward the most dominant feature on the Zuni landscape—the cream-and-rose-striped mesa, Dowa Yalanne—until we see two rocky, tower-like formations split away from the main mesa. "Those rocks are the little boy and girl who saved the

people who fled long ago to the top of Dowa Yalanne during the flood," says Niiha. According to legend, "the water was rushing up to the top of the mesa, so the children of the head priest asked if they could place their prayer sticks in the water." The priest granted their request, and the children stepped into the water with the prayer sticks on top of their heads. Instantly, the floodwaters began to recede. "With that sacrifice, the boy and girl saved Zuni," Niiha says. "They became part of the mountain."

The late afternoon sun reached the two stone figures, turning them a rosy golden hue. It was easy to imagine them as children holding hands as they waded into the water and to their deaths, and asking as all Zuni do for blessings, for their people and their land and the world.

That, after all, is the Zuni way.

*Virginia Morell is the author of Ancestral Passions and Blue Nile. Photographer Scott S. Warren's work has also appeared in National Geographic, Outside and Newsweek.*

**[Click here to comment on this article in SoundOff, Smithsonian.com's reader forum](#)**