

## Hope for the Hopi: Finding Prosperity on the Rez

### Experience and approach

For this research paper I spent two weekends in the fall of 2015 attending two Basket Dances at the villages of Sungopovi and Old Oraibi on the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona. **Slide** In addition to observing the dances I conducted informal interviews with Hopi who attended. I also drew on over 10 years of prior engagement with the Hopi through attending various ceremonies and visiting in their homes. **slide**

### Introduction

When driving to the Hopi Reservation, you will have to go through desolate desert land to reach their very isolated home. This isolation has played a major role in convincing many traditional and even some non-traditional Hopi both on and off the reservation that the ceremonial culture has not changed. Reading an 1899 article written by anthropologist Walter Fewkes, who observed Basket Dances in several villages, including the ones where I was, largely supports that conclusion as well. The most obvious and almost the only visible change is what the women are throwing out into the crowd. Today in addition to the traditional arts and crafts, there are many store bought items that are “distributed.” It is not hard to see this as a growing emphasis on the gifts as people come prepared with boxes to carry the stuff home.

**(slide)** But when observing the Basket Dance in person and talking to people who attended, more subtle changes underscore the implications of the obvious differences. More subtle but important changes include: Attitudes toward the overall experience demonstrated by the younger women dancers and people in the crowd is not as genuine and appreciative as in the past as well as knowledge of what is going on and the meaning of the Basket Dance has decreased. I will argue that these subtle changes are severely threatening the ceremonies that have been taking place for centuries.

The root causes of this threat are: the dwindling Hopi language usage, the age and maturity of initiates in the katsina society and related groups, and Hopi living off the reservation and not experiencing or appreciating traditional social structures and the “hard life” of dry farming, which is really the heart of their ceremonial system because the meaning of life is derived from it.

Ultimately, the changes I observed are like broken cogs in a machine; if one is not working, the entire machine will not function properly. I believe this failure points to a decline in the ceremonial system which will lead in the not too distant future to either a major collapse of the ceremonial system or to major changes in how ceremonies are performed in order for their continuation.

### **Hopi Ceremonial Background (slide)**

Many Hopi communal and ritual values are reflected in the close condominium-type housing, but in the ceremonies the community is expanded. The Hopi often say that their ceremonies are not just for themselves but for the whole world. (slide)

The main ritual spaces for all Hopi ceremonies, of which there are many, are the village plaza and the kiva. (slide) Ceremonies go in a seasonal cycle and sacred spaces are used differently at different times. (slide) From late winter to late summer spirit beings called katsinas perform rituals in these spaces and bring needed rain to grow the sacred blue corn. (slide) Katsinas are spirits that can be embodied in men. Katsinas may also be represented in dolls but are not worshipped. (slide)

Katsinas depart after the home dances in July and the men’s and women’s ceremonies take over after that with the men and women switching duties depending on the ceremony. (slide)

## The Basket Dance

The Basket Dance is a women's society ritual done at the end of the growing season. (slide) It is also performed in hopes of having a successful harvest the following season. It should be noted that the public part of this and all ceremonies is preceded by kiva ceremonies that can last over a period of days.

As Fewkes' study and my own experience verify, each village performs the public dance differently, but the main structure is similar. (slide) Generally the ceremony begins when a priest followed by initiates enters into the plaza. They perform blessings then the women throw corn cobs with feathers attached onto a drawing on the ground made by the priest using cornmeal. (slide) After that the women participants enter single file with a basket in hand and form a circle in the middle of the plaza. The dancers begin the ceremony by singing in Hopi followed by swaying of the feet along with moving the baskets in a circular motion. During the course of the day there are eight sets with each set lasting about an hour and includes the "distribution" of goods at the end of each set.

What I witnessed and what Fewkes described over a century earlier appeared on the surface to be almost exactly the same up to the point when gifts were thrown into the crowd. (slide) In the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth the gifts were mostly baskets and crops from the field. But sometime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century other things were added – such as products that could be purchased in the Walmart in Winslow. (slide) But even with that difference much looks the same, including struggles for the baskets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which I also witnessed. Fewkes says that the "struggle for the baskets continued long after the participants left the plaza." (86) I saw a struggle that also lasted over an hour and it was resolved by cutting the handwoven sash that the men had been fighting over in half. That resolution, according to more than one Hopi with whom I talked, indicates that people no longer respect the ceremony or appreciate the baskets which take a lot of work and skill but they also represent something spiritual.

People with whom I talked were adamant that even though there have always been struggles, the present situation is far more materialistic. People come to the dance, they say, just to get stuff for their kitchens or trophies for the wall, not a spiritual experience. People at the dances I attended were fighting even to the point of virtually destroying baskets that took many hours to make. (SLIDE)

I also observed changes in the attitudes of the “dancers.” The older women continued to sway and move their baskets through the whole dance while younger ones would just stop. The younger women also did not know the Hopi songs as well.

While in many ways subtle changes, these things are indicative of breakdowns in the system. These changes were analyzed in a number of ways by Hopi with whom I spoke. What follows are what I believe are the most significant.

### **1) Language (slide)**

Hopi is a very complex language which sounds nothing like English. There are gendered elements of the language that go far beyond Spanish or French. There are also different ways of speaking about space and time, which is really important for ceremony. All this also influences how rituals are understood or in this case not understood.

Everyone I interviewed saw language preservation as a vital aspect of maintaining the culture and especially the ceremonies. Since the Hopi ceremonial tradition is all oral, it is impossible to learn the “secret knowledge” necessary for initiations of every kind without speaking Hopi, and without members of the secret societies some rituals cannot be performed.

The majority of Hopi thought that the language was in serious risk of dying out. An older man expressed a commonly held view when he said, “The kids aren’t interested in learning the language because of modern society and technology.” When asking a young Hopi if she knew the language, she answered with a resounding “no” that indicated an attitude of, “why would I?” Another contributing factor that was raised was that the adults don’t have time to teach the kids the language as well as Hopi being chided for not having good language skills or a different village dialect.

When I asked if writing down the Hopi ceremonial words was appropriate in order to preserve the ceremonies, I received a wide range of answers. One woman elder told me adamantly that “writing the ceremonial language down will change the tradition and cause it to lose its purpose and sacredness.” Others thought that it could be written down but the initiates must learn the secrets by hearing the ceremonial language, not from a book. An older man from the same village said “speaking the language brings it to life.” Others insisted that the ceremonies be written down in order to preserve them.

### **Initiation (slide)**

Initiation into one of the katsina societies is key to maintaining the ceremonial system. I was told that traditionally, Hopi kids were initiated anywhere from age 10-14, depending on maturity levels. The initiation process is imperative to truly understand who the katsinas are. And the ceremony is dramatic. The children are whipped and then shocked into a period of what Sam Gill calls “disillusionment” by suddenly presenting unmasked katsinas and thus revealing the secret that the katsinas who dance in the village are their relatives. (Slide) Gill says that the initiation is tied to the Bean ceremony called Powamu for an important reason. In that ceremony beans that have been “shocked” into early sprouting are used to begin the spring planting rituals. The beans are like the initiates because they “are forced by heat and water into a state of growth.” While many Hopi believe that this is the best way to teach the children, a child who is too immature might be traumatized in a way that might interfere with learning the ceremony’s meaning.

And what they must learn is a difficult concept to accept. The Hopi see the katsinas as more than humans wearing a mask. Gill says that when a Hopi “dons the mask he loses his identity and actually becomes what he is representing.”

I was told by an older Hopi man that kids have started to be initiated as young as 7, which he thought was too young for them to understand. But some saw initiating the young as a good thing because it would get them involved in ceremonial life earlier. Others said that

initiation needs to occur early to keep children from learning the “secret knowledge” in textbooks at school instead of in the kiva, the only correct place to learn them.

As with the language instruction, there is an issue of time. Uninitiated kids are supposed to receive elaborate gifts that weeks to complete.

### **Dry Farming/hard life/living off the reservation**

Almost every Hopi believed that living off the reservation and not tending to the sacred corn was another huge reason why the ceremonies are dying out. A young man pointing to a photo of a Hopi on a tractor said, “people are lazy so they don’t go out in the fields the old fashion way.” To understand their connection with the spirit world it’s vital that the Hopi perform the dry farming process with traditional tools. Raising corn in ways that require respecting the earth is the way to learn the meaning of life. Hopi blue corn represents that life. The Hopi see themselves as being born from the corn but this must be learned by farming.

Many people on the rez think that Hopi who live other places, just cannot understand what it means to be Hopi. One Hopi reservation resident said that “most of the people at the dances live somewhere else; they just come back for the weekend to **play** Hopi.” Some Hopi, however, attribute the value of the hard life as a reason to return.

### **Conclusion**

Observing the Basket Dance and talking to Hopi people provided an opportunity to get a glimpse of how things are barely being held together despite what looks like minor change. The Hopi know the culture has changed, some just don’t want to admit it. (SLIDE)

How Hopi prophecy plays into what is going on, if at all, is unclear. Some Hopi on the reservation talk about it and believe the demise of their way of life is predestined, but others say that it is simply “non-native talk.” However, many traditional Hopi say, as one man did to me, that “you can change prophecy.”

Prophecy Rock is a drawing that was carved into a rock near Old Oraibi in 1968, at the time of the Indian Rights Movements. It depicts one of the many creation stories in Hopi folklore. In this story the Hopi emerge from the third world into the fourth and are given three

items: water, blue corn seed and a planting stick. (SLIDE) Massaw, the creator god, tells them that there are two ways to live. The first is the Hopi way, the hard life. The other is the non-Hopi way in which people are mischievous and destroy the earth along with the values Massaw gave them. But the message of Prophecy Rock is that you can return to the Hopi way.

As I said earlier, traditional Hopi society functions like cogs in a machine and there are many cogs missing. The hinge to the problem I believe is the failure of interconnectedness between clan and cultural norms that fail to pass on sacred knowledge for various reasons. This leads to the kind of breakdown which makes it impossible to complete the “cycle” which then leads to the decrease in the number of people who know what the ceremonies mean and the desire for them to continue. The breakdown also affects how often the language is used which then leads to fewer initiations thus giving people more reasons to leave the rez. More and more the ceremonies and the language are like historical artifacts learned about in school.

So, on the surface things may not look that bad right now. There are still ceremonies going on all year and Hopis do return and gather to participate in them. Some people still report deep attachment to them. But we may be near the tipping point that holds the structure together. All of the little holes in the system are certain to eventually cause a complete and probably sudden system breakdown at some point. To avoid that, there would have to be a major change in the ceremonial traditions, and I do not see that coming right now. It is not clear to me where the “Hope for the Hopi” lies. All of the “stuff” distributed at the basket dance and other ceremonies may indicate that folks on the rez have begun to look for another kind of prosperity.