

Southwest kachina figures



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This paper endeavors to demonstrate a thematic approach regarding southwest kachina figures. It will present two groups of people who are well-known for kachina carving: the Hopi and the Zuni, American Indians. It will narrate a brief knowledge about the two chosen groups. Furthermore, it will feature a kachina doll from each group and will bestow information about the artworks. Moreover, it will give a critical analysis about Hopi kachina doll and Zuni kachina doll. Native Americans or American Indians are the first inhabitants of America long before the arrival of white European men.

There are about ten million Indians populating the north of present day Mexico and it is believed that they have arrived at approximately 20, 000-30, 000 years ago, during the last ice age through a land bridge stretching from Bering Sound to the northeastern Siberia and Alaska. The name “ Indian” has been first used by Christopher Columbus who mistakenly believes that the mainland and archipelago of America are part of Indies in Asia (“ American Indians”). The Hopi Indians call themselves Hopitu, or The Peacable People, which means good, peaceful and wise.

They originate from the group of Southwestern people called Pueblo. They live in northeast Arizona and southern end of the Black Mesa, a small isolated hill. Their art is an means for them to communicate with their dreams, aspirations, visions, and belief to each other (“ Hopi Civilization”). On the other hand, Zuni Indians are one of the 19 original tribes that inhabited the area that is now known as New Mexico and Arizona. They are also said to have originated from a tribe that occupied the same area last 1, 000 years ago prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

These people are different in a sense that they remain unaffected by outside forces and influences (Kittelton). The Hopi and Zuni are the two well-known groups for their dolls. Zuni creates and produces lesser number of dolls and of less variety compared to Hopi (Wright 9). Kachina dolls are crafted both for ceremonial use and public sale (Neyland 46). The name itself signifies “spirit father” or “life father” (“Kachinas of the Southwest: Dances, Dolls and Rain”). They are considered and believed to be masked spirits of the unseen forces of life. They are dressed in intricate costumes and masks (Neyland 46).

The word Kachina in Hopi depicts a myriad of distinct things that are all associated in their mind. It portrays to the masked and imitation, to the spiritual being and impersonated, to the cloud and to the dead (Kennard and Earle 4). It can also be a supernatural being, a male dancer who represents the supernatural being or a painted wooden doll that represents the male dancer. The significance of kachina in the religious life of Pueblo people is apparent in their various depictions of kachinas in masks, potteries, as well as the great quantity of kachina dolls (“Kachina Dolls”).

Hopi kachina dolls are vital parts of their religious rituals. It also implies Hopi’s importance as bringers of rain (“Kachinas of the Southwest: Dances, Dolls and Rain”) because they are also linked to the powerful ancestor spirits that carry rain in order for the crops to grow (“Hopi Civilization”). They are the people who are most famous for kachina doll carvings even though the Zunis also make some dolls which delineate their spiritual dancers (Neyland 46).

Traditionally, the Hopi kachina doll is carved in a cottonwood root, coated with a layer of kaolin and then painted (Sturtevant 775). They are carved wooden figures that depict the dancers who characterize the spirit figures in public ceremonies. The dolls are bestowed to the Pueblo children to teach the identities of the variety of kachinas and the symbols of their costumes. They are decorated and painted in accordance to their functions (“Hopi Kachina Dolls”). They are precious and important teaching tools and serve as spirit nexus between the child and the kachinas (Day).

On the contrary, Zuni also has a great number of kachinas whom they refer as “koko,” which means the spirit of men who come as ducks to bring rain and administer hunts. They live in the mountains however most of them are at the bottom of the mythical Lake of the Dead in Listening Spring Lake at the junction of the Zuni and Colorado Rivers (“Zuni and Hopi Native Americans”). Zuni kachina dolls have more elaborate arms compared to Hopi.

They are the result of the eighteenth-and-nineteenth century influence of Spanish friars to teach the native Indian artist to carve statues of saints or the churches (qtd. in Berlo and Philips 54). They typically have movable arms and are more linear in physical form (Highwater and Fodor 227). Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls primarily have the same functions because of the fact that “kachina” in both groups of people refer to the supernatural beings or spirits. The Hopi kachina dolls are embodiment of the spirit that they represent. They are also the ones responsible for the various forces of nature. Moreover, they aid the people in finding the right way.

They are also taken home and then hung on the wall to protect a valued possession (“Hopi Kachina Dolls”). On the other hand, Zuni kachina dolls signify its importance just like Hopi’s. They are protective spirits of nature and they bring good fortune. They do personify nature in terms of clouds, tress and sky. They look after the needs and interests of humans, thus they bestow fertility power and long life (“Zuni and Hopi Native American”). They are also designed for educational and religious purposes. They are not idols and are not revered, thus no prayers are being said to them.

To make sure that children are able to recognize and identify the most vital spiritual powers, their friends and relatives are carved in miniature kachina spirit replicas and they are given as gifts. They are being hung over the cradle to bring good health to the child (“Kachina Dolls”). Kachinas, in the forms of dolls or masked dancers, are representations of the spirits of everything on earth from plants to animals to sacred places and ancestors (King et. al. 102). They are presented to infants on both sexes as symbols of good luck.

They are always crafted and carved by men using the dried cottonwood roots. They are covered with thin clay and painted using vegetable colors or minerals (Hirschfelder and Beamer 129). The identity of kachina dolls is delineated in specific shape and form of mask, elaborated use of color and ornamentation such as feathers, leathers and fabrics. They are also being portrayed with the use of different and diverse behavior, dance steps, gestures and vocalizations. The Hopis permit the non-Hopis to see their ritual dances and they also sell kachina dolls to them.

On the contrary, Zunis are more secretive regarding their ritual traditions. The Kachinas come to the Hopi and Zuni peoples between December and July. They carry with them gifts such as rain, good crops, and happiness. They are considered as supernatural beings that assist the people in their struggle with their life. The dolls are representations and symbols of the real and actual Kachina that are being carved from cottonwood root (“Kachinas (Katsina or Katsintithu) and Kachina Dolls”). Kachina dolls are one of the embodiments and representations of American Indian art.

They are hand-made and are done and painted by American artisans. They, like human Kachina dancers, are visual manifestations and representations of the invisible spirits who assist and help in the struggle and fight to the rigors of life. Some ordinary spirits that are portrayed by Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls are the chief, the corn maiden, the ceremonial dancer, and the buffalo. These dolls are spiritual envoys that carry with them special blessings (“Facts on the History of Kachina Dolls”). These dolls imply important manifestations of Native American culture.

It can be hauled that their society is a patriarchal one, if the carving of kachina dolls will be taken into consideration, because these dolls are done in the form of a male and a female. Nevertheless, the doll may be a male or a female, it will still be dressed and adorned as male. The males are also the only ones who execute the Kachina dance ritual. Furthermore, it does convey that males dominate the Native American society. Kachina dolls are essential and fundamental part of Hopi and Zuni life. They also symbolize historical events and things in nature.

Amongst the Hopi, the dolls are conventionally carved and crafted by uncles and are bestowed to uninitiated girls at the Bean Dance, or the Spring Bean Planting Ceremony (“ Facts on the History of Kachina Dolls”). To sum up, kachina dolls are visual allegories of unseen spirits. They are not gods; rather they are purely representations of supernatural beings that vary from the ancestors, and things in nature. They bring good luck, fertility and power. They are also religious educational tools for children. They convey historical and cultural accounts in the life of the Hopi and Zuni of Native America.