

PUEBLO PEOPLES BELIEFS, TRADITIONS, AND RITUALS

Zuni, Acoma, Taos, Santo Domingo, and the Living Traditions of the Ancestral Southwest

The Pueblo is not the building.
The Pueblo is the community — the people who have lived
in the same houses on the same mesas
for a thousand years.
Acoma Pueblo has been continuously inhabited since approximately 1150 CE.
The kiva is not a meeting room.
It is the opening in the earth through which the ancestors breathe.

CONTENTS

- A Note on Sacred Knowledge and Pueblo Sovereignty
- Introduction — Who the Pueblo Peoples Are
- Part One — The Eastern Pueblos: Rio Grande Traditions
- Part Two — The Western Pueblos: Zuni and Hopi (Cross-Reference)
- Part Three — The Ancestral Puebloans (Anasazi): The Deep History
- Part Four — The Pueblo Revolt of 1680: The Most Successful Indigenous Uprising
- Part Five — Pueblo Cosmology: The Emergence and the Four Worlds
- Part Six — The Kachina Tradition in Pueblo Peoples (Beyond Hopi)
- Part Seven — THE KIVA: The Sacred Underground Chamber
- Part Eight — The Kiva — Complete Sacred Protocol
- Part Nine — ZUNI: A:shiwi Traditions and the Shalako Ceremony
- Part Ten — The Shalako Ceremony — Step-by-Step
- Part Eleven — ACOMA: Sky City and the Living Tradition
- Part Twelve — TAOS PUEBLO: The Two-House Sacred Community
- Part Thirteen — The Blue Lake Ceremony and Water as Sacred
- Part Fourteen — Rain Ceremonies: Calling Water to the Desert
- Part Fifteen — The Rain Dance — Step-by-Step
- Part Sixteen — Corn: The Sacred Plant of Pueblo Life
- Part Seventeen — The Corn Dance (Tablita) — Step-by-Step
- Part Eighteen — Sacred Pottery: Vessels as Sacred Containers
- Part Nineteen — The Clown Societies: Koshari and Sacred Inversion
- Part Twenty — Death and the Kachina Spirit World
- Part Twenty-One — The Haligrity Lens: The Kiva and Sacred Community

A Note on Sacred Knowledge and Pueblo Sovereignty

The Pueblo peoples maintain one of the most carefully protected bodies of sacred knowledge in any Indigenous tradition. Many Pueblo communities distinguish explicitly between what may be shared publicly and what is held as sacred community property — the specific prayers, the specific songs, the specific ceremonial content of the most sacred ceremonies are not appropriate to document outside the community. This document presents what Pueblo cultural representatives, scholars working with tribal permission, and publicly available tribal sources have shared. The specific content of restricted ceremonies is not included.

Who the Pueblo Peoples Are

The Pueblo peoples are the Indigenous nations of the American Southwest who live in permanent masonry or adobe villages (pueblos — from the Spanish word for 'town,' applied by Spanish colonizers to describe the multi-story stone and adobe settlements they encountered). Today there are 19 officially recognized Pueblo nations in New Mexico and one — Hopi — in Arizona (covered in the dedicated Hopi document). Despite sharing the pueblo architectural tradition and many cultural features, the Pueblo peoples are not a single nation — they speak languages from at least four distinct language families (Tanoan, Keresan, Zuni, and Hopi) and maintain distinct cultural and ceremonial traditions.

THE PUEBLO PEOPLES — OVERVIEW

EASTERN PUEBLOS (RIO GRANDE): The pueblos along the Río Grande corridor in New Mexico — Taos, Picurís, Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan), Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Nambé, Tesuque, Pojoaque, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Zia, Jémez, Sandia, and Isleta. These communities maintained close geographic relationships with Spanish colonial authorities from 1598 onward and developed specific strategies for preserving their sacred traditions under sustained pressure. **WESTERN PUEBLOS:** Zuni (A:shiwí) in western New Mexico — the largest single-village Pueblo with approximately 10,000 members — and the Hopi villages of Arizona (covered in the dedicated Hopi document). Zuni and Hopi maintained greater geographic distance from Spanish colonial centers. **ACOMA PUEBLO (HAAKU):** Called 'Sky City' — a mesa-top pueblo approximately 357 feet above the surrounding valley floor, inhabited since approximately 1150 CE. Acoma is recognized as the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. Its position on the mesa was both a defensive strategy and a sacred statement: the community lives closer to the sky world than to the ground. **LANGUAGES:** The Pueblo peoples speak languages from four completely unrelated families — Tanoan (Tiwa, Tewa, Towa dialects, spoken by most Río Grande pueblos), Keresan (spoken by Acoma, Laguna, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, and Zia), Zuni (a language isolate — like the Tonkawa language of Texas, Zuni has no known linguistic relatives), and Hopi (Uto-Aztecan family).

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680

The Most Successful Indigenous Uprising in North American History

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 is the most successful Indigenous uprising against European colonialism in the history of North America — the only instance in which an Indigenous people succeeded in permanently expelling European colonizers from their territory (for 12 years) and negotiating the terms of their return. Understanding the Revolt is essential to understanding contemporary Pueblo sacred life, because the Revolt was fundamentally a religious revolution — a resistance to the Spanish suppression of Pueblo sacred traditions that ended in the physical expulsion of Spanish colonial authority and the restoration of Pueblo ceremony.

THE PUEBLO REVOLT — THE SACRED DIMENSION

THE SUPPRESSION: Beginning with the Spanish arrival in 1598 under Juan de Oñate (whose initial conquest involved extreme violence including the amputation of one foot from every male survivor of the Acoma siege of 1599), Spanish colonial authorities systematically suppressed Pueblo sacred practices. Kiva ceremonies were forbidden. Sacred masks and ceremonial objects were burned. Pueblo religious leaders were whipped, hanged, or enslaved for practicing their traditions. By the 1670s, the suppression had become severe enough to trigger specific resistance. **POPE:** The leader of the revolt — a Tewa-speaking Pueblo man from Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan Pueblo), also called Po'pay — organized the most politically sophisticated Indigenous uprising in North American history. Working from Taos Pueblo in the north, he coordinated simultaneous uprisings across all 19 pueblos — speaking at least six different languages and representing genuinely distinct political communities — scheduled for August 11, 1680. **THE REVOLT:** On August 10 (moved up one day when the Spanish discovered the plan), the Pueblo peoples rose simultaneously across New Mexico, killing approximately 400 Spanish colonists and 21 of the 33 Franciscan missionaries. The surviving Spanish — including the governor Antonio de Otermín — fled south to El Paso del Norte. The Pueblo peoples had successfully expelled the Spanish colonial presence from their homeland. **THE 12-YEAR FREEDOM AND THE NEGOTIATED RETURN:** The Spanish returned in 1692 under Diego de Vargas. This time, however, the terms were different — the Spanish colonial authorities agreed (tacitly but effectively) that the most aggressive suppression of Pueblo sacred practice would not be resumed. The kiva ceremonies were not openly suppressed again in the same way. The Pueblo Revolt established a precedent of Pueblo resistance that shaped the entire subsequent history of colonial-Pueblo relations.

Zuni: The Shalako Ceremony

Step-by-Step

The Shalako ceremony — held in late November or early December at Zuni Pueblo — is one of the most elaborate and most theologically complete ceremonial events in any Indigenous tradition. It is the culmination of the Zuni sacred year: the annual return of the Shalako (giant bird messengers of the rain gods, represented by 10-foot costumed figures) to bless newly built homes and to renew the community's relationship with the spirit world.

THE SHALAKO CEREMONY — STEP-BY-STEP

TIMING: The ceremony is timed to the winter solstice and the specific position of the Pleiades — announced approximately a year in advance. The specific date is set by the Pekwin (the Zuni Sun Priest) based on his astronomical observations. **YEAR-LONG PREPARATION:** The Shalako ceremony requires a full year of preparation — the families who will host the Shalako figures in their homes must complete or expand those homes to accommodate the 10-foot figures, must produce specific quantities of food for the feast, and must undertake specific ceremonial obligations throughout the preparation year. **THE KACHINA COUNCIL:** Throughout the preparation year, the Koyemshi (Mudhead clowns — the Zuni equivalent of the sacred clown societies) serve as intermediaries between the living community and the spirit world, conveying the community's preparations and prayers to the Kachina spirits. **STEP 1 — THE RETURN OF THE COUNCIL OF THE GODS:** The ceremony begins with the return of the Council of the Gods — supernatural figures including Sayaykia (the warrior), the Salimopiya (guardian figures), and others — who enter the village from the sacred directions and conduct specific ceremonies at the sacred locations within the village. **STEP 2 — THE ARRIVAL OF THE SHALAKO:** At nightfall, the six Shalako figures (giant bird messengers, each approximately 10 feet tall, operated by Zuni men inside the costume) emerge from the Zuni River and enter the village — crossing a footbridge that spans the divide between the spirit world and the human world. Their arrival is one of the most dramatically powerful ceremonial moments in any Native American tradition. **STEP 3 — THE ALL-NIGHT CEREMONY IN THE SHALAKO HOUSES:** Each Shalako figure enters a specific host house and performs the all-night ceremony — dancing, reciting the entire Zuni cosmological and historical narrative (the 'talk of the Shalako,' which can take hours to recite), blessing the house and its occupants, and receiving specific offerings from the host family and the assembled community. **STEP 4 — THE DAWN RACE:** As the sun rises, the Shalako figures emerge from the houses and race through the village — the racing is understood as the Shalako testing their strength and the community's readiness for the blessing to hold. **STEP 5 — THE DEPARTURE:** The Shalako figures return to the spirit world, crossing back over the river bridge. Their departure closes the ceremony — but the blessing of the houses and the community is understood as lasting for the year until their return.

The Rain Dance

Calling Water to the Desert — Step-by-Step

The Rain Dance — or more accurately, the Rain Ceremony — is the most widely known Pueblo ceremonial form outside the Pueblo communities and also the most misunderstood. It is not merely a dance asking for rain. It is a ceremony of sacred reciprocity — the community offering their most concentrated and most sustained sacred attention to the spirit world, and the spirit world responding with the specific gift that the desert community's survival requires: water.

THE RAIN CEREMONY — STRUCTURE AND STEP-BY-STEP

THE KIVA PREPARATION (DAYS BEFORE): The ceremony begins not in the plaza but in the kiva — with days of prayer, song, and the specific preparations conducted by the medicine societies responsible for rain ceremony. The prayer sticks (pahos) are made, the specific altars are constructed inside the kiva, and the ceremonial leaders conduct the restricted kiva portion of the ceremony that precedes the public plaza ceremony. **STEP 1 — THE EMERGENCE FROM THE KIVA:** At the appointed time (typically dawn or specific time of day), the dancers emerge from the kiva through the hatchway — the emergence from below replicates the emergence of the people from the underworld, and each dance ceremony is a reperformance of that original sacred event. **STEP 2 — THE PROCESSION TO THE PLAZA:** The dancers process to the village plaza — typically two lines, male dancers alternating with female dancers (or in some traditions, male dancers with female singers flanking the group). The specific costumes, specific body paint, specific items carried by each dancer are all precisely specified by the ceremony's requirements and the dancer's specific ceremonial role. **STEP 3 — THE DANCE:** The dance itself — the specific footfall patterns, the specific movements of the gourd rattles, the specific body postures — is the prayer made physical. The dancers are not performing for an audience; they are conducting a ceremony that does something. The difference between a Rain Dance and a theatrical recreation of a Rain Dance is the difference between surgery and a film about surgery. **STEP 4 — THE SONGS:** The accompanying singers (in some traditions, the dancers themselves sing; in others, a separate choir sings) perform specific songs in specific languages that carry specific prayers. The songs are not in modern forms of the Pueblo languages but in archaic sacred language that has been maintained specifically for ceremonial use — in some cases, in a language no longer spoken in ordinary life. **STEP 5 — THE MULTIPLE SETS:** A full rain ceremony typically involves multiple sets of dances through the day — the dancers retire to rest and eat between sets, then return. The full ceremony may last from before dawn to after sunset, with the prayers accumulating in intensity through the day. **STEP 6 — THE DISTRIBUTION OF SACRED FOOD:** At specific intervals, the women of the hosting clan distribute food to the community — the specific foods are part of the ceremony's sacred language, each food associated with specific sacred qualities and specific relationships with the spirit world.

The Haligricity Lens

The Kiva and Sacred Community

The Pueblo tradition offers Haligricity the most complete available model of what it means for a community to maintain a specific sacred place — the kiva — as the living threshold between the ordinary and the sacred world, tended continuously, entered with specific protocol, and understood as the point from which the community's relationship with the spirit world is renewed through every ceremony.

The Emergence and the Sacred Container

Every kiva maintains a sipapu — the small hole in the floor representing the emergence point through which the ancestors came from the world below. Every ceremony conducted in the kiva is a renewal of the original emergence: the people entering the kiva descend into the below-world relationship, conduct their sacred work in that relationship, and emerge back into the ordinary world changed by what happened below. This is the most complete available spatial model of what the Haligric Rituals book is doing when it describes how to open and close sacred space — the kiva is the most sustained, most institutionally complete, and most architecturally specific expression of the sacred container concept in any tradition.

Acoma has been on that mesa for nine hundred years. The same houses, the same kivas, the same ceremonies — nine hundred years of continuous maintenance of the specific relationship between this community and the spirit world. The Pueblo Revolt established that this maintenance is not negotiable: the Pueblo people expelled a colonial power that tried to interrupt it. The kiva hatchway opens downward into the earth, and through it, every ceremony is a descent into the ancestor relationship and an emergence back into the ordinary world carrying what the ancestor relationship provides. The hole in the kiva floor is the hole through which all the people came. It stays open. Grand Rising.

*"The rain comes because the ceremony is done correctly.
The ceremony is done correctly because the people remember who they are.
The people remember who they are because the kiva is still open."*

— Pueblo understanding of ceremonial continuity

Acoma Pueblo: inhabited since approximately 1150 CE. The Shalako still crosses the river at Zuni every December. The kiva sipapu is still there. The Corn Dance still moves through the plaza at Santo Domingo every August. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 remains the only successful permanent expulsion of a European colonial power in North American history. The tradition earned its survival. Grand Rising.

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