



## KACHINAS

Kachinas are an important element in the religious life and practice of Southwestern Pueblo peoples. Kachinas are spirit beings that personify elements of the natural world. Some represent the sun, or the moon or the stars. Others represent qualities such as bravery or honor or loyalty and reverence for ancestors. Still others represent natural phenomena like rain or wind or corn. Because each Pueblo community remains free to create and employ kachinas for its specific needs, there are hundreds of different kachinas in Hopi and Pueblo culture.

It is important to remember that kachinas are not gods. They are part of Pueblo and Hopi religious practice, but they are NOT worshipped. Each kachina is a very powerful being who can either use his power for good or choose to ignore the entreaties of communities in need. The basis for making that choice is the people's proper veneration and respect for the kachina and the natural element he represents. Kachinas are not whimsical. They represent the moral values of Pueblo and Hopi societies: a belief that life exists in everything everywhere, therefore, everything in nature is to be treated with respect. People, animals, plants, relationships, elders, seasons, the sun and moon, as well as phenomena like rain, wind and snow all contain a spiritual nature. Kachinas represent the positive elements of nature, prosperity, abundance, harmony and life. If a community follows the moral values and respects the life force in everything that surrounds it, then the kachinas use their power and influence to maintain prosperity and abundance. If communities fail to honor their surroundings, relationships or others, then the kachinas do not use their powers to influence the gods to provide those elements necessary for life. As a result, droughts, poor harvests, wars and famine materialize. Until the community returns to the practices that promote harmony and peace, the kachinas cannot assist in their survival.

The origin of the kachinas depends entirely upon which Native American creation story is being followed. The common element among all of them seems to be that the kachinas emerged together with humans from the dark center of the earth. The two lived together for a long period and peace, prosperity and harmony reigned. Then, for one reason or another, depending upon the Native American society, the people chose disharmony (war), or disrespect (failure to honor nature) and the kachinas had to leave. As they departed, they left behind the costumes and symbols of their powers. They instructed males who had retained respect for them in the dances, costuming and rituals that would appeal to the kachinas' positive nature. These men, then, established the ritual pattern of life that begins in January and lasts throughout the year. This pattern includes the symbolic return of the kachinas in dances and festivals that coincide with the seasons and the planting/harvest cycle. Proper respect for the kachinas shown through the proper preparation of costume, the correctness of the dancing, and the giving and receiving of gifts enhances the possibilities for prosperity, harmony and abundance for all throughout the year.



Kachinas are, then, symbols of the duties, responsibilities and obligations that Pueblo and Hopi communities incorporate into a proper spiritual existence. It is a relationship of mutual obligations. The people are to live in harmony with each other and with nature, as the kachinas have instructed. In return, the kachinas employ their power and influence to insure and maintain prosperity and abundance for the community. On both sides of this relationship lies the fundamental premise of honoring the life force that exists in everything, everywhere.