

People of the Corn

*Teachings in Hopi Traditional Agriculture, Spirituality,
and Sustainability*

DENNIS WALL AND VIRGIL MASAYESVA

This article describes aspects of a unique relationship between an ancient agricultural practice and the culture that it sustains. Hopi agriculture, known as “dry farming” because it relies strictly on precipitation and runoff water (along with hard work and prayer), has kept the Hopi culture intact for nearly a thousand years. But aside from the sustenance it provides the people of the high desert of northern Arizona, corn enters into nearly every aspect of traditional Hopi life, contributing to values development, the sharing and passing on of tradition, and the celebration and connection with the Great Mystery.

The authors of this article are members of the staff of the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals (ITEP), a tribal training and support organization based at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. ITEP’s work involves helping tribes to build capacity in their environmental management programs. The institute’s work centers on air quality management training but also addresses other media, including drinking water, wastewater, and solid waste, as well as challenges that tribes face with environmental toxins such as nuclear waste and heavy-metal deposition. Virgil Masayesva, director of ITEP is a member of the Hopi Tribe and was raised in the village of Hotevilla on Third Mesa on his family’s farm (mentioned below), located in a valley that his family calls *Hopaq*. Dennis Wall, an Arizona native, is an author, longtime freelance writer-photographer, and ITEP’s editor.

After their Emergence into the Fourth World, the clans that would one day comprise the Hopi people approached the Guardian Spirit, Masaw, in the region that is now northwest Arizona and asked his permission to settle

there. Masaw recognized that the clan people's former life, which they knew was not bringing them happiness, had been given over to ambition, greed, and social competition. He looked into their hearts and saw that these qualities remained, and so he had his doubts that the people could follow his way. "Whether you can stay here is up to you," he told them.

Masaw warned the clan people that the life he had to offer them was very different from what they had before. To show them that life, Masaw gave the people a planting stick, a bag of seeds, and a gourd of water. He handed them a small ear of blue corn and told them, "Here is my life and my spirit. This is what I have to give you."

There is a distinction between the one true Hopi, Masaw, and the people who follow his way. Masaw is the true embodiment of a Hopi; the people who follow his way are merely Hopi *Senom*, or People of the Hopi. Following common tradition, however, members of the Hopi Tribe discussed in this article will be referred to as "Hopi."

To be Hopi is to embrace peace and cooperation, to care for the Earth and all of its inhabitants, to live within the sacred balance. It is a life of reverence shared by all the good people of Earth, all those in tune with their world. This manner of living lies beneath the complexities of *wimi*, or specialized knowledge, which can provide stability and wisdom but when misused can also foster division and strife.

Deeper still in the lives of traditional Hopi people lies the way of Masaw, a way of humility and simplicity, of forging a sacred bond between themselves and the land that sustains them. Masaw's way is embodied in corn. At the time of the Emergence, Masaw offered the clan people a manner of living that would not be easy. Dry-farming in the high desert of northern Arizona, relying only on precipitation and runoff water, requires an almost miraculous level of faith and is sustained by hard work, prayer, and an attitude of deep humility. Following the way of Masaw, the Hopi people have tended to their corn for nearly a millennium, and the corn has kept them whole.

For traditional Hopis corn is the central bond. Its essence, physically, spiritually, and symbolically, pervades their existence. For the people of the mesas corn is sustenance, ceremonial object, prayer offering, symbol, and sentient being unto itself. Corn is the Mother in the truest sense—the people take in the corn and the corn becomes their flesh, as mother's milk becomes the flesh of the child. Corn is also regarded as the child, as



Part of the Masayesva family fields.

when the wife of a farmer tends to the seeds and newly received harvest, blessing and ritually washing the corn, talking and singing to the seeds and ears. The connection between the people and the corn is pervasive and deeply sacred. In a remarkable symbiosis between the physical and the spiritual, the Hopi people sustain the corn and the corn sustains Hopi culture.

Victor Masayesva Sr. remembers as a young man in the 1920s and 1930s working just after dawn in his family's cornfields north of the village of *Kykotsmovi*. He could hear other farmers up and down the valley, a place his family calls *Hopaq*, as they sang to their corn plants. "That's how you take care of the plants," he says. "You sing to them, because they're just like humans, they have their own lives, and they like to hear you singing to them."

The Hopis' intimate relationship with corn is a bond that reaches back for centuries (terraced fields near the village of *Paaqavi* have been farmed since at least AD 1200). That bond reflects their profound reliance on the plant to sustain them in both good and difficult times. Even in this century, says Masayesva, there have been winters when corn, dried and carefully stored, was essentially the only food available to the Hopi people.

In the early 1940s, when his two brothers were drafted into World War



Victor Masayesva Sr. (Duplicate of a family photo, year unknown.)

II, Masayesva considered moving to Phoenix to continue his work in highway construction. He spoke with his father, who told him, "I'm getting old, and soon I won't be able to take care of our fields any longer. I want you to take over the farming. This is your decision. If you choose to be a farmer, you won't get rich, but you can sustain not only yourself but your family, and there are other benefits. It's going to take a lot of hard work. You have to be able to accept that responsibility."

Masayesva spoke with some of the elders at Hotevilla, his village on Third Mesa. They told him that to be a farmer would be a good thing—the fundamental Hopi way. After careful consideration he made his decision, and he has been tending his family's fields, probably the largest fields remaining at Hopi, ever since.

"One of the things that Masaw wanted the people to do was to plant, to be farmers," Masayesva says. "A long time ago I spoke with one of the last major chiefs in this village. He told me he wished he were in my place. He had certain religious responsibilities, obligations, and he and the other priests were concerned that they might not fulfill those obligations. He told me, 'You're like a child, you don't have these things weighing down on you.'" The priest told Masayesva that he was living the simple life that Masaw had offered the people, and in doing so, he was blessed.

Masayesva says that farming is a crucial element in a way of life that binds the people, the corn, and the sacred mystery. Hopi farmers believe that singing to the plants is much like photosynthesis, that the songs energize and rejuvenate the plants. "It's all tied together. When you first plant your seeds, you take very good care of them, and when the plants come up, you go and sing to the plants, and the plants dance in rhythm to the song. That's how we were taught, and it is a practice we continue."

To test the strength and character of the clans, Masaw instructed them to travel in the four directions, to make their way in a difficult world and face the hardships that would determine whether they might come back and follow the life he offered to them. He told the clan people that at some point he would signal them that it was time to return.

Thus began the Migration Period, marked now throughout the Southwest and beyond by stone ruins and other structures, by petroglyphs and pictographs, and on a more subtle level by the spirits of the people who lived and died along the way.

During their journeys the clan people relied on corn as a primary means

of survival. The varieties of corn they carried and cultivated were uniquely suited to the harsh, unforgiving environment in which they would eventually settle. During their travels they learned how to plant, cultivate, and protect the corn, how to use carefully developed techniques to sustain the plants, to channel water and discourage pests. Along with these things they learned precise methods of prayer and ceremony to ensure a harvest that might mean the difference between survival and starvation. No one can fathom the hardships they faced or which clans were left behind; those who were unable to embrace Masaw's way probably did not survive.

Sometime later Masaw sent out his signal, and slowly the surviving clans began moving back toward the Hopi Mesas. First to return were the people of the Bear Clan, who were told that their land included all that lay between the Colorado and Rio Grande rivers—with three mesas forming the spiritual center point. Soon they had founded and settled the village of Oraibi on Third Mesa. More clans followed, and in time a new community, a new tribe called Hopi, was formed.

One by one, other clans came to the mesas and demonstrated their special skills and talents. Over time, through careful negotiation among the different groups, a covenant was established that they would reject the old practice of clan selfishness and instead contribute to the whole of the newly forming tribe.

The clans settled in their separate villages on the mesas. In doing so they became one, the People of the Hopi. They planted their fields in valleys and canyons with the small, resilient corn that Masaw had given them, corn as hardy and sturdy as the people, and the corn and the people were able to survive. The harshness of the land was indeed the reason that Masaw had provided this place for the clan people, for in such a place only a life of humility, balance, and hard work would ensure their survival. Their shared hardship was the prime bond that held them together.

The Hopi developed ceremonial and spiritual practices common to all the clans, though they also kept their unique clan ways. The villages grew in number, the people kept to Masaw's way, and the corn kept the people whole, sustaining for a thousand years a culture unique in its richness, diversity, and pervasive spirituality.

Hopi corn farming is an endless cycle; the very seeds used now to plant blue, red, white, and yellow Hopi corn arise from a lineage that reaches back for many centuries. The tough, smallish plants have been bred to

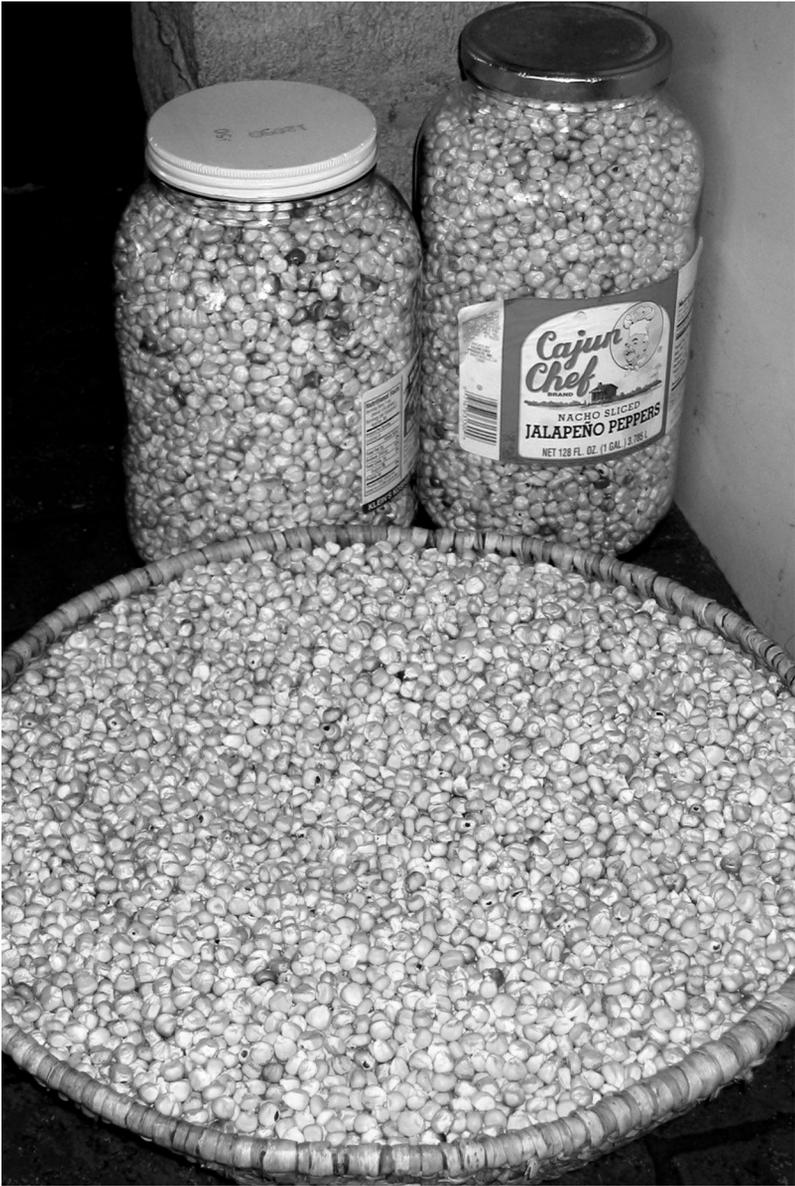
provide sustenance in an unforgiving environment. Agricultural methods developed by the Hopi people—such as planting the seeds deep in the soil and tending to them carefully by hand throughout the growing season—have resulted in an agricultural efficiency known in few other places on Earth. Hopi farming endures strictly through the bounty of the universe. Known as “dry farming,” it employs techniques that take advantage of drainage and runoff but relies primarily on whatever precipitation falls in a given season.

Prayer and supplication, embodied most publicly in the dances of the *katsinas*, are religious/cultural practices woven deep into the daily lives of traditional Hopis. Through ritual and ceremony the people entreat the spirits of the earth, the sky, the mountains, and the clouds to bring the rain, to tame the wind, to provide a bounty in the fields year after year. This all-embracing focus on sacred ceremony is a powerful cultural binder, guiding the people in common purpose as it sustains a rich cultural tapestry of spirituality, work, and tradition.

WINTER AND EARLY SPRING

To choose an arbitrary “starting point” for a year’s agricultural cycle at Hopi, one can look first to late winter when the *katsinas* descend from the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff to enter the villages and dance for rain and regeneration. The *katsinas* dance for the vitality not only of the Hopi people and their crops but for the bird world, the insect world, the reptile and amphibian worlds, the world of plants and animals and humans everywhere on Earth. They dance so that the living world will continue.

In the *kivas* in late winter special ceremonies are performed, including the planting of bean sprouts. The *kiva* chief monitors the growth of the plants with a close eye, as the sprouts are harbingers of the level of success the people can expect in the fields during the coming year. The relationship between the bean sprouts and the fall harvest exists on many levels, some of which cannot be shared with those outside the societies. Perhaps the most understandable is the practical relationship between plants and tenders: If the sprouts grow strong and hardy, those responsible for cultivating them will probably exercise equal care in the fields. A duty of the *kiva* chief is to admonish those whose sprouts are allowed to dry out or come up weak and spindly.



Yellow corn ready for planting.

In the home farmers ask their wives what will be needed in the coming year's harvest. The wives of Hopi farmers are responsible for drying and storing seed stock from the previous year, for securing the seeds and dried corn from rodents and deterioration, and for keeping track of each year's planting needs—for both food and ceremony. These are skills and knowledge they pass on to their grandchildren, daughters, and nieces. The contribution of Hopi women to the longevity of these hardy varieties of corn cannot be overstated; through their understanding and keen eyes and careful genetic selectivity, Hopi women have kept the corn extant for centuries.

Zetta Masayesva, who has resided in the Hopi village of Hotevilla for many decades, describes her intuitive approach to selecting seed stock: "When I choose the seed corn I don't care if the ear is long or short, as long as the kernels look hard. Those are the ones that will come up. You can tell which ones are weak. We pick the ones that are strong, that will germinate. We know how to pick the ones that are not so good."

A traditional Hopi farmer married to a Hopi woman does not plant for himself but for his wife's family. Each year before planting begins his wife advises him on the quantities and types of corn needed to provide for the food and ceremonial needs of her family and perhaps others as well. The man in turn tells his wife how many gunnysacks of each type of corn seed that he will need to plant his fields, and she prepares them.

The corn planted each year will be used for a variety of purposes: for food, for ceremonial use, to contribute to weddings and other social events, for use during prayer, and as material for rituals performed by Hopi secret societies that cannot be shared with outsiders or even with other Hopis who do not belong to those societies. A farmer's wife must have a clear sense of these varied needs and how best to satisfy them in the coming harvest. Her understanding of the different needs for corn requires intimate knowledge of Hopi culture and religious and ceremonial practice. A woman who can determine the quantities and types of corn needed for the coming year holds a bounty of general knowledge of the Hopi way. Over time she will pass that knowledge on to her sons and daughters, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren.

Before the seeds leave the home, the woman blesses them with prayer and a symbolic washing, a sprinkling of water. She talks to the corn seeds, wishing them good fortune as they grow into new plants. She tells them that she looks forward to seeing them again when they return at harvest

time. Zetta Masayesva describes her relationship to the seed stock: “It’s kind of like a mother taking care of a child. You take special care, you wash their hair, talk to them, prepare them—in this case, for planting.”

Victor Masayesva visits his fields in March to study them and prepare for cultivation. How much moisture has been retained in the soil? Has erosion caused runoff that must be repaired? Are there worms present? Some farmers plant in March, gambling on a frostless early spring. Sometimes they are lucky; other times the seedlings are frost-burned and killed off, though most of the hardy plants will regenerate new seedlings within a few weeks. Masayesva generally plants in mid-May, pursuing a conservative, reliable method that has never failed him.

Spring is a time when the family comes to Hopi from all over to assist in the planting. It is a period for renewing family bonds, for sharing stories and experiences, for working together toward a common, important purpose. In earlier times only the men would plant. These days female family members assist in the fields as well. The women are also responsible for providing food for all during the laborious planting process.

Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, the Hopi Tribe’s cultural preservation officer and resident of Bacavi (*Paaqavi*) village on Third Mesa, recalls when he was a boy in the 1950s, around the end of the horse-drawn plow era of Hopi farming. He says farm work creates good children and responsible adults.

Back when agriculture was widespread—and unfortunately that is declining these days—part of a boy’s role was to get out there farming, learning the hardships, dealing with the environment, listening to his grandfather and father and uncles. I remember watching my grandfather saddling up the burro early in the morning. If my grandmother was packing a noon snack, we knew we would be out all day. At that moment my heart sank. It was hard work, and there were times when I hated it. But if grandmother was just packing water, I would be so happy because we would be home by noon and I could play!

The hardships of his youthful farming days, Kuwanwisiwma says, may have seemed like heavy burdens then, but they have come to shape his adulthood, instilling in him an appreciation for hard work, for patience and faith, and for being able to put off the rewards of success in favor of duty and responsibility.



Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, cultural preservation officer for the Hopi tribe.

In the fields of his youth, as he prepared the soil and repaired drainage channels, as he planted the corn seeds and offered them their first small taste of water, Kuwanwisiwma was developing a fundamental connection with the earth. His labor involved hoeing the soil, checking for and removing worms, thinning the plants, channeling runoff, helping to erect windbreaks, and building stick shelters around the plants to keep

crows and coyotes away. As he performed these tasks, he learned about farming, nature, the animal world, weather and wind, the rhythms of life. Now he teaches the same knowledge and skills and, he hopes, the deeper lessons they hold, to his young son.

LATE SPRING AND SUMMER

After planting, a traditional Hopi farmer spends much of his time in the fields, tending each plant with loving care. It is a labor-intensive way of farming. Often family members work alongside him; in these days of outside jobs and distant residences, their times together on the farm are perhaps more important for family cohesion than ever before.

There are numerous concerns in spring and summer: Worms are a constant threat and must be removed by hand from individual plants; ravens and other animals must be discouraged through various means; and if the field lies in a runoff path, the shaping of channels and dikes is ongoing, especially in a wet year (the current multiyear drought has presented its own challenges). In the fields the farmer relies on knowledge, faith, and prayer. In the villages the *katsinas* dance to bring rain that will allow the plants to germinate and grow to fruition.

During late summer and early fall sweet corn is sometimes harvested and roasted in stone-lined, underground steaming ovens. Victor Masayesva's oven is located on the edge of one of his fields alongside a shallow arroyo. The oven is primed with a wood fire and the corn is heaped inside and sealed off at the top. The steaming process takes all night. Masayesva arises from bed several times during the night to check that the oven remains completely sealed, ensuring a well-steamed batch of corn which, when ready, will be shared heartily by family members or dried for later use.

AUTUMN AND THE HARVEST

When the corn plants have grown to four or five feet tall, when the ears are filling out and their husks have begun to crack with dryness, harvesting begins. This is another time in which the family gathers. Plants are knocked down and ears are harvested and tossed into truck beds to be carried home to the women of the family.

In Hopi tradition it is never proper for a man to simply bring the corn



A corn-roasting pit beside the field.

into the home, lay it down somewhere and tell the woman, “There you are.” Instead corn is presented directly by the man, and the woman steps forward to receive it. Her receiving is a way of honoring him, as his personal, respectful presentation honors her.

When the corn harvest arrives Zetta Masayesva welcomes the ears into her home, thanking them for growing well and providing food for her family. Her long-held tradition, common for traditional Hopi women, is

to handle each ear separately, greeting each one and talking to it as she examines it for quality and firmness.

There is another reason why the woman spends so much time touching and examining the harvest: She is searching for a small number of perfect ears, which she will set aside for ceremonial and ritual use. The ears she seeks are generally small and always elegant in form: large at the bottom, tapering smoothly to narrow tops, the end kernels arranged in perfect symmetry. These “Corn Mothers” will serve a variety of ceremonial needs—and not merely as “symbols,” for to the Hopi people, corn is the Mother in a very real sense.

Drying and storage of corn are the domain of Hopi women. Ears are sorted and placed in their respective stacks. The Hopi tradition is to stack the ears neatly in the home in overlapping form. Some use boxes these days to store their corn; Zetta Masayesva frowns on that practice, but modern ways have crept into Hopi agricultural practices and many have shifted to more labor-efficient methods.

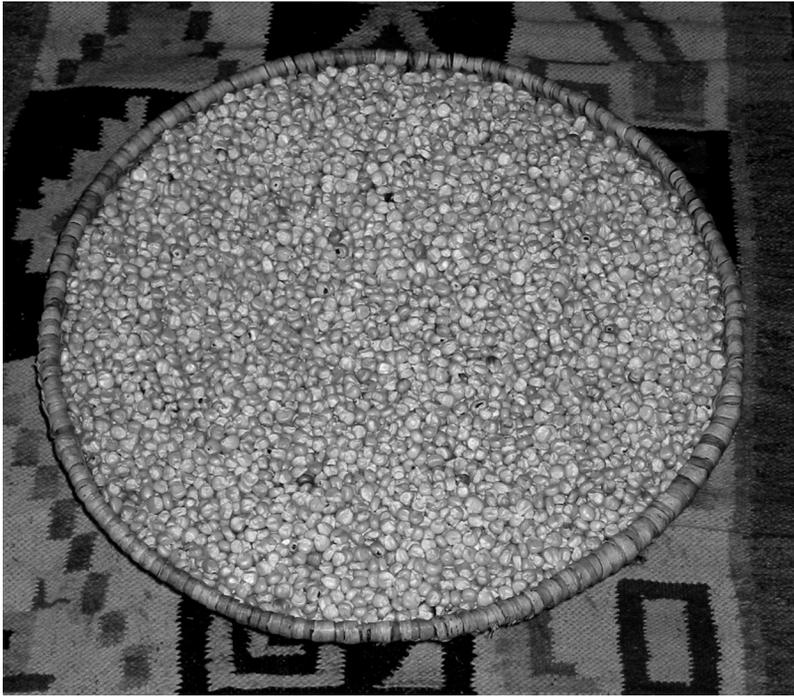
WINTER AND THE VARIETIES OF CORN-BASED FOOD

Soon after the harvest is separated, dried, and stored, winter sets in. During the winter season, which can be bitterly cold on the mesas, and throughout the year, corn is a basic dietary component for the Hopi people.

A staple for Hopi meals is *piki*, a paper-thin, layered bread made most often from ground blue corn, water, and ashes, cooked by hand on a special flat stone (other varieties of corn are also used for *piki* including a delicious red-corn *piki* mixed with chili peppers). Zetta Masayesva says she, like most Hopi females, has been making *piki* since childhood. “I pat it down with my palms onto the hot stone. I’ve done it all my life, like most Hopi women, so we don’t feel the heat of the stone on our hands.”

Corn is steamed and dried or simply allowed to dry. It is used to make hominy, often eaten directly off the cob; for pudding (red corn is generally the variety used), heaped into a bowl and taken in pinches by the diners; for *somiviki*, small balls of cooked cornmeal wrapped and tied into husks; and eaten in various other forms, including steamed and roasted sweet corn.

For centuries corn grinding has been a formative social experience for Hopi girls. The work, performed by hand using grinding stones some-



Hopi yellow corn.



Piki bread made from blue and red corn.



Hominy, a favorite Hopi food item.

times referred to by the Spanish terms *mano* and *metate*, is grueling, akin to the difficult labor that boys face in the fields. Grinding is a social bonding event for girls; as they work side by side they talk, joke, tell stories, and share cultural knowledge. Most important in terms of Hopi culture, it is a time when young girls learn to take their traditional place in the family, to accept their gender-based role as provider and nurturer in the home, and to learn the value and necessity of hard work.

CEREMONIAL USES OF CORN

The sacred nature of corn is reflected in its pervasive use in Hopi society not only for food but as ritual and ceremonial material. Secret Hopi societies use corn in a variety of ways, but outsiders are not privy to those uses. Across the many clans that make up the Hopi people, however, corn has universal uses related to celebrating, praying, and maintaining the people's connection to the Infinite.

In ground form white corn is the variety most commonly used for ceremony and ritual. White cornmeal and seeds are used in *kiva* rituals throughout the villages, and cornmeal is employed as an offering to each

clan's guardian deity, represented by an icon in the home. White corn powder, or *homa*, is carried in a pouch by traditional Hopis, to be used for a variety of prayer offerings.

During *Powamu* (winter solstice) *pahos*, or prayer feathers, are given to people throughout the villages. *Pahos* serve multiple purposes, but most typically they are a way in which the people offer prayers for good health, a long life, and goodwill and happiness for all living creatures. In the hours before sunrise, *pahos* are deposited in special places and individual prayers are made, followed by the scattering of *homa* on the *paho*. This is followed by offerings to the rising sun.

Homa is used during the *katsina* ceremonies. It is used to "feed" and bless the *katsinas* as prayers are made that the *katsinas* will reward the people with an abundance of rain and a strong harvest of crops for the benefit of all people. As the *katsinas* begin their song, the *katsina* chief sprinkles *homa* on the dancing spirits with deliberate and passionate instructions that the dance be performed in harmony with the Earth and with vibrancy and a good heart. Some *katsinas* wear garb that is adorned with parts or symbols of the corn plant.

CHILDBIRTH AND THE NAMING CEREMONY

Corn is used ceremonially to mark significant milestones in the lives of the Hopi people. The ceremonial significance of corn is demonstrated from the moment a child is born, when a Corn Mother is placed beside the child, to remain with him or her for the first twenty days after birth.

White corn is used in infant naming ceremonies twenty-one days after a child is born. The ceremony is a combination of festivity, prayer, and family unity. Most importantly it is a time to give a name to the child that will stay with him or her for the remainder of life.

Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts gather on this special occasion, each prepared to offer a name that somehow reflects their clan lineage. Before the rising of the sun the newborn is first given a bath, and then the hair is washed, usually by the maternal grandmother. She is the first in line to begin the naming ceremony, followed by other grandmothers and a succession of aunts.

The white corn is gently brushed over the baby's naked chest, with words spoken from the heart, eternal words that are offered to the child: "Your name shall be (name). You shall carry this name through the rest

of your life, in sickness and in health. You shall carry this name through your adulthood until the day that you shall sleep in peace.” After the naming ceremony, at the breaking of dawn, the newborn is taken outdoors to face the rising sun, and the identification of a new child has begun.

INITIATION

As in many cultures worldwide, an initiation ceremony is held to mark the transition point when a child begins moving into adulthood. At about the age of twelve it is time for Hopi boys and girls to take their place in one of two Hopi societies. Before their initiation begins, each child is given a Corn Mother. The ear of white corn is never large; clutching to the largest ears would be contrary to the Hopi way of humility. The initiate will hold the ear of white corn close throughout the long initiation ceremony. Afterwards parents sometimes plant the kernels, bringing forth new plants that hold special meaning for those involved.

END OF LIFE

On the third day after death—the day before the spirit of the departed is released from the physical body—relatives take food to the burial place. At that time cornmeal is laid down along a ceremonial path to help guide the departing spirit on its way to the Grand Canyon, which the Hopi people consider their spiritual home. And so a life that has been linked to corn on every level from the very moment of birth now follows a trail of cornmeal to the final spiritual resting place.

When the clans accepted Masaw’s way, they asked him to lead them. Masaw told them that would not be possible because, he said, he recognized that they carried a lot of knowledge and that they would eventually be controlled again by their own ambition—perhaps to some finality. “At that time,” Masaw told them, “I will return to you.” To that, the people of the clans assured Masaw, “We will remember our past and try not to repeat it, and we will continue to learn from experience.”

In this era of heightened mobility and pervasive mass communication, the remoteness of the Hopi villages, which cushioned them for centuries

from the impacts of Spanish colonialism and Euroamerican incursions, no longer represents the barrier it once was. Times are changing, and Hopi culture is stressed today as never before.

Kuwanwisiwma says that Masaw's spirit still abides at Hopi. The question now, he says, is whether the people can continue to hold to the old ways, to remain people of the corn. "The generation of Hopis today," says Kuwanwisiwma,

lives in the real world. No longer can we say this is a "white man's world" and we're up here separate from that world on these mesas. We're part of the dominant culture. We too have become influenced materialistically through the cash economy, with different kinds of value systems that have become our way of life. That is, I suppose, good to some extent: You work hard for something and you gain materially. But at the same time it's impacted our culture; we now rely on other forms of survivability.

The ceremonial cycle may be ongoing—though much has been lost already—but the strength of the culture is under strain because the corn, and the way of the farm, have slowly been impacted. When I got married in the early 1970s, my father gave me a piece of his cornfield, and he said, "You take care of it, grow your corn for your family and in-laws." That's how I assumed responsibility as a husband and father. And I think that kind of social responsibility to family can be strengthened if younger people can appreciate what it means to be part of the Hopi way through farming.

Participation in the ceremonies, as we see now with younger kids being initiated and participating, is important. They need to be told in the kivas, in the homes, that the corn is the way the Hopis have chosen; it goes back to our Emergence. As Hopi people, we are fortunate to have survived this long. It is a privilege to be a part of this complex Hopi community of clans living under this one philosophy of corn, of humility. I think if we can continue to teach that, we'll strengthen the culture as it stands.

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