

Language of Place: Extended Background

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Hopi Landscape

The Hopi Tribe is a sovereign nation inhabiting over 1.5 million acres in northeastern Arizona. The tribe has a rich cultural connection with the landscape, place, and environment that most Hopi people call home. The Hopi homeland, “Hopitutskwa,” (pronounced: Hopi-doot-skwa) is part of the Colorado Plateau. Nicknamed “Red Rock Country,” this area of Arizona is known for its high deserts, scattered forests, stark mesas, deep canyons, as well as the Grand Canyon. The Hopi have lived in this area for centuries. Evidence of current and previous inhabitation is apparent across Hopitutskwa in active villages as well as in the remnants of abandoned villages and homesteads. Twelve villages are located in three regions known as First Mesa, Second Mesa, and Third Mesa. Currently, over 10,000 Hopi people live in villages across the three mesas, and over 7,000 Hopi people live elsewhere around the world.

Hopi history and culture are intertwined with the landscape of the Colorado Plateau. Lomawywesa, a Hopi artist also known as Michael Kabotie, explains the Hopi’s connection with the land in a historical and modern context in *Hopi Nation: Essays on Indigenous Art, Culture, History, and Law*, ed. Edna Glenn, John R. Wunder, Willard Hughes Rollings, and C. L. Martin (Lincoln, NE: UNL Digital Commons, 2008):

The Hopi live in a harsh environment, with not much vegetation. Our people chose to come to this land and to settle themselves among these mesas because during the migrations it was said that we should seek this promised land; a place where there is not too much green, where it is not too comfortable; a land that we would find barren and where, to survive, we would be able to develop our strengths and our souls. Many of the mountains of the area are volcanic cones, and they are very special to our spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. It is among these buttes where our shrines are, and it is to these shrines that the Hopi make yearly pilgrimages to collect their eagles and to deliver their prayer feathers; or to collect herbs and other materials used in our ceremonies. So, this is the land where we chose to live. Here among the sandstone mesas you will find the Hopi. “Among them we settled as rain,” a Hopi song says. Here we would have to survive with our own personal strength and our soul strength.

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Corn in Hopi Culture

Corn as a Crop for Hopi

A great deal of strength is needed for the Hopi people to survive and thrive in this stark environment. Primarily an agrarian culture, the Hopi developed a method of dry-land corn farming that has sustained their culture nutritionally and also culturally and spiritually for centuries. Although they also grow beans, squash, peaches, and other high desert crops, the many varieties of corn grown by the Hopi people (including yellow, blue, red, and white corn) have been cultivated as a key nutritional source. Corn is also respected and revered as an important symbol of what it means to be Hopi.

To grow corn on the Colorado Plateau, especially in the area of the Hopi mesas, requires an intimate knowledge of the land, environment, crops, weather, and the ecology of the high desert. This area receives less than 12 inches of rain a year, has a very short growing season, and is largely unirrigated. Hopi scholar Lyle Balenquah describes the challenges of growing Hopi corn the Hopi way in his article, “Connected by Earth: Metaphors from Hopi Tutskwa:” “Though most Hopi today have wage-paying jobs that do not allow much time for traditional corn farming, the practice is still revered and many families work hard to maintain their traditional Hopi corn fields.”

In order to grow corn in such a challenging environment, Hopi farmers have developed an intimate knowledge and experience of their plants, environment and the ecology of the high desert. This knowledge is evident in many Hopi culture and language practices.

Corn as Art and Essence of the Hopi

A rich reverence and respect for corn cultivation and Hopitutskwa ecology can be found in the art, poetry, songs, celebrations, and culture of the Hopi people.

The [National Museum of the American Indian](#) houses several examples of Hopi corn-based art and artifacts:

[Corn pendant necklace](#)
[Corn maiden necklace](#)
[Hopi Vase](#)
[Painting](#)

Beyond these artistic and celebratory manifestations, many Hopi consider corn more than just a cultural value— it is an archetypal symbol of what the Hopi are and how they present as a people. The metaphors “corn is life” or “corn is our children” are often used to explain the dynamic Hopi relationship with dry-land corn farming that extends to explain the comprehensive Hopi word view.

Lomawywesa (Michael Kabotie) explains:

Hopi are basically corn people. We believe in agriculture because our greatest symbol is the corn, the Corn Mother. In our truths and in our history it was taught us that at our time of emergence into this world, various kinds of foods were issued to the various peoples: the Hopi was given the corn, or we chose the corn. And instead of picking the long corn, the Hopi decided to pick up the shortest of the corn. Since that time we have

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been identified with that very short corn: each of us is very short just like our Mother, the Blue Short Corn.

As evidenced by the [Hopi calendar](#), a cyclical year in Hopi culture that is rich with events, dances and ceremonies, many of the seasonal celebrations reflect the cycle of planting and harvesting corn.

Corn is also interwoven throughout the Hopi people's rites of passage. Hopi Tribal Chairman, Sekaquaptewa, gives this example: "At birth, the child is given a mother ear of corn, representing the earth mother. This is kept close to the baby, wrapped in his covers, and in this way, environmental sensitivity begins from the moment of birth." As a symbol of fertility and friendship, corn plays an important part in many Hopi ceremonies including births, christenings, and rites of passage including marriages. (i.e., corn and food made from corn is given away by Hopi families at wedding celebrations.)

[Hopi Tribe Economic Development Corporation's "Explore Hopi" website](#) offers [background to explore tribal symbols](#) (i.e., "corn our mother," and the corresponding belief that "it is through 'her' that we have lived this far into the future.")

A print resource for further background is: Lyle Balenquah, "Connected by Earth: Metaphors from Hopi Tutskwa," in *Thinking Like a Watershed: Voices from the West*, ed. Jack and Celeste Loeffler (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 61–62.

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Language Forms in Hopi Culture: Place Names

Through careful study of Hopi language forms, learners can identify symbols, metaphors, and direct references to the Hopi way of life and the tribe's cultural values. Hopi place names provide a window into the centuries-old relationships Hopi people have with the homeland and dry-land corn farming.

Hopi Place Names

Across Hopitutskwa ("Hopi lands"), there are places of importance to the Hopi people that have been assigned Hopi language names. Some of the Hopi names have been erased over time by English names (i.e., the Grand Canyon, San Francisco Peaks), but others have been maintained in their Hopi language referents—i.e., Hopi villages: Oraibi (pronounced Orr-rye-vee), Kykotsmovi (pronounced Kee-koats-moe-vee).

Today the Hopi language struggles to maintain its prominence and use among Hopi people; based on a 1998 language survey of 200 Hopi people, fluency was highest (100% among elders 60 years and older), but was lowest (5%) among children (age 2–19). To address this loss, organizations like [Mass Media Inc.](#) produce Hopi language-learning materials and sponsor language-learning events and programs.

Hopi place names often refer to specific geologic or ecologic characteristics of places. For example San Francisco Peaks, called Nuvatukya'ovi, (pronounced: Nuh-vaa-doo-kyaa-oh-vee) can be translated to mean "snow butte on top place." Tonto Basin, known in Hopi as Wukoskyavi means "big valley." Such Hopi place names offer reference to landscape characteristics and markers, as opposed to referencing Catholic saints ("San Francisco") or referencing the Spanish term ("tonto" meaning stupid or ignorant) pejoratively assigned to the Dilzhe'e Apache tribe that lived in the area south of the Hopi mesas.

Hopi place names can also refer to aspects of the natural world, such as types of vegetation or natural resources (i.e. stone, clay) that can be found in certain areas, or reflect the cultural significance of Hopi places. For example, the Hopi name "Itaakuku" (meaning "our footprints") is used to refer to any old and non-inhabited Hopi archaeological sites, rock art, or old artifacts found across Hopi lands. Overall, Hopi place names demonstrate an ecological and cultural value for the land and its important cultural sites.

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Language Forms in Hopi Culture: Poetry

Through careful study of Hopi language forms, learners can identify symbols, metaphors, and direct references to the Hopi way of life and the tribe's cultural values. Hopi poetry provides a window into the centuries-old relationships Hopi people have with the homeland and dry-land corn farming.

Hopi Poetry

Contemporary and historical Hopi poetry often includes cultural references and symbols including corn, animals, and significant aspects of the Hopi landscape. Hopi poet and artist Ramson Lomatewama writes about the Hopi landscape and his experiences in the fields as a dry-land farmer. Natural phenomena such as the weather (especially rain), sandstone cliffs, corn in the fields, crows, butterflies, and other animals living in and around his fields are important actors in his poetry.

“After the Rains,”

(Reprinted by permission of the poet, Ramson Lomatewama)

I look to the sky.
There!
A rainbow
is arched above me.

As I walk down
the dusty road
I look up.

Again!
The rainbow
dressed in beauty
walks with me.

Lomatewama's poetry celebrates his presence on the landscape, highlighting the things he sees, hears, feels, and experiences while working, walking, or simply standing still outside. Many poems like this one describe an intimate and personal interaction between the poet and the environment. Here, Lomatewama describes walking with the rainbow and later describes the silence that makes up his conversation with the rainbow.

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Language Forms in Hopi Culture: Song and Traditional Dance

Through careful study of Hopi language forms, learners can identify symbols, metaphors, and direct references to the Hopi way of life and the tribe's cultural values. Hopi song and traditional dance provide a window into the centuries-old relationships Hopi people have with the homeland and dry-land corn farming.

Hopi Song and Traditional Dance

Hopi songs are often written and sung to accompany traditional dances; however, they can also be written as emotional expressions to be used within less formal celebrations. Formal ceremonial dances are practiced throughout the year in the Hopi homeland by different clans and villages according to their individual traditions. During formal dances, traditional costumes and music accompany the dancers who have practiced at length to prepare for the event. Traditional dances can be small, private, and intense or large, inclusive, and joyous. Dances vary depending on the time of year, the purpose of the dance, and the clans, villages, or Hopi people involved.

Hopi songs can also be written as emotional expressions to be used within less formal celebrations: to entertain and teach children; to sing as prayers to corn plants or Hopi spirits; or just to pass the time. Dee Lomawaima, a Hopi tribal member, clarifies this use of language noting, "Some Hopi will say that our everyday language is different than the words we use in song. In a way, we use more elegant words in song; more 'graceful' words you might say."

Poet Ramson Lomatewama explains further:

In my culture, we sing songs to show our happiness. We sing while we do our chores because songs seem to make the work go quickly and easily. We believe that when we sing songs, we are sharing our feelings of happiness with nature. Since the corn plants are also our children, we sing to the corn, too. Our elders tell us that when we sing to our corn children, we make them happy. When they are happy, they grow better.

In Hopi songs—whether informal or made to accompany dances—listeners can find additional evidence of the way Hopi people value and are connected to the environment of Hopitutskwa.

In one of the Hopi song samples explored in Lesson 3, "Paavonmant" ("Corn Stalk Girls"), the singer describes the movements of the "corn stalk girls." This refers to the dancers at celebrations like the Hopi Butterfly Dance by using figurative language that points to the arms movements as the "fluttering" of their "wings."

The Hopi Butterfly Dance is a celebratory social dance that takes place in late August or early September. The dancers are children or young adults in the tribe who are accompanied by a chorus of their male relatives: fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and older brothers. Female dancers wear brightly colored costumes—most notably, beautifully decorated "kopatsoki" (pronounced: go-baaht-tsoo-kee) headdresses—made for them by their male dance partners. The boys wear loose shirts and embroidered kilts.

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The Butterfly Dance recognizes the butterfly for its beauty and role as a plant pollinator. The rain and cloud symbols on the dancers' costumes express gratitude and prayers for rain. [Arizona State Museum's page on the Butterfly Dance](#) contains additional information, while the [National Museum of the American Indian's "Circle of Dance" page](#) provides details on the Butterfly Dancers' costumes, as well as some lovely photos of young dancers performing in a ritual celebration adorned with kopatsoki.

The "Paavonmant" ("Corn Stalk Girls") song describes one seasonal ecological phase that occurs "during the month of August" when "the insects have happily started to dance." The song also points to the personal and intimate relationship many Hopi have with the land as it invites the listener or observer to enter into fully into the experience of the summer season in this desert environment.

There are a few Hopi celebrations and dances with open invitations for public observation; most are held privately for attendees among various villages or clans within the tribe. Typically, it is not permitted for Hopi dances to be videotaped or photographed by outside visitors. However, the Hopi Tribe does authorize some limited sharing with the public through selected photos and video.

Hopi clans and villages sometimes have distinct spiritual responsibilities that necessitate specific dances and ceremonies to be held at specific times throughout the year. In Lesson 3 of the Language of Place unit, students examine images from Hopi traditional dance to find evidence of corn imagery, eagle feathers, pine boughs, and butterflies in the bright and beautiful costumes of the dancers.

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