

# **Native Americans of the Southwest Cultural Region**

**By Jennifer Kenny**

The Southwest cultural region or area of the Native Americans is what are now considered Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Utah. This is a land of majesty and contrast with both mountains and deserts. There is scorching heat in the summer and cold in the winter.

4,500 years ago, the people became farmers. 2,100 years ago, Hohokam, the ancestors of the Pima, learned how to dig extensive irrigation ditches for crops. Some canals were miles long. 2,100 years ago, the Anasazi, or ancestral Pueblo people, were also here. They were referred to as Basket Makers. They hunted with a spear and gathered wild foods, but they were known for their fine baskets made from rushes, straw, and other materials. They lived in large pit houses, dwellings with sunken floors topped by timber frameworks covered with mud.

By about A.D. 700, the Basket Makers had evolved into the early Pueblo culture. They started to build their famous pueblo dwellings during the next 200 years. Sometimes they were built on cliffs, hence the term Cliff Dwellers. By the year 900, their culture dominated the Southwest. Pueblo dwellings were rectangular, multi-storied apartment buildings made of terraced stone and adobe. The flat roof of one level was the floor and front yard of another. Ladders connected the different levels and allowed people to enter the rooms through holes in the roof. Hopi and Zuni used stones to cement the walls. The Pueblo Indians along the Rio Grande used adobe bricks. The largest pueblos were called Great Houses and could hold 1,000 people! The Pueblo culture built large planned towns connected by roads and irrigation systems.

The Pueblo Indians also built a pit house (probably evolving from the Basket Makers) called a kiva, which served as a ceremonial chamber or clubhouse of the men. It was located in a central place in the pueblo.

The Pueblo cultures of the Hopi and Zuni had some unique lifestyles. They grew corn, beans, squash, cotton, and tobacco. They killed rabbits with wooden throwing sticks. In the fall and winter, a mile-round circle of hunters would keep moving in until they could throw the sticks at the rabbits. They traded cotton textiles and corn in exchange for buffalo meat from the nomadic tribes. The men wove cotton textiles and cultivated the fields. The women made fine polychrome pottery.

The Hopi (which means "peaceful ones") and Zuni were guided by kachinas, spirit beings that enter men's bodies wearing masks and performing dances. The children had kachina dolls, not as toys, but to teach the children about the roles of the kachinas.

The Hopi settled in the numerous mesas in the area. A mesa is a plateau or "tabletop" of land. They built homes of stones. Dirt paths connected the mesas years ago. Today roads help a person reach them.

The Hopi and other Pueblo people believed snakes brought rain. They held a Snake Dance. For four days, the men hunted snakes each day in a different direction. When the ceremony began, the snakes were brought to a priest in the center of all the people. A male dancer would take a

snake and put it between his teeth. When the dance was done, the snakes were let go at the edge of a mesa. The snakes would go off in four directions asking the Water God to bring rain. Another elaborate ceremony was the Niman. It started on June 26th and went for 16 days. The Indians prayed for rain and returned kachinas to the spirit world. The departing kachinas would offer the villagers symbolic gifts like ears of corn.

Pueblo clothes were usually made of cotton spun into fabric for garments. Sometimes they used animal skins, furs, or feathers too. In cold weather, they added ponchos, which were rectangular cuts of cloth with a hole for the head.

In Pueblo society, the women owned houses. The married men lived in the homes of their wives. Tribes were organized into clans, groups of families who claimed a common ancestor. The priests were civil and religious leaders. The priests advised on matters affecting entire pueblos. They also conducted rituals of dances, songs, and prayers all throughout the year.

Descendants of the Hohokam people, the Pima and the Papago, also built irrigation systems to raise crops. Both worshipped Elder Brother and Earthmaker. The Pima settled by rivers to grow corn, squash, beans, and wheat. They actually had a surplus of food (so much that they supplied food to the Union Army when it was needed). The Papago were more dwellers of the desert so they had to rely on seasonal floodwater for farming. They were somewhat nomadic. They made wine for rituals from fermented fruit of certain cactus. The Pima were famous for the art of basket making.

The Pima houses were small, round, flat-topped, pole-framed structures covered with grass and mud. The villages had armadas - clubhouses that were rectangular with one wall for a windbreak or with no walls at all.

There were severe droughts in the Southwest area between the 1200s and 1300s. This is when the Navajo and Apache appeared from the north. The Pueblos were not warriors, but they did fight to defend themselves against the Navajo and Apache.

The Navajo and Apache were hunters and warriors. They were able to learn agricultural skills from the Pueblos. They also raided villages for crops. The Apache and Navajo were less formal than the Pueblos. They joined in bands made of extended clans. A headman was chosen informally for leadership and military prowess. However, other warriors could start raids without the headman's permission.

The Apache bands lived in a wickiup, a dome or cone-shaped hut with a pole framework. A wickiup was covered with brush, grass, or reed mats. It had a central fire pit and a smoke hole. The Navajo lived in hogans. Hogan in Navajo means "home place." A hogan was cone-shaped or dome-shaped with six to eight sides. Logs and poles were used for frameworks. They were covered with mud, sod, and bark. In later years, the frameworks were covered with stone or adobe. The doorways faced east. The floor symbolized Mother Earth. The roof symbolized Father Sky.

The Apaches believed in ga'ns, or mountain spirits. They were important in the Apache ceremonies. The Navajo believed ghosts were the spirits of dead ancestors and witches, or people who practiced magic.

The Navajo practiced sand painting, which was ceremonial art. Colored powders were mixed with neutral sand for healing. Sand painters led by shamans created mosaics of legendary beings and natural phenomena using white, black, blue, red, and yellow. At the end of the ceremony, the paintings were destroyed.

The Navajo believed in Spider Woman, a spirit being, who first taught women to weave. These skills were passed from mother to daughter. Their blankets and rugs were, and still are, world famous. Their silverwork was also famous.

The Apache women were known for their fine beadwork. They also made beautiful baskets of willow rods. One famous Apache man was Geronimo, or Goyanthlay. He was a famous Apache warrior. He fought the American invasion of Apache lands in the 1860s and 1870s. He was confined to the San Carlos reservation in 1877. In 1881, he escaped and finally surrendered in 1886.

Today, many Native Americans live on reservation lands in New Mexico and Arizona. Some raise livestock and farm. Some sell handicrafts. Tourism has helped. Of course, the discovery of oil, natural gas, and minerals has helped as well.