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COMMENTARY

The Concept of *Hikwsi* in Traditional Hopi Philosophy

MARIA D. GLOWACKA

Scholarly efforts to understand the Hopi concept of *hikwsi* were rather unilateral and led to the oversimplified conclusion that *hikwsi* is a Hopi linguistic equivalent for the soul. This article attempts to shed some light on this important philosophical concept in a Hopi language perspective, particularly as applied in an explanation of human structure and behavior.

In the Hopi belief, death does not end a person's presence in the physical world, but marks a transition from one state of being to another or, in other words, from one form of experience to another. On the fourth day after death, a person's breath (*hikwsi*) leaves the body and goes to a place which represents the other realm of existence, not separated from the world of the living, but different in that this realm is unmanifested, unseen, and not accessible to the senses. In ethnographic and anthropological literature this symbolic place has been described as the Underworld, Lower World, Third World, or the World of the Dead (*maski*; *mas-ki*, "corpse-home"). According to Emory Sekaquaptewa, this concept can be expressed by a Hopi word, *atkya*, which literally means "down below."¹ The word *atkya* can refer not only to an area at the bottom of the Grand Canyon (*Öngtupqa*) called *Sípàapuni*, from which the Hopi came out of the Underworld, but also to an area seen from the tops of Hopi mesas in the southwestern direction. This area is marked with *kiikiqö* (literally, "ruins"; metaphorically, "footprints"), places inhabited once by Hopi ancestors (*Hisatsinom*) before they arrived at Hopi present settlements, such as, for instance, Homol'ovi, Wupatki, Tsor'ovi (Tuzigoot), and

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others. *Hikwisi* of the dead is believed to have the ability to return to the Hopi mesas in visible forms of clouds, rain (or *katsinam*) and act as an animating force in the sensuous world of the living.²

Many researchers of Hopi culture considered the term *hikwisi* as the Hopi name for the soul, which was said to live forever after the body dies. As Fewkes notes: "The modern Hopi recognize in man a double nature, corresponding to body and soul, and to the latter they ... give the expressive name breath-body [hik'si].... It is the breath-body or shade of man which passes at death through sipapuh, or gateway, to the underworld...."³ The Underworld is perceived not only as "the ultimate home to which the soul of the dead person must go,"⁴ but also as "the place of its [the soul's] genesis before it was embodied."⁵

Titiev's interpretation of the life and death cycle indicates that death in the present world, or the Upper World, is followed by birth in the Lower World, and ultimately the souls of the dead are reembodyed in babies born on earth. At the same time, he emphasizes that the cycle is completely generalized among the Hopi and should never be interpreted as a belief in a personal reincarnation. He also points out that individual variations or deficiencies in an individual's experiences during life affect the disposition of his soul after death.⁶ Thus, the soul of a child who died prior to initiation into Powamuya/Katsina Society cannot return alone to the Underworld but must wait on earth to be reborn in its mother's next child or—in case she fails to bear another child—to accompany her *hikwisi* to the home of the dead after she dies.⁷ These statements are confirmed by Brandt: "Adults are supposed to reach the spirit world after death (perhaps after some punishment). The souls of uninitiated children, however, hover about the village until they enter the body of a newborn child."⁸ According to Titiev, unmarried girls or women who married illegally cannot travel to the Underworld because they lack the wedding garments; the souls of men who have never passed through the initiation return to the general underworld, whereas the spirits of the initiated have special homes reserved for them.⁹ The journey to the Underworld is particularly painful, slow, and difficult for the souls of "witches."¹⁰ At the end of this journey they are consumed in "big ovens from which they emerge as beetles."¹¹

The motive of the soul journey after death, as well as the concept of the hell or purgatory, are alien to traditional Hopi culture and were taken by early ethnographers from a Christian philosophical tradition.¹² Early ethnographers explored a changing Hopi culture. Christian missionaries have been active in Hopi country from the sixteenth century, and even though they were not very successful in converting the Hopi people to their system of belief, they introduced some non-Hopi elements into Hopi tradition.¹³ As a result, much ethnographic data was affected by a Christian tradition (in Hopi: *Tsiisastuptionsi*). The detailed descriptions of the soul's journey to the Underworld after a person's death presented by Fewkes, Voth, Titiev provide examples of this influence.¹⁴

Scholarly efforts to understand the concept of *hikwisi* were rather unilateral and led to the overly simplified conclusion that *hikwisi* is a Hopi linguistic equivalent for the soul. Like so many terms in the anthropological study of

religion, the soul that can be considered a potentially distorting term carries an enormous amount of baggage, like both deity and spirit.¹⁵ Some researchers have pointed out that the attempt to increase our understanding of native categories by consciously and deliberately comparing and contrasting them with our own is often useless.¹⁶ Western religious concepts applied in studies of Hopi culture often lead only to limited, ethnocentric insights. Moreover, many ethnographic and anthropological observations would have been much more useful and accurate if they had been recorded in the Hopi language and/or interpreted from a Hopi linguistic perspective.¹⁷

At this point I would like to present briefly the Hopi view on the structure of human beings in the light of the Hopi language. Some of the examples presented here hopefully will contribute towards reinterpreting the concept of *hikwsi*. To the Hopi, human beings can be equated metaphorically with corn plants.¹⁸ Structural analogies between humans and corn plants are evident when parts of their bodies and stages of their developmental cycles are analyzed. The human body without *hikwsi*, which signifies breath (of life), vital force, vivifying power is called *qatungwu*. Illustrative examples from the Hopi dictionary, *Hopiikwa Lavàytutuveni*, state:

Hakiy hikwsi at qatungwuyat ang yámakngwu.
Your breath passes from your body.

Pay itam put qatungwuyat.sa amya.
We buried only his body (*qatungwu*).¹⁹

Qatungwu means a corpse or lifeless body. This term refers also to a corn plant body after the ears were harvested. *Qatungwu* is considered to be without *soona*, the substance of life.²⁰ The term *soona* has several meanings: kernel; the nutriment of a plant as contrasted with its form *qatungwu*; the sustaining or nurturing part; the living part of a whole; life which makes body viable. *Soona* also signifies sustenance, like in the following sentence: *I' qaa'ö Hopituy soona'am* (The corn is sustenance of the Hopi). As Black points out, the dichotomy *qatungwu* versus *soona* can be explained by another dichotomy: form versus substance.²¹

The *hikwsi* of corn plants and human beings is considered to *anìwiti*, which means to mature, become perfected, or continue to be perfected after death, after leaving the physical body. The corn plant achieves the "state of perfection" when in the form of *hooma*, or ceremonial cornmeal, which has the ability to retain and carry wishes that were "breathed" on it:

Katsinmuy na'am hoomay aw hikwsut pu' akw katsinmuy homnangwu.
The father of the *katsinam* breathes the essence of his wish/prayer on the ceremonial cornmeal, then sprinkles the *katsinam* with the cornmeal.

Hooma is also used to "purify" a pathway, on which the *katsinam* enter and leave the village. When a Hopi woman grinds corn she is aware that she touches the perfect element of life. Therefore, grinding corn is a ritual duty that

should be performed with “pure heart,” symbolizing the state of being morally pure, without negative, disturbing thoughts and feelings.

As we can see, in ritual context human *hikwsi* is used for carrying the person’s wishes by means of *hooma*. The other ritual tool which serves the same purpose is *hikwsünpi*, prayer feathers wrapped in corn husks carried by *Wuwtsimt* members (*hikwsi’ynumyaqam*) from house to house during the *Soyalangw* (Soyal ceremony):

Soyalangwuy ep hikwsünpit aw hakim hikwsuyangwu.

At the Soyal ceremony people breathe wishes/prayers on the prayer feathers.

The Hopi verb *hikwsuntima* means literally: go along, causing people to breathe on *hikwsünpi* (prayer feathers). Metaphorically, the word also means to be encouraging, going along (as through life), serving as a source of inspiration or assurance to others.

Pay katsinam piw yep itamuy taawiy akw hikwsuntiwisa.

The *katsinam* go along (through time) inspiring (encouraging) us also by means of their songs.²²

The human *hikwsi* comes to the “state of perfection” when manifested in a form of rain-bringing clouds. This thought is reflected in a speech following the *Wuwtsimt* ceremony cited by Kennard, Loftin, Black.²³ Presented here are only the last five statements of this speech.

Pangso hak ahoy nimangwu, i’hakiy qatungwu’ata.

When one goes back home (after death) this (body) is stalk.

Pamsa pipay nukwsiwtingwu.

Only it becomes worn out, spent.

Niqw aapiyniqa hikwsi aniwtiqa

That which continues (to live) is the breath that is perfected.

Pam hapi sutsep qatungwu.

That is what always lives.

Put um hapi uuqatsiniqata aw na’saslawu.

That is what will be your life, and is what you are preparing for.

These statements reveal clearly that *hikwsi* of human beings is believed to become perfected (*aniwti*) after releasing from the physical body, at death. The *hikwsi* of the dead returns to the world of the living and manifests in visible forms as clouds, rain, *katsinam*.²⁴ A Hopi verb *katsinaniwiti* means to change into *katsina*, to become *katsina* (after death). *Katsina* represents the perfect state of being, which is difficult to achieve by human beings in their lives because of imperfections of their physical dimension represented by *qatungwu*.²⁵

Linguistic examples given above indicate that *hikwsi* is endowed with

power that is not acknowledged in Western culture. This power gives life and in a ritual context can influence events in the world.

By the concept of *hikwsi* human beings are linked to the immanent force of the world. The human *hikwsi* is a "portion" of the life-giving force that enfolds the entire world and invests all elements, manifesting in them differently. In the Hopi perception all things, even the sun, the moon, the wind, the stars and the clouds, are alive and related. The Hopi language reflects this view.²⁶ Animate nouns include not only real or folkloric beings, but also items in nature and objects that are perceived as involving an animating force, such as certain ritual tools.²⁷

The human individual force of life represented by *hikwsi* is an invisible but tangible power, a part of the physical, sensible world. *Hikwsi* provides the body (*qatungwu*) with thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, speech, and other properties which Western philosophical tradition assigned to an interior individual human mind. That which is described by the English concept of mind (in its old and current meaning)²⁸ can be considered as the manifestation of *hikwsi*, and *hikwsi* is a property of the surrounding world in which human beings, like all other beings, participate.

Without *hikwsi* the human body is only a form—*qatungwu*—yet with *hikwsi* the human body is a breathing, sensing, active, and open entity, having the world inside and communicating with the world outside.

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NOTES

1. Emory Sekaquaptewa, personal communication, 1998.
2. Some authors (Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole, *Hopi of the Second Mesa* [Menasha, Wisconsin: American Anthropological Association, 1935]; Maitland R. Bradfield, *An Interpretation of the Hopi Culture* [Derby, UK: privately printed, 1995]) point out that *hikwsi* leaves the body in dreams. "In this sense both sleeping and dreaming and unconsciousness brought about by injury, are thought of as being equivalent to death, since in both states the 'breath' has left the body" (Bradfield, 39).
3. Jessie W. Fewkes, "The Prehistoric Culture of Tusayan," *American Anthropologist* 9:5 (1896): 161–162; Mischa Titiev, *Old Oraibi: A Study of the Hopi Indians of Third Mesa* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, 1944), 171.
4. Titiev, 176.
5. Fewkes, 162; Titiev, 176.
6. Titiev, 176, 177.
7. Titiev, 177; Henry R. Voth, *Brief Miscellaneous Hopi Papers* (Chicago: Field Columbian Museum, 1912), 103.
8. Richard B. Brandt, *Hopi Ethics: A Theoretical Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 31.

9. Voth, 103.
10. The English translation of the Hopi word *powaga* as witch or sorcerer is inaccurate. The term *powaga* refers to any individual who has ingenious skills and uses his knowledge for negative purposes.
11. Elsie C. Parsons, *Hopi Journal of Alexander M. Stephen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Titiev, 177.
12. However, Geertz states that the Hopi do have a hell for most recalcitrant witches and sorcerers. He also suggests that this place is not cosmographically linked to the Siipàapuni axis but rather to the mountain. Armin W. Geertz, "A Reed Pierced the Sky: Hopi Indian Cosmography on Third Mesa, Arizona," *Numen* 31 (1984): 237; Emory Sekaquaptewa (personal communication) did not confirm this view.
13. For instance, R.H.Voth himself was a Mennonite missionary.
14. As Vine Deloria notes: "In general we could say that afterlife was not of overwhelming concern to people of the tribal religions.... No highly articulated or developed theories of the afterlife were ever necessary and certainly none projected a life radically different than that experienced on Earth." Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 179.
15. Klass Morton, *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 99.
16. Kenneth Morrison, "Beyond the Supernatural: Language and Religion Action," *Religion* 22 (1992): 201–205; Benson Saler, "Supernatural as a Western Category," *Ethos* 1:5 (1977): 31–53.
17. Emory Sekaquaptewa, personal communication.
18. This thought is expressed in one of the most universal metaphors used in the Hopi language "*Um hapi qaa'ö aniwiti*," which means, "You really have become corn." Mary Black, "Maidens and Mothers: An Analysis of Hopi Corn Metaphors," *Ethnology* 23 (1984): 279–88; 280.
19. Hopi Dictionary Project & Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, *Hopi Dictionary/Hopïkwa Lavàytutweni, A Hopi – English Dictionary of the Third Mesa Dialect* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998).
20. Emory Sekaquaptewa, personal communication, 1998.
21. Black, 280.
22. As Geertz points out, ceremonial songs are called *pöötavi*, "road prayer feather," meaning that, like this ritual, object songs provide the people with a symbolic road to travel upon. Armin W. Geertz, "A Typology of Hopi Indian Ritual," *Temenos* 22 (1986): 52.
23. Black, 280; Edward A. Kennard, "Metaphor and Magic: Key Concepts in Hopi Culture," *Studies in Linguistics in Honor of George L. Trager*, ed. M.E. Smith (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 468–473, 471; John D. Loftin, *Religion and Hopi Life in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 31.
24. Fewkes's observation indicates that in Hopi belief, the *hikusi* of the dead can manifest as *katsinam* and clouds, thus the deceased Hopis were regarded as rain-bringers (Fewkes, 107–108). He has noted: "... it is believed that the breath-body, freed from its material double by death has a supernatural influence...." (Fewkes, 162).
25. Through the *katsina* ceremonies, the Hopi transcend themselves symbolically into perfect beings, but at the same time they are aware of their distance from the ideal. During these ceremonies, the Hopi also perform clown (*tsuku*) ceremonies in

which they portray negative human characteristics. Thus, human beings embody both *katsina* (perfect) and *tsuku* (imperfect) nature, and the latter can be overcome only by death.

26. As Hallowell points out in regard to Ojibwa people: "Whereas we should never expect a stone to manifest animate properties of any kind under any circumstances, the Ojibwa recognize a priori, potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances." Irving A. Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World," in *Teachings from the American World*, ed. Barbara and Dennis Tedlock (New York: Liveright, 1975), 148.

27. For a description of ritual objects considered to be alive, see Geertz, 1986.

28. According to Wierzbicka, the English concept of mind is specific to Anglo-Saxon culture and has no exact equivalents in other European languages, let alone in other geographically and culturally more distant languages of the world. Moreover, the older English word *mind* appears to have meant something rather different from what it means in present-day English. It was clearly linked with emotions and values, whereas the modern English word *mind* focuses on the intellect. Anna Wierzbicka, "Soul and Mind: Linguistic Evidence for Ethnopsychology and Cultural History," *American Anthropologist* 91 (1989): 48–49.