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**The Language of Dance:
Communicative Dimensions of Hopi Katsina Dances***

The ethnographic focus of this paper is the “katsina dance” — as it is popularly known — which is regularly performed in all Hopi villages during the spring and early summer. The katsina dance is a complex ritual performance and will be described in detail. However, since the concern of this paper is to make a contribution to the cross-cultural understanding of a dance performance, it will be useful to provide the analytic/descriptive perspective first.

The analytic/descriptive perspective is concerned to illuminate the ways in which the katsina dance is *meaningful* as contrasted, for example, to *functions* it serves. The appropriate question here is “how?” rather than “why?”. To this end, the “dance” will be regarded as a *language*. Edmund Leach has suggested that “almost every human activity that takes place in culturally defined surroundings. . . has a technical aspect which *does* something and an aesthetic, communicative aspect which *says* something.”¹ How dance “says something” involves looking at the katsina performance from a semiotic point of view; that is, as an act of communication involving the existence of multiple codes and the processes of encoding and decoding.² As a symbolic medium of communication, language involves two fundamental aspects, “code” and “message.” By code is meant the system of elements, and rules for combining them through which meanings are encoded, communicated and understood. Message, then, is the specific speech act or linguistic communication conveying particular meanings. This perspective is that of Roman Jakobson whose model for human communication will serve as a framework through which the communicative dimensions of the Hopi katsina dance will be described.³ Jakobson’s structuralist perspective on language provided a basis for that of Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss suggests that no one creates absolutely, that the underlying logical structures of all human institutions (kinship, myth, art, systems of classification, etc.) are constrained by certain “invariant laws of logic” which he locates in the unconscious.

Included in these invariants are notions like opposition, homology, inversion. As his essay on "The Bear and the Barber" makes clear, Levi-Strauss sees clan and caste as two possible types of social organization manifested out of a range of possibilities all of which are (theoretically) possible for any society but which are also constrained by history and environment.⁴ Levi-Strauss may be the ultimate materialist for — in later writings — he sees these structures as being located in the physiology of the human mind. The structuralist perspective is not, however, a search for 'mental universals' but is rather a comparative technique concerned to account for similarities and differences in collective phenomena (in a way distinctly different from the frameworks or explanations offered by evolutionary theories or diffusion).

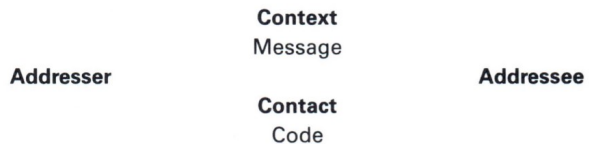
The most fundamental element in these logical structures is opposition. Oppositions are the basis out of which more complex logical systems are constructed. It is this one idea which will be carried forward into our consideration of the Hopi katsina dance. The notion of opposition or contrast is basic to discrimination and meaning. As N. S. Trubetzkoy said: "Distinctiveness . . . that is, the capacity of differentiating meaning . . . presupposes the concept of opposition."⁵ Meaning can and must be stated in terms of identifications and discriminations,⁶ of relations of similarity and opposition. Meaning implies choice, and where there is no choice, there is no meaning. The meaning of a word in use is not something attached to a particular lexical item, a particular sound complex. Rather, it is defined by contrasting it with all other words which might have been employed instead. On a street or highway, red does not signify stop, except by means of a systematic opposition to green and yellow. More frequently, however, the contrast is not immediately apprehendable as, for example, the choices of tense and number in the declension of a verb. The contrast or opposition sometimes takes place unconsciously, sometimes across time and space.⁷ What is important is this: it is the critical differences developed through relations of similarity and opposition with other elements of a symbol system which constitute the distinctive — that is, the *meaningful* — inflexion. Meaning is derived from the internal relations between the parts of the system, rather than by reference to some external source. From this observation may be derived a number of questions — indeed a methodological stance — for viewing dance in ritual and for illuminating its symbolic richness.

Jakobson has also provided a useful outline of the elements involved in human communication. In his language these are "the constitutive factors in any speech

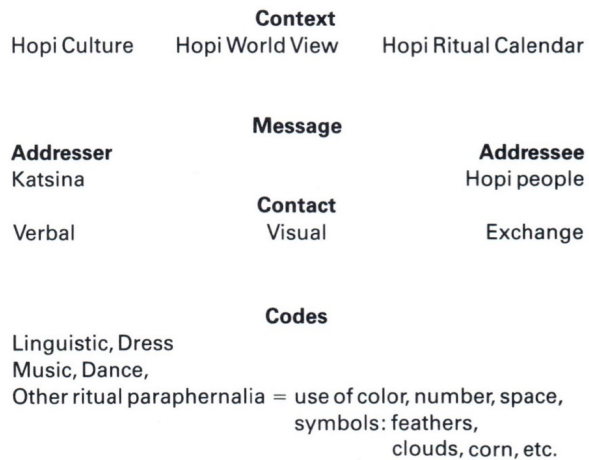
event, in any act of communication:

The **Addresser** sends a **Message** to the **Addressee**. To be operative the message requires a **Context** referred to [and] seizable by the addressee. . . ; a **Code** fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and the decoder of the message); and, finally, a **Contact**, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.⁸

These factors may be schematized as follows:



Jakobson’s model can be applied in a simplified fashion – to the Hopi katsina dance, the key elements of which are summarized in the following figure:



The Katsina Dance

There are two series of Katsina dances performed annually. In January, after the end of the Soyal or winter solstice ceremony, each of the kivas prepares a series of masked dances. They occur only in the kivas at night, but one group of katsinas appears in each kiva so that as many as twelve different kinds of katsina are seen in the course of a single night. During the winter months there may be three or four night dances. In April, May and June the katsinas come to the plaza to dance. Generally, only one kind of katsina appears but they dance all day

long, on two succeeding days, and the number of performers is much greater. They are usually three or four dances of this type culminating in the Niman or Home Dance. These are feast days and throngs of visitors come from other villages and from off-reservation.

Context

The contexts of the katsina dance are many. However, the many elements which comprise the katsina dance are — in Roy Wagner's words — “meaningful to us only through their associations, which they acquire through being associated with or opposed to one another in all sorts of contexts.”⁹ The contexts of the katsina dance include all those things which constitute the Hopi culture (language, food, dress, values, norms, etc.) but especially the ritual calendar and the Hopi's “world view.” Since the katsina dances of the spring and early summer also include clowns and clowning (clown ceremony, *tsukula/wa*),¹⁰ the moral choices presented by the larger cultural context off-reservation are also relevant. If the katsina dance is defined in part by its context in time — in the ritual calendar, it is also defined by its spatial context — its performance in the village plaza. At the personal level, various myths and memories inform the Hopi's perception of the dance.

World View

One of the basic premises of Hopi life is a conception of a world which is bipartite in structure. There is:

“a dual division of time and space between an upper world of the living and the lower world of the dead. This is expressed in the description of the sun's journey on its daily rounds. The Hopi believe that the sun has two entrances, variously referred to as houses, homes or kivas, situated at each extremity of its course. In the morning the sun is supposed to emerge from its eastern house and in the evening it is said to descend into its western home. During the night the sun must travel underground from west to east in order to arise at its accustomed place the next day. Hence day and night are reversed in the upper and lower worlds.”¹¹

Life and death, day and night, summer and winter are seen not simply as opposed but involved in a system of alternation and continuity — indeed a fundamental constancy. Death is birth into a new world and many Hopi burial practices parallel those of birth except that four black lines of charcoal separate a dead person from his home in the village while four white lines of corn meal mark the walls of a new born baby's homes.¹²

This world and the world of the spirits are transformations of each other. At death a cotton mask, a “white

cloud mask,"¹³ is placed on the face of the dead person. All katsinas are believed to take on cloud form, to be cloud people, and their substance (*navala*) is liquid which is manifested as rainfall. Navala means "spirit substance." The Hopi do not say, "I am of the same flesh and blood as my parents." Rather, "I am the liquid substance of my fathers." Navala is, also, the Hopi's "self-substance." Thus, when the katsinas (as masked ritual figures) depart, they are petitioned, "when you return to your homes bring this message to them that, without delay, they may have mercy on us with their liquid substance (i.e., the rains) so that all things may grow and life may be bountiful." Everything, in Hopi thought, is dependent on rainfall which, when combined with "mother earth," is the substance of all things. Through this combination and subsequent transformation into corn, the blessings (the gifts) of the katsinas (their navala) become the substance of "our" bodies (our navala). In sum, there is again an essential consubstantiality in the bipartite structure of the Hopi universe which relates cotton masks and clouds, the living and the dead, rain and life.

The Ritual Calendar

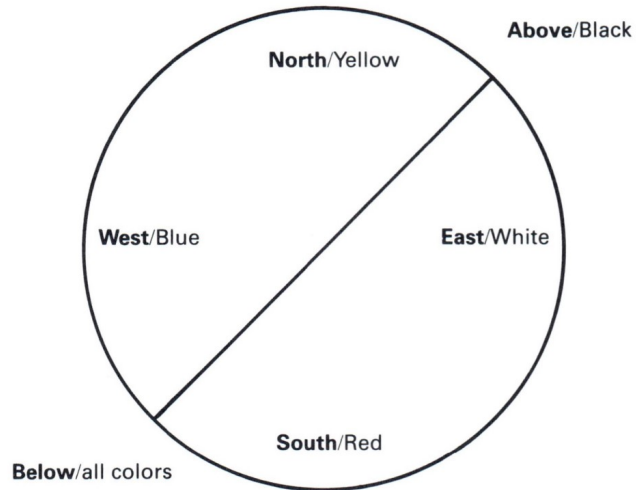
The Hopi ritual calendar is divided into two halves, pivoting at the summer and winter solstices. One half of the year involves "priestly" activities which consist, in large part, of prayers and prayer offerings (prestations) to the spirit world. The other half consists of activities surrounding the presence of the katsinas in this world. The katsinas are "messengers of the gods" and, according to A. M. Stephen, the literal translation of the word is "a sitter." Thus, "the katsina is one who comes to sit and listen to the petitions of the people"¹⁴ and brings them assurances that their prayers have been heard. On these ritual occasions, the Hopis "feed" the katsinas with prayer offerings and the masked dancers reciprocate with gifts of food.

Addresser

Analytically the katsinas are the addressers and the Hopi people are the addressees. However, "communication" (and exchange) takes place in both directions and the total performance is quite complex. Briefly, the public aspects of the katsina dance may be outlined as follows. In a predawn appearance in the village plaza the katsinas are heard singing. In an encounter with the village "priestly" representative — the "father of the katsinas" (*katsinum naamu*) — the dancers are invited to return during the day to sing, dance, and make the people's hearts glad. And so it is that throughout the two

day duration of the "dances," the *katsinam* are lead to the plaza (ideally) four times before lunch and four times after (but usually six to eight). In their songs, dance movements and attire the katsinas embody the fundamental symbols of the Hopi world view (see under Code). These "beautiful creatures," "the creator's messengers" represent in their solemn manner all that is "sacred" to the Hopi. In contrast, the earth-colored clown priests (*tsuchkut*) who first appear in the early afternoon are conceived to be playing mythically ordained roles through which they show in their being and behavior the "faults of mankind." Thus, alternating with the katsinas, the clowns — as practical ethicists — act out a drama in which "life as it should not be" is held up to the judgement of laughter, and various forms of un-Hopi (*kaHopi*) behavior are displayed in humorous fashion. Other masked figures (*piptukum*) appear to the clowns and present "skits" in which still other examples of kaHopi behavior are presented. And finally still other masked figures — various warrior katsinas — punish the clowns for their behavior.

Given the dominance of their role, the katsinas will be regarded as "addressers." The *ma'lo katsina* has been a popular katsina for impersonation at outdoor dances. It is sometimes called "stick katsina" because of the staff he carries in his left hand. The leather case mask is painted red and blue (or green) with a tubular mouth. At one side of the mask is a squash blossom ("his flower"), a "convention of colored yarns wound around stems radiating from a solid stamen,"¹⁵ and at the other side two eagle tail feathers with a tuft of red hair. The ruff (collar) is of douglas fir. The body may be painted "any common katsina style" although Stephen says they are "the cloud colors of the cardinal directions." In another description of the *ma'lo katsina*, Stephen says this use of color "may be called chromic prayer, as it is definitely regarded as an appeal to the clouds at the four directions to hasten with rain to the Hopi land."¹⁶ The red sash over the right shoulder, the kilt, sash and belt around the waist and the usually green moccasins are all common attire. A gourd rattle held in the right hand, a tortoise shell rattle worn on the right leg and bells worn on the left contribute to the complex rhythms of the katsina's songs. All distinct elements of form and content which comprise the mask are named and in themselves derive their significance from a variety of expressive media or codes used to give symbolic articulation to fundamental elements of the Hopi world view. This conception includes a complex system of correspondences which relates space, color and number into one paradigmatic statement of order. The colors of the katsina — yellow,



blue, red and white — are the colors associated with the four directions. The eyebrow is a conventionalized representation of the cloud (and indeed it is called *o'mauwu*, cloud). Beneath it is the eye, of which Stephen records:

The eye of the kachina (any kachina?) is the seed of all plants, hence the seed of any plant is its eye (bo'shi), and appropriately the eyebrow becomes a cloud over the seed, in position to pour down rain and start germination. The eye is . . . specifically spoken of as seed of cotton, beans, muskmellon . . .

These seeds are chewed producing a black pigment, the color of the Above. The two black tipped eagle feathers on the top of the mask case represent the Below, the region of all color. Of the mouth, Stephen writes:

(It is) an ear of corn, partly perforated and with open slits through which the personator emits his song-prayer. The common convention of a corn ear is nearly a facsimile of the natural object, but in this katsina it is modified in that only its cylindric form is retained to indicate its prototype. Because, Sü'yüký says, with customary logical iteration, through the mouth comes prayers, not only for corn, but for all other essentials, hence the corn ear should not be too specially manifest.¹⁷

Stephen continues recording similar statements regarding the ma'lo katsina's staff, its song, etc.

The sixfold division of color and space is not simply a matter of cultural convention but has important natural motivation for the Hopi as well.(Fig. 1) According to another early observer of the Hopi, "at least ninety per-

cent of the vegetable food eaten . . . is made from corn."¹⁸ Hopi corn is yellow, blue, red, white, black and sweet (katsina corn). To the Hopi, corn is their "mother" for "they live on and draw life from the corn as the child draws life from its mother."¹⁹ A second basic source of food is beans. According to Stephen, the "old time beans of the Hopi seem to be . . . yellow, blue, red, white, black, speckled . . ."²⁰ Hopi dependence on corn has decreased since the 19th century but corn remains a meaningful symbol of life, its substance and that which sustains it. Color is a code used culturally for the expression of significant distinctions in the Hopi conception or construction of moral space as it is or was with all native American peoples.

The behavior of the katsinas is a dynamic expression of what is "said" in their appearance or being. Songs, dance step and movements, musical instruments — all produce a co-articulate expression. The meaning of the following katsina song should be at least partially apparent:

*Who is good of heart and brave as the Katsinas
Let their breath (prayers) be with them.
No rain the clouds give us. Where have our crops gone?
The stars are the cloud guides; bring the clouds this way.
Come here clouds, bring your thunder and lightning.
Come together with the hearts and strength of the Katsinas.*

*The Katsinas have come, why come not the clouds?
Take heart and come; come with your thunder and lightning.
No rain has reached the roots, the corn is wilted.
Come clouds together and smile, let the rain come.
Good now, listen! Hear us, Omau! Smile upon us.
Listen to our brave Katsinas. Send new life to our corn.
Good now, listen! What do the stars say to the clouds?
With you the rain is sitting, so the stars say.
Over there, away from us, where have the clouds gone?
From our crops they have carried the rain,
The grass is parched and matted to the earth.
We would be happy if the rain would come.²¹*

Addressee

In this simplified view, the "addressees" are the audience — the Hopis and others — who see and hear the message of the katsinas, who make prayer offerings to them and, in turn, receive their gifts.

Code

Color, number, and use of space, fundamental symbols (feathers, clouds, corn, etc.) are all mediums for the expression of the Hopi's conception of their world, what it is and what it ought to be. The codes are at once aes-

thetic and logical, moral and ontological. Both verbal and visual, the katsina's codes require the involvement of several sensoral channels at once (visual, auditory and tactile). This is not an empty redundancy but an existentially rich and meaningful performance.

Message

The songs of the katsinas are affirmations of life, confirmations that the prayers of the Hopis have been heard and their prayer offerings received and ultimately statements of the interdependence of the Hopis and the worlds of nature and of the spirits. During the afternoons, when the greatest number of Hopis are in attendance, particularly good compositions are sung. For example:

*My mothers and my fathers
Remember in the old days, in times past,
The steady rain came from down below,
As it came, the water settled in your fields
And the calls of the waterfowl
and the creatures of the water —
Their calls sounded beautiful in the land.
And then your crops grew and the whole land
blossomed.
If you remember to do the things you did then,
The cloud will appear from the below
And the rains will come again.
Then the whole land will bloom
And there will be a happy land.*

The final song of the dance recalls the events of the first encounter of the father of the katsinas with the katsinum:

*Remember my father
You spoke to us when we came
That we should be together until the sun reached
the house in the west.
Then it would be time for us to return.
You must make a path for us with your corn
meal over which we shall return
with your prayers and your offerings.
And bring your message to the
Cloud people so that then
They may come and bring the rains
And life will be renewed.*

Contact

The final element to be considered in Jakobson's model of human communication is the notion of contact. In his view this involves "a physical channel and

psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication." Much has already been said of the verbal and visual channels of communication involved in the katsina dance. However, there is one other essential element: the notion of reciprocity or exchange. Throughout the dance the Hopi people or their representative — the father of the katsinas — "feeds" the masked dancers with corn meal, sacred corn meal. The katsinas, in turn, bring gifts — boxes of fruits, vegetables, breads, candies, etc. — which are given to the people. Reciprocity involves, according to Levi-Strauss, the unconscious principle of the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to give in return.²² As H. R. Voth noted, "It is the supposition that the spirits of the departed [i.e., the katsinas] come and get the food and the prayer feathers, or rather the *hikosi* (breath, essence, soul of these objects)." ²³ Because the dead "eat only the odor or soul of the food," the dead are not heavy. "And that is the reason why the clouds into which the dead are transformed are not heavy and can float in the air."²⁴ While one purpose of ritual in this world involved a contribution to the well-being of the spirit world, the spirit world is obligated to contribute to the well-being of this world by providing rain which is essential to the crops and hence to the health of the Hopis (and all living things of this world). Rain is the most common request in Hopi prayer, however the "gift," "blessing," or "benefit" (*nahmangwu*)²⁵ may take other forms. So the contact is not just visual and verbal but involves an obligation whose meaning is life itself.

The dance of the katsinas can be viewed as art. To Hopis, however, the dance both "says something" and "does something." Its primary purpose has to do with communication and exchange. What we perceive as the aesthetics of the performance are, in fact, secondary and derive from the logic of the codes employed. Dan Sperber has noted that "Information can be transmitted in two ways: either by coding it in a shared language or by drawing attention to it, by displaying it."²⁶ Nearly a century ago, A. M. Stephen recorded a quite similar — Hopi — perspective:

The Kachina is a paho [prayer messenger], so is the *ti'hu*, the figurine. Aside from the conventional significance of its details, the costume is also distinctly of a decorative intent, because the deities are naturally attracted by beautiful objects. When the deities see elaborate and brilliantly decorated kachina personators, they say, 'Aha, what beautiful objects are those, they must be the admirable kachina of the Hopi."²⁷

To some extent it is difficult to extract the katsina dance from the total context of its performance. And, indeed, much of this paper has been concerned to describe the context in which it occurs. Out of context, the characters, circumstances and actions seem to involve random differences but on closer inspection these turn out to be systematic and oppositions, elements of codes, words of languages — all meaningful to the Hopi people.

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