

Dancing with pots on their heads

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Zuni Olla Maidens are all blood relations

The Zuni Olla Maidens make the Summer Night Indian Dances in Gallup a sight to behold. The dances showcase different Native American tribes in traditional regalia, performing cultural dances and songs. In the case of The Zuni Olla Maidens, they are one of the few pottery dancing groups still active today.

From the Pueblo of Zuni come the Zuni Olla Maidens, an all-female group, who balance painted pottery jars on their heads as they perform dances to the beat of drums. The group sings songs of social dance and blessing, learned from the men of the pueblo, while balancing an “olla” on their heads. “Olla” is the Spanish word for jar. The name takes note of Spanish influences through their history.

Just 33 miles south of Gallup, the Pueblo of Zuni is home to the maidens, who dance to pay homage to the ancestral women who carried water for daily sustenance from local wells and ponds around the community. Co-leader of the group, Loretta Beyuka, says, “We dance the ‘pottery’ dance because that is what they used to carry the water in.”

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The group consists of: co-leader Loretta Beyuka, co-leader Juanita Edaakie, Joy Edaakie, Breana Yamutewa, Kimberly Dewa, and Ashleigh Yamutewa.

Instruments used in the ceremony include flat drums and a notched wooden “frog box” or rasp. It creates a sound similar to a frog croaking.

Outfits worn by the group change based on the weather. But Beyuka says most of the time they wear their traditional Zuni regalia. Their summer dress is called “*miha*.” Their winter attire is called “*manta*” and is a black sheath. An aunt creates the warm weather dresses for them. Their jewelry is also created by family members.

As for the pottery jars, the maidens began by buying ceramic jars in Gallup and painting them. Since that time, Breana Yamutewa has found someone in Zuni who uses natural clay and makes her pottery jars. The jars are concave in shape, which helps in the art of balancing them. She says, “People often ask if we have flat heads (laughing) which of course, we don’t.”

Breana Yamutewa started out by carrying the banner when she was seven years old and progressed to being one of the dancers. She says she was thrown into the group by her grandmother, in a manner of speaking. She says, “My grandmother didn’t give me a choice (laughing). She said I was going to carry the banner and when I hit twelve, she told me I was going to start dancing and get a pottery.”

As for Beyuka, she began dancing because of her mother’s influence. For the past 30 years that influence continues to keep her going as the reins were handed over to her with Juanita Edaakie, who has been performing for over 25 years. Beyuka says, “I like performing in front of audiences, because it gives me a rush. I enjoy singing and dancing.”

She adds that what got her involved was an interest in educating people about the Zuni culture and women’s role in their society. She also enjoys being a part of the group and traveling with her family.

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As the group performs, members take time out to tell the crowd about their regalia, traveling from above the top of their heads with the pottery jars, all the way down to their “pipe stove” shaped moccasins.

They also wait after each performance to pose for pictures and answer questions from the crowd. Two they hear frequently are: “Is it hard to balance the pottery jar?” and “Have many been broken?”

Breana Yamutewa, says she remembers perfecting her art by balancing books on her head.

The Maidens invite members of the audience to participate in one of their social dances to show that no matter what color, language, or ethnicity, we are alike.

You can experience the Zuni Olla Maidens performing throughout the summer at the McKinley County Court House.

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