



The Zuni Enigma: A Native American People's Possible Japanese Connection

By Nancy Yaw Davis

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"A stunning and carefully supported argument that should stir useful discussion.... [An] exciting, groundbreaking work."?Booklist

Did a group of thirteenth-century Japanese merge with the people, language, and religion of the Zuni tribe? For many years, anthropologists have understood the Zuni in the American Southwest to occupy a special place in Native American culture and ethnography. Their language, religion, and blood type are startlingly different from all other tribes. Most puzzling, the Zuni appear to have much in common with the people of Japan. In a book with groundbreaking implications, Dr. Nancy Yaw Davis examines the evidence underscoring the Zuni enigma and suggests the circumstances that may have led Japanese on a religious quest?searching for the legendary "middle world" of Buddhism?across the Pacific to the American Southwest more than seven hundred years ago. 72 black and white illustrations and 17 maps

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The peaceful Zuni of New Mexico and Arizona are much studied, partly because their language, culture and physical appearance set them apart from other Native American peoples. Davis, an anthropologist who has made 10 visits to the Zuni pueblo, now offers the startling thesis that a group of Japanese Buddhists left earthquake-racked medieval Japan and came by ship to the Southern California coast, eventually migrating inland to the Zuni territory, where they merged their culture and genes with Native Americans to produce the modern Zuni people around A.D. 1350. Davis uses "forensic" evidence--including analyses of dental morphology, blood and skeletal remains--to support a Japanese-Zuni connection. Further, she notes the Zuni's exceptionally high incidence of a specific kidney disease that is also unusually common in Japan. Yet she acknowledges there have been no DNA studies to confirm or refute her hypothesis, and she has not turned up a single 13th-century Japanese item in North America. Her bold, highly speculative theory gets a boost from some cultural parallels, including striking similarities between the Zuni and Japanese languages; between the Zuni "sacred rosette" found on robes and pottery and the Japanese Buddhist chrysanthemum symbol (presently Japan's imperial crest). A Zuni mid-January ceremony with masked monsters, aimed at frightening children into proper behavior, is almost identical to one in Japan. Davis's broader thesis that the Pacific was a "liquid highway" mounts a serious challenge to the entrenched idea of the peopling of the Americas solely via the Bering Strait land bridge. Open-minded readers will enjoy her beautifully written book as an opportunity to ponder our shared humanity. Illus.

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From Library Journal

Davis, an independent anthropological researcher with a Ph.D. from the University of Washington, has developed a bold and unorthodox theory to account for some of the cultural, linguistic, and religious characteristics that set the Zuni people apart from other Pueblo Indian groups. Davis hypothesizes that a small group of Japanese men, possibly on a religious pilgrimage to find the "middle-world" of Buddhism, may have sailed to North America in the late 13th century and then traveled eastward. Eventually, she posits, they may have settled in the area of present-day western New Mexico, intermingling their customs and religious practices with those of the local Native Americans. Davis's theory is well thought out and provides intricate comparisons among many Japanese and Zuni cultural characteristics. Her work is an engaging and persuasive presentation of an alternative migration theory that perhaps deserves more serious consideration by anthropological scholars. Recommended for academic libraries.

-Elizabeth Anne Salt, Otterbein Coll. Lib., Westerville, OH

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From [Booklist](#)

This is what scholarship is supposed to be. Although her thesis is bound to be controversial, Davis makes a stunning and carefully supported argument that should stir useful discussion. The Southwest's Zuni people are among the most studied indigenous Americans, but no one had previously noticed--at least, not in print--that some of the Zuni vocabulary seems Japanese. That perception inspired Davis through decades of study, on which this book is based. An anthropologist, Davis examines various forms of evidence: physical, such as the prevalence of certain diseases and blood types among both Zuni and Japanese; cultural, such as motifs that appear in the art of both peoples; and cosmological, that is, myths and ideas found among both. She contends that a splinter sect of Buddhists left Japan in the thirteenth century and traveled east in search of a new spiritual homeland, and that Zuni culture is the result of an amalgamation of Asian and indigenous

American beliefs and cultural ways. Written in clear, evocative language, this is exciting, groundbreaking work. *Patricia Monaghan*

Users Review

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