

Excerpt from *Esteban: The African Slave Who Explored America*

1 A Man of Mysteries

History books of the American West have ignored him or, even worse, attacked his character and belittled his importance. Spanish conquistadors pretended that one reason they went to Arizona and New Mexico was to investigate what happened to him. There are no buildings or natural landmarks in the United States named in his honor. The only public spaces honoring him are small Arizona parks in Tucson and Phoenix. He's known best by his insulting nickname. He is almost erased from America's historical record.

Nevertheless, the African slave Esteban was the first person from the "Old World" of Europe, Africa, and Asia to travel across the North American continent and also explore the American Southwest in the early 1500s.

Most historical literature claims Zuni warriors killed him in 1539 in the present state of New Mexico.

If so, there is conjecture on why they killed him. Some say his gourd rattle from another tribe or owl feathers he wore angered Zuni religious leaders. Others claim he was arrogant and demanded gifts and favors, or that his never-before-seen skin color startled the Zunis. None of these reasons seem serious enough for a tribe characterized as inclined toward peace to kill him.

The most persistent reason stated in book after book is that he was killed because he made advances toward Zuni women. However, Mexican Indians who accompanied Esteban reported that Zunis did not allow him to enter the village. Esteban most likely never saw any Zuni women. The conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado wrote the next year that Zunis kept women guarded so closely that even he saw only two elderly ones.

Zuni historian Edmund J. Ladd wrote that *if* his ancestors killed Esteban, the most likely reason was because they concluded he was a spy. They feared he could show the location of Zuni villages to slave-raiding Spaniards that trade-route rumors warned them about.

On the other hand, they allowed the Indians with him to escape with that same knowledge. So there's a possibility Zunis did not kill Esteban despite almost all history books declaring they did.

What really happened?

Most of at least his adult life was spent in slavery. But the Spanish viceroy in Mexico City chose Esteban to guide Spain's first expedition north of Mexico. So the slave was at last able to live as a free man, even if briefly.

That came after he'd survived an escape from a Spanish expedition's invasion of Florida and traveled the width of the continent with three Spaniards in a journey that took seven and a half years. That incredible feat is described starting in Chapter 4.

His Spanish name of Esteban is often Anglicized as Estevan, because the letters b and v are pronounced nearly the same. The name translates into English as "Stephan."

When reported on, however, he is almost always referred to as Estebanico or Estevanico, either of which translate to a nickname, "Little Stephan," or even "Stevie." Spaniards of his day used that diminutive for a child—or, in Esteban's case, to convey condescension toward him because of his low status as a slave.

The original disrespect of the nickname continues today in many history books, which still refer to him as Estebanico or Estevanico instead of his actual Spanish name. The excuse for using the nickname is that he is referred to that way in most Spanish chronicles.

Well, of course he is, as a way for Spaniards of that time to demean and marginalize him.

This biography will refer to him by his actual Spanish name of Esteban.

He also is referred to as an Arab Moor much more often than as a black African, and his Berber connection is almost invisible. The next chapter will examine this controversy.

Esteban remains an intriguing although unheralded figure of history. His reputation remains under repeated disparagement despite his accomplishments, his courage, and his talents.

PUEBLO TRIBES REMEMBER HIM

Ironically, the Zuni Indians who are said to have killed him are the ones who keep his memory alive in their oral history and through their ancient Katsina religion.

In 1885, almost 350 years after Esteban's arrival, Zuni elders told Smithsonian ethnologist Frank H. Cushing what he called "the Zuni legend of the Black Mexican." In it, he said Zuni oral history told of killing a Black Mexican from "the Land of Everlasting Summer." Cushing recalled that the Zunis told him Esteban was killed at the village of Kyaki:ma, although he remembered wrong or was given incorrect information. Most historians agree Esteban went to the southwestern-most Zuni village named Hawikku, often Anglicized to Hawikuh.

Esteban is also remembered in the Katsina religion, in which some Pueblo men wear regalia and elaborate masks to represent spirit-beings. Such masked figures are katsinas, often Anglicized to "kachinas."

A katsina can be a deity or the spirit of a historical figure, ancestor, animal, or bird, depending on the Pueblo ceremony. Although sometimes referred to as Pueblo gods, they are not. They would be closer to the concept of Catholic saints, but even that is not an exact comparison.

"Borrowing the bodies of living men," writer Paul Coze explained, "these lesser gods [katsinas] visit the villages ... to receive prayers to [the Creator]. He who wears the mask of a

kachina believes he loses his personal identity and assumes that of the spirit.” This would be similar to religious leaders of any other belief feeling a sense of spiritual ennoblement when putting on clerical vestments.

Men wearing masks and taking on the roles of katsinas could have been among the warriors and elders who met Esteban when he arrived at the hilltop Zuni village of Hawikku in early 1539.

Esteban’s surprise appearance generated this saying among modern Pueblo Indians: “The first white man we saw was a black man.”

Anthropologists report that, at least in the past, the Hopi, Zuni, and some Keresan pueblos memorialized Esteban’s arrival by creating a katsina spirit-being called Chákwaina (*Tsa’kwaina*, in Hopi). It was always painted black and referred to as “the black katsina.”

Chákwaina is also known as the “monster katsina.” Chákwaina emerged as a symbol of the ruinous Spanish conquest that Esteban’s appearance at Hawikku foreshadowed. As a portent of the event that so altered the life, religion, and culture of all Puebloans, they vilified Esteban by making him the fearsome Chákwaina katsina.

Small carved katsina figures, more properly katsintithu but commonly called dolls, are still created as religion teaching aids, not toys, to instruct children in the ancient culture in some pueblos. Chákwaina is usually made with a long, black goatee, sheep wool or buffalo hair, a Pueblo kilt called a dance kirtle, and carrying a gourd rattle. Over the past few decades, Chákwaina’s face has often had a star painted on one cheek and a crescent moon on the other, signifying Esteban’s Muslim heritage. Chákwaina was introduced to Hopi First Mesa from Zuni and later adopted by some pueblos along the Rio Grande. Ceremonial dances in the past have commemorated Esteban’s arrival in 1539, represented by Chákwaina.

A lesser-known katsina named Nepokwa'i has also been linked to Esteban. Nepokwa'i is similar to the flute-player figure named Kokopelli, which is so prominent in Puebloan rock art. At the Tewa settlement of Hano at Hopi, Nepokwa'i's mask and body were painted black and referred to as "a big black man." In Puebloan tales, Nepokwa'i appears with a buckskin on his back from which he makes moccasins for women.

The public can see katsinas today in a few ceremonies, but only at the western pueblos of Zuni and Hopi. Centuries of missionary work have suppressed public appearances of masked katsinas in the pueblos along the Rio Grande, although they might still appear today in ceremonies closed to the outside public.

Spaniards would come to know the Zuni territory as Cibola, a word of indefinite origin. Some historians think Cibola was an Indian word for the American bison, also known as buffalo, on the Great Plains. Even today, part of Zuni Pueblo lands are in New Mexico's Cibola County with its seal portraying a buffalo. Other theories about the word exist, including that it might be the name that a Mexican tribe used for the Zuni that was later also applied to buffalo.....