4-2015

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Recommended Citation

McHugh, Erin (2015) "Letting the Unspoken Speak: A Reexamination of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2015.050105

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol5/iss1/5>

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Letting the Unspoken Speak:
A Reexamination of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680

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The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 was one of the most significant yet misrepresented events in the history of American Indians. After three generations of being oppressed by Spanish rule, the Pueblo Indians throughout the southwest region of North America banded together, organizing a widespread rebellion in the blistering summer heat of 1680 and successfully liberating themselves from their oppressors by springtime. When examining the causes of the revolt, the lack of authentic Pueblo voices within the written records challenges the validity of the available sources and makes one wonder if we will ever know what went on through the eyes of the Pueblo. Although in the traditional narrative, the Spaniards are regarded as missionaries sent by God to "save" the "barbaric" Pueblos, the event, if seen from the Pueblo perspective, can be understood as a violent retaliation by the Pueblo against the Spanish oppression. The Pueblo uprisings, from burning down churches to the violent deaths of Catholic friars, reveal spiritual abuse as the major cause of the revolt. Moreover, without texts written by the Pueblo, their architecture and spatial organization provide valuable insight into the causes of the revolt era and help to overcome the veneer of Spanish colonialism.

Before the Spanish arrived in the new world, the Pueblo carried out their religious practices in relative peace. They lived in a prayer culture and freely practiced the sacred religion

of their ancestors, which is evident in the Hopi tradition of growing rows of corn, offering prayer sticks to their gods, and adorning katsina masks.¹ Even though the Pueblo highly valued these religious rituals, the Catholic friars wanted to stamp out these pagan practices immediately.

After the Spanish failed to find the golden city of Quivera during the sixteenth century, they turned their efforts into converting the Pueblo. From this time on, the Spanish penetrated into New Mexico, the epicenter of the Pueblo world. Backed by the cross and the whip, Catholic missionaries sought to eradicate the ancestral Pueblo religion. Any resistance to Spanish rule was met with imprisonment, torture, and even death. Take for example an incident recorded in 1655 when Fray Salvador De Guerra “whipped a Hopi man for worshiping idols until ‘he was bathed in blood.’”² Furthermore, the friars destroyed around sixteen hundred of the Pueblos’ katsina masks and praying sticks.³ The evidence not only suggests how the Spaniards physically abused the Pueblo for their spiritual beliefs but also how they destroyed many of the Pueblo ancestral religious practices.⁴ Instead of seeing them as equal people, the Spanish regarded the Pueblo as idolaters, which led the Pueblo to being further silenced.

It is evident that the Spanish were trying to cover up their oppressive actions by focusing on how “barbaric” the Pueblos were. In the “Declaration of an Indian Rebel of 1680,” a Pueblo Indian killed several Catholic friars,—and indeed, according to the document, five Spanish bodies were later found behind the church built among the Pueblo of Santo Domingo.⁵ Similarly, an account from 1689 described the Jemez Pueblo tying a friar to the back of a pig and

¹ Colin Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 96.

² Matthew Liebmann, *Revolt: An Archaeological History of Pueblo Resistance and Revitalization in 17th Century New Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 37.

³ Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 171.

⁴ Liebmann, *Revolt*, 38.

⁵ “Declaration of an Indian Rebel, August 23, 1680,” in *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Otermin's Attempted Reconquest: 1680-1682*, ed. Charles W. Hackett, vol. 1 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942), 21.

finally, shooting him with arrows and burying his body next to a kiva.⁶ These witness accounts, however, lack the Pueblo perspective and de-emphasize the motives that caused the Pueblo to retaliate. If the Pueblo voices were heard, perhaps they would tell us that the Pueblo people had a strong dislike for the Spanish, that they had put up with them for too long, and they would have fought back sooner if they could. Their actions reflected feelings of resentment, anger, and weariness.

One of the most problematic aspects of the revolt's narrative is that it has been primarily written by the oppressors. For example, in the "Declaration of a Christian Indian Rebel of 1680," the Spanish captured and interrogated a Pueblo man. There are many dimensions to this document that give cause to question its validity. Firstly, it quoted the Pueblo man describing himself as a "sorcerer" and "idolater."⁷ Secondly, it is highly probable that the interview was conducted under the threat of torture, which impacted what the Pueblo man allegedly said. Lastly, the document was a signed testimony of the Spanish Captain Montano. All these factors raise a red flag. The document serves as a prime example of flawed evidence because it discredited the Pueblo voices. If the document was genuine it would have included culturally relevant terms, such as "katsina masks" rather than "idolatry," because the majority of the Pueblo did not view their religious culture in a negative way. The lack of Pueblo voices within this document illustrates how the Spaniards were putting words into the Pueblos' mouths, supporting the fact that the history of the revolt has mainly been constructed by the persecutors.

In contrast to the Spanish colonial perspectives ingrained within the written sources, archaeology brings us a little closer to a Pueblo perspective of the the revolt. Indeed, the ideology of revivalism became employed by the Pueblo in the wake of the revolt, and as

⁶ Liebmann, *Revolt*, 84.

⁷ "Declaration of Christian Indian Rebel, Sept. 6, 1680," in Hackett, ed., *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians*, 61.

Matthew Liebmann's study indicates, the compact, dual-plaza form of Kotyiti, Patokwa, and Boletsakwa departed from the dispersed, scattered layouts of the mission villages that were popular among previous generations. Architectural data demonstrates that these villages were highly planned, with coordinated construction events that were organized on the communal level. Their archaeological records suggest that the inhabitants of these communities shared a common ideological template, emphasizing social balance and harmony as a means of reordering their world, which had been thrown into chaos during eight decades of Spanish colonialism. Liebmann employs the term "erasure" to convey how many of the Pueblo insisted on rebuilding, rather than living in constant remembrance of religious persecution. They restored kivas to honor their ancestral religion and to live the way their ancestors did. Therefore, the Pueblo did not view themselves as "idolaters," as indicated in the written documents, but as a diverse group of individuals who held onto their religious culture. The actions of the Pueblo described in these sources indicate how they did not want to abandon their worldview based on religion. They suffered from religious abuse for long enough and now longed for spiritual independence.

It is important to note that many documents concerning the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 are skewed because they tend to homogenize all Pueblo peoples as "rebels." While some of the Pueblo followed Po'pay (the charismatic revolt leader), it is apparent that others rejected Po'pay's nativist call. For instance, Alonso Shimitihua, the Spanish-speaking colonial sympathizer from Isleta, planned to persuade the Pueblo to surrender and adopt Christianity.⁸ Two Tiwas (Baltasar and Tomas) followed Shimitihua's lead, immigrating with the Spanish to El Paso. Liebmann's evidence further indicates how the Punames displayed ambivalence toward the Spaniards, which contrasted sharply with Po'pay's followers. Lastly, not all Pueblos desired to

⁸ Liebmann, *Revolt*, 71.

destroy signs of Christianity and to kill friars. In fact, the Zunis preserved all of the “ornaments of divine worship” from the mission churches, including images of the crucified Christ.⁹ By the 1680s, there were three generations of Pueblo who had been exposed to Catholicism and embraced it. Many Pueblo respected Christianity and left several missions intact, indicating that the Pueblo were not unanimous in rebellion.

Ultimately, authenticity in the writing of the Pueblo history by non-Indians is an ongoing dilemma. From the evidence gathered, there are ample sources from the Spanish, especially military directives, but what is lacking are authentic Pueblo voices. Due to the lack of Pueblo voices, one can only turn to the traditions and motivations of the Pueblo people and interpret spiritual abuse as a contributing factor to the revolt. Additionally, it is evident that the Pueblo know their history, but through the form of oral tradition. Therefore, it is still questionable if we will ever know the true causes of the revolt. While attempting to avoid these false documents, which have perpetuated into truths, it is important to view the Pueblo as equals and to respect their religious rituals. As Historian Donald Fixico emphasizes, one necessary step in hearing the Pueblo voices and learning the causes of the revolt through the Pueblo eyes is to acknowledge their limitations and start “thinking like an Indian.”¹⁰

About the author

Erin McHugh is a History major in her third year at St. Olaf College, Minnesota. She is a member of Phi Alpha Theta and the Blue Key Society. This summer she will work at the Field Museum in Chicago as an intern in the Education department. After graduation, she plans to

⁹ Liebmann, *Revolt*, 60.

¹⁰ Donald Fixico, "Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History," *American Indian Quarterly* 20 (Winter 1996): 36.

attend graduate school to continue her study in history. She dreams of becoming a teacher to inspire others to appreciate history.