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Environmental Studies 600
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13 March 2017

Enduring Invasion, Conquest, Land Struggles, and Neocolonialism: A Case Study of The Taos Pueblo

Introduction

The Taos Pueblo is steeped in traditional narratives and folklore of the American West. Tales of imperial resistance, most famously the 1680 Pueblo Revolt led by Popé, and generations-long struggles for land and autonomy are inextricably linked to this place. The part of this story that has historically been too-often lost is the Taos Indians beyond their interactions with foreigners. The Taos Indians faced significant struggles to exist as an independent people in the face of European and American invasion. They fought to gain control of their own lands in the 20th century, highlighted by the prolonged Blue Lake land dispute. In recent years, this troubling aspect of U.S. history has begun to be remedied at the Taos Pueblo. Through cooperation from and collaboration with entities such as UNESCO and federal, state, and local officials, culture at the Taos Pueblo is being recognized, honored, and respected. With these new cooperative partnerships, a strong tourism industry has developed at Taos Pueblo. This has been lucrative for the Pueblo people, but it is also fraught with a whole new set of issues of respect and threats to cultural integrity. Neocolonialist attitudes and tourists who often disrespect cultural protocols and histories of the Taos Pueblo have shown the difficulties of cultural tourism today.

Background

The history of the Taos Pueblo is deep. Historians estimate Native Americans built their first pueblo structures—located about an hour and a half north of modern day Santa Fe, New Mexico—there between 1100 and 1200 CE¹. The structures of the Taos Pueblo are the oldest “continuously inhabited” structures in the United States². The Spanish were the first Europeans to come upon the Taos Pueblo. The rich soil of the Rio Grande valley and the more sedentary lifestyle of the Pueblo people appealed to the Spanish; the climate was more readily available for settlement and the sedentary people were susceptible to Christian conversion. Trouble followed, as the Spanish ultimately were manipulative and coercive, demanding the Pueblo people pay taxes and perform manual labor. By 1680, the Taos Pueblo people had reached a breaking point. Popé, a legendary leader of Native American resistance to European imperialism, engineered a revolt. The Revolt of 1680 is the most successful Native American uprising in history, to the point that some call it the First American Revolution³. The Pueblo people took back the Taos Pueblo from the Spanish and journeyed south to Santa Fe, picking up other Pueblo peoples along the way. They essentially drove the Spanish from the area and although by 1692 there was a new Spanish regime installed, this revolt left its mark and is an example of the resilience of the Taos Pueblo people.

The next century was tumultuous for the Taos Pueblo people, as the Spanish to the Mexicans to the Americans all claimed their land as their own—and those are just the most clear cut claims. Revolutions in Texas, America, and Europe all created unstable political

¹ Dornan, Ellen. *Wicked Taos*. The History Press (Charleston, SC). 2014: 5.

² Dunigan, Jerry. “The Uniqueness of Taos Pueblo.” *National Association of African American Studies*. 2013: 783.

³ *Ibid*: 788.

circumstances in which the Taos Pueblo people were laid claim to by numerous different leaders and nations. It would not be until very recently—within the last half century—that the Taos Pueblo people regained some control over their land and culture and began to receive some respect from American governmental institutions.

Today, the Taos Pueblo culture is unique, rich, and nuanced. They are one of 19 federally recognized Pueblos in New Mexico.⁴ While there are over 1900 Taos Indians living on Taos Pueblo lands, only about 150 live inside the Pueblo walls full-time. Most others spend most of their time in a more modern home outside the Pueblo walls.⁵ Their religion is self-described on their website “complex,” as 90% of Pueblo Indians identify as Catholics, but traditional Pueblo spirituality is still practiced in tandem with the Catholicism.⁶ The native language of the Taos Indians, Tiwa, is still spoken, but Spanish and English are both common, as well. They are governed by a Tribal Council of elders, who appoint a War Chief and Tribal Governor each year. The education system is unique, too. The Bureau of Indian Affairs funds an elementary school near the Pueblo, with primarily Indian teachers overseen by an education committee of Pueblo members. In the Town of Taos, there are typical public schools which most Taos Indian children attend.⁷

Policies Affecting the Case

The Taos Pueblo has been the site of numerous issues, disputes, and reconciliations.

Public policies in the modern way we understand them really began for the Taos Pueblo people

⁴ “Taos Pueblo: Over 1000 Years of Tradition.” *Taospueblo.com*. Last modified 2017. Accessed 11 March 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

with their absorption into the United States as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The American government was no more hospitable towards them than the Spanish had been centuries earlier. The United States imposed, “policies of forced assimilation focused on the children, tribal government, religion, and culture”⁸. Blue Lake, an important cultural and spiritual site for the Taos Pueblo people was stripped from them in the early 1900s. Ironically, the United States Forest Service incorporated Blue Lake into the Carson National Forest, which was one of the natural spaces President Theodore Roosevelt has been heralded for preserving⁹.

A very long, multi-generational fight by the Taos Pueblo people to have Blue Lake returned to them ensued. In the first decade after it was stripped from them, the tribe attempted to have Blue Lake declared an “executive order reservation”¹⁰. This was rejected by William Taft’s administration in 1912 and again by Woodrow Wilson’s administration in 1916. In the midst of this, New Mexico became a state in 1912, and along with it came the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In another cruel twist, the Bureau acted on the 1883 Religious Crimes Act that essentially outlawed Native American spirituality. When meeting with the Bureau’s Commissioner about Blue Lake in 1926, he told the Pueblo people they were “‘half animals’ because of the ‘pagan religion’”¹¹.

As a result of these experiences with the United States and New Mexico government, the Taos Pueblo people went underground with many of their religious and cultural practices. This

⁸ Lujan, Carol Chiago. “A Sociological View of Tourism in an American Indian Community: Maintaining Cultural Integrity at Taos Pueblo.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. Volume 17, Issue 3. 1993: 103.

⁹ Dunigan, Jerry. “The Uniqueness of Taos Pueblo.” *National Association of African American Studies*. 2013: 791.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

covert transition is widely documented and, unfortunately, is a recurring theme in the history of the Taos Pueblo people and Native American tribes generally post-European contact.

The reconciliation of Blue Lake ultimately came from what may seem to be an unlikely source: Richard Nixon. The Indian Claims Commission, established at the federal level in 1946 gave tribes a body to appeal to if there had been unjust land seizure. Taos Pueblo filed a claim about Blue Lake and won, but the Commission was only empowered to give monetary compensation. The Taos Indians only wanted Blue Lake back, though, so they refused the money. This demonstrates their differing relationship to land and money, which was, unsurprisingly, ignored by the U.S. government. Finally in 1970 as part of a new federal policy to empower Native Americans with more self-governance, the Senate passed a bill 70-12 which President Richard Nixon signed to give Blue Lake back to the Taos Pueblo¹². The Taos Pueblo's website calls the return of Blue Lake, "the single most dramatic event in the recent history of Taos Pueblo Land."¹³

After the Blue Lake justice, the official policies of the government towards the Taos Pueblo became more benign. The naming of the Taos Pueblo as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1992 and indigenous development of tourism at the Pueblo are some factors which have begun the long process of healing and cultivation of cultural respect. The tourism industry has been a very lucrative one for the Taos Pueblo people, but comes with a new set of difficulties with cultural respect and integrity. Tourism at the Taos Pueblo dates back to the late 19th century, but for a long time it was operated by white businessmen with no interest or concern for the

¹² Ibid: 792.

¹³ "Taos Pueblo: Over 1000 Years of Tradition." *Taospueblo.com*. Last modified 2017. Accessed 11 March 2017.

cultural integrity of the Taos Pueblo¹⁴. Only within the last 30 years has the tourism industry shifted to control by the Taos Pueblo people themselves.

Analysis

The direction of the relationship with the Taos Pueblo people took a turn when ownership of Blue Lake was returned to them. This was really the first time the United States government showed any level of respect for the indigenous inhabitants of the Taos Pueblo since it became part of the United States in 1848 and only caused them historic trauma, abuse, and perpetrated an ongoing colonial mindset.

The development of tourism, though, according to members of the Taos Pueblo, has impersonalized and diluted *their* experience of their own Pueblo. This can be so intense that it has been referred to as a form of neo-colonialism¹⁵. One anonymous member of the Taos Pueblo shared their experience of constant tourists inside the Pueblo as “you begin to feel like you’re part of a zoo. It’s like being a wax model in a wax museum”¹⁶. Another Pueblo Tribal member expressed their frustration with tourists “[hurrying] over and [starting to] to take pictures” any time a member of the Taos Pueblo was simply trying to plaster their home¹⁷.

One Pueblo member seemed to understand the draw to tour the Pueblo, though. They observed, “There is a powerful sense of community in Taos Pueblo. There is a powerful sense of

¹⁴ Lujan, Carol Chiago. “A Sociological View of Tourism in an American Indian Community: Maintaining Cultural Integrity at Taos Pueblo.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. Volume 17, Issue 3. 1993: 109

¹⁵ Ibid: 105

¹⁶ Ibid: 112

¹⁷ Ibid

nature interacting with the human race. . . . I have a feeling that the average American has lost the feeling of belonging, and they come to the pueblo to share this sense of belonging.”¹⁸ This Pueblo member believes the people at the Taos Pueblo seem to belong in a way others outside the Pueblo walls do not. In this way, this particular Pueblo member seems to have some sympathy for the tourists through recognition of the richness of their own culture.

Even with the difficulties, tourism at the Taos Pueblo is regarded as a success story of cultural tourism. In her study of tourism at the Taos Pueblo, Carol Lujan argues the success stems from three things: 1) the Taos Pueblo people already had a strong culture and religion pre-tourism, 2) the pueblo residents maintain control over the regulation of tourism, and 3) they protect their religion from outside interference¹⁹.

The problems boil down to a two-pronged issue. First, federal land management steals vast amounts of indigenous lands. The entire Taos Pueblo being converted into a mission by the Spanish and Blue Lake being taken by the United States Forest Service is not an anomaly; unfortunately, it is a norm. While some of this has been remedied in very recent history, the Taos Indians have seen rise to another set of issues entailed in their development of cultural tourism as an lucrative economic enterprise for their Tribe. It is difficult to educate about traditional cultural values when tourists are disrespectful of that cultures and slip into neocolonialist attitudes about the space they are touring.

¹⁸ Ibid: 114

¹⁹ Ibid: 117

In my project in partnership with the City of Monona and the Ho-Chunk Nation to develop a Cultural Management Plan, history and contemporary issues abound with lessons. Recognizing that extremely well-intentioned projects—I imagine something like a tourism element—can lead to deeply problematic cultural disrespect is important. Cultural management is best practiced when left to the people whose culture is being managed. In this case, that would be members of the Ho-Chunk Tribe. I see our role in this as merely assisting to facilitate the logistics of such a plan and leaning in on expertise and advice from members of the Ho-Chunk Nation.

Lessons Learned

Many of the lessons learned through the course of the Taos Pueblo are familiar. These enduring people have withstood centuries of invasion and conquest²⁰. Despite this, they remain today as a strong and resilient people. The structures they built have been designated as a World Heritage Site, although the Pueblo people likely did not need validation from an international organization to know their architectural sites are precious and invaluable.

When working with sensitive cultural integrity issues, it is important for outsiders to understand the long-view. I think it is important to recognize that while tourism is vital to the Taos Pueblo today and managed relatively well, it was not until very recently an operation like this was even possible; only a few decades ago the Taos Pueblo people were still fighting for their rights to their own land. The most important aspect that is working of tourism in the Taos

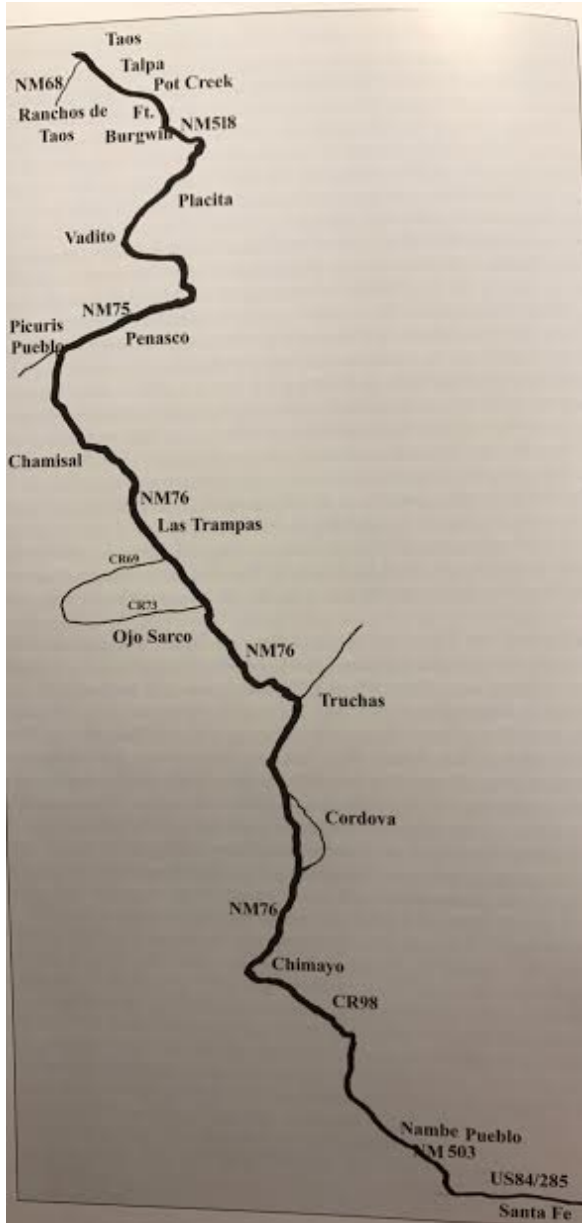
²⁰ Dunigan, Jerry. "The Uniqueness of Taos Pueblo." National Association of African American Studies. 2013: 797

Pueblo is the autonomy in management maintained by the Taos Indians. This autonomy should seem only natural, as it is their land and culture being toured. However, tourism at the Taos Pueblo beginning in the late 19th century was managed by white Americans; tourism autonomy is not a given. While they are experiencing difficulties in cultural integrity, it is by far the best option to have the Taos Indians decide how to move forward to handle these issues in the Pueblo, rather than an outside group or entity with no personal understanding of the issues. This does *not* mean it is their responsibility to stop neocolonialism attitudes and disrespect of cultural protocols perpetrated by predominantly white American tourists. This is a responsibility that lies with the dominant culture in the United States.

Conclusion

Native American peoples are enduring and resilient. From centuries of colonialism and oppression, they persist today as a valuable people with great contributions to society. Today, the preservation and respect of their histories and culture is best accomplished in what should seem to be the most obvious strategy: relying on the advice and expertise of indigenous communities. Improving relationships with these communities by returning their land to them and working with them (or simply allowing them to work) on cultural and land management matters.

The tourism industry is one of the most important for the Taos Pueblo today. It is lucrative and provides an opportunity to share their culture with others. However, as members of the Taos Pueblo have expressed, these tourists are often disrespectful and sometimes even downright racist when touring within the sacred walls of the Pueblo.



Appendix 1: “The High Road to Taos” is the road typically taken north from Santa Fe to Taos Pueblo by tourists. It is about an hour and a half and, along the way, numerous ancient Pueblos can be seen. (Source: *High Road to Taos*)

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