Surviving colonialism: The 1680 revolt and Pueblo cultural resurrection

Introduction

This paper argues that the Pueblo revolt of 1680 was not only a political uprising but also a catalyst for cultural survival, enabling the Pueblo community to preserve many aspects of its culture. This is most clearly evident in the archaeological record of the independence era (1680–1692), which demonstrates that the Puebloans actively purged Spanish material goods, revitalized traditional architecture, and retained more of their own culture.

By analyzing these physical shifts, I argue that the revolt was a revitalization movement that forced the returning Spanish in 1692 to accept a new *status quo*. The "success" of the revolt was not in keeping the Spanish out forever, but in creating a twelve-year period in which Pueblo religious and linguistic identity became so deeply rooted that it could not be destroyed again. Thus, the modern survival of Pueblo culture is a direct result of the reorganization during those twelve years of independence.

The political and social reorganization that followed the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 marked a turning point in the history of Indigenous resistance and cultural continuity in the Americas. In its aftermath, Pueblo communities not only expelled Spanish colonial authorities for over a decade but also reasserted forms of governance, spatial organization, and ceremonial life that had been under sustained pressure. This article asks how, as a direct consequence of that moment, Pueblo cultures have endured in ways that many other Indigenous societies, subjected to more prolonged displacement and assimilationist policies, have struggled to do. It further considers how the specific gains associated with the revolt and its aftermath, particularly in language retention, architectural continuity, ritual practice, religious life, and material culture, have

continued to shape Pueblo identity into the present. By foregrounding these domains, the study examines the revolt not simply as an episode of resistance, but as a foundational process in the long-term preservation and transformation of Pueblo cultural sovereignty.

The Pueblo revolt of 1680 is one moment in the long colonial history of the Americas. However, it remains one of the most successful and prolonged expulsions of a European colonial power by Indigenous peoples in North America, keeping the Spanish Empire at bay for twelve years. The significance of the revolt goes far beyond its military success. For scholars of the American Southwest, the revolt is one of the main ways to understand the mechanics of colonial failure, the resilience of Indigenous cosmology, and the processes of cultural resurrection. This paper examines the historiography and archaeological analysis of the revolt to understand how it functioned as a mechanism for long-term cultural preservation.

Research so far has focused on a narrow selection of issues concerning the revolt, such as its causes, organization, the period of independence, and the Spanish reconquest. While these aspects are crucial, this focus leaves unanswered some major questions about the cultural aspects and the specific mechanics of survival that came as a result.[1]

The origins of the conflict are usually attributed to the social and cultural tensions of the 17th century. According to this interpretation, the revolt should be analyzed as the result of a long process of acculturation and resistance rather than a sudden event.[2]

Regarding the organization and execution of the revolt, many scholars, such as Pueblo historian Joe S. Sando, point to the role of leaders such as Po'pay. Sando argues that Po'pay

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managed to spend five years building an alliance that included different language groups of Puebloans, creating a pan-Pueblo unity that was historically unprecedented.[3]

A big challenge for scholars, particularly Matthew Liebmann, is the period of independence (1680-1692).[4] This era is historically ambiguous in the written records because the Puebloans destroyed almost all the Spanish documents.[5] Only the archives in Seville and Mexico City remained intact; the administrative records in Santa Fe were burned, resulting in a loss of information for this decade. The local records were destroyed, and the Spanish were absent from the region for twelve years, creating a gap in the written text. This means archaeology is the main way we can learn about this time.[6] In addition to archaeological evidence, Spanish accounts of the return and the examination of internal cultural shifts can provide crucial information for a holistic understanding of this era.[7]

Scholarship has also examined in depth the period of the Spanish Reconquest and the revolt's legacy.[8] Historiography has frequently characterized Don Diego de Vargas's return in 1692 as a "bloodless reconquest," a narrative that obscures both the internal divisions among Pueblo communities and the violence that followed in subsequent years.[9] Still, most scholars frame the Pueblo revolt as a long-term success.[10] Although Spanish colonial rule was eventually reestablished, the revolt forced colonial authorities to moderate some of their most oppressive policies, especially in the realm of religious persecution.

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While traditional scholarship has focused on colonial pressure and reorganization, this paper fills this gap by connecting the dots, asking how those specific historical events created a model of resilience that allowed Pueblo communities to retain their culture and tradition. By connecting the political success of the 1680 revolt to the long-term phenomenon of "cultural survival," this contribution shifts the emphasis from revolt as a discrete historical event to revolt as a structural condition that made possible enduring forms of cultural continuity, adaptation, and self-definition within Pueblo communities.[11] This question matters historically because it shows the revolt not as a temporary military victory, but as the moment that defined the modern existence of the Pueblo people. It moves beyond the "causes" of war to look at the "consequences" of survival.

Methodologically, this research engages with the archaeology and anthropology of colonialism since material remains often speak louder than biased colonial texts regarding the daily ritual practice.[12] Additionally, it uses primary-source testimonies from the Puebloans, which were obtained under harsh interrogations by the Spanish, to demonstrate both the colonial and Puebloan perspectives.[13]

1. The "Holy War": Franciscan Suppression and the Roots of Revolt

This chapter contextualizes the revolt by focusing on the specific suppression of religion, including Kachina dances and kivas, rather than just economic labor imposed by Spanish colonial administration. It also argues that the revolt was a religious war, created by the threat to Pueblo culture posed by the Spanish colonizers and Franciscan missionaries.

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To understand the 1680 revolt, one must look beyond the economic exploitation of the *encomienda* system and examine the specific, existential threat posed by the Franciscan missionary program.[14] While the Spanish civil administration sought labor and tribute, the Franciscan friars wanted a total reconstruction of the Indigenous soul. From the beginning of colonization in 1598, the spiritual conquest was a significant aspect of Spanish rule, instrumental for its justification. The Franciscans viewed Pueblo cosmology not just as "different," but as engagement with the demonic. As a result, the suppression of Pueblo religion was not a side effect of Spanish governance; it was a targeted attempt to destroy the cosmological foundations of Pueblo society.[15]

Friction between the two different belief systems and their associated members was frequent.[16] Where Pueblo religion traditionally practiced rituals, Kachina dances, offerings in kivas, and the maintenance of sacred landscapes, to be rewarded with rain, harvest, and balance, the Franciscans saw idolatry and devil worship.[17] As a result, the friars started a regime of terror.[18] This included widespread destruction of kivas, burning Kachina masks, and public humiliation or execution of religious leaders.[19] However, the Franciscans did not just attempt to destroy the Pueblo people physically; they also employed psychological warfare.[20] For example, in one case, they banned the Kachina rites during a period of environmental instability to instill fear within the Puebloans about the upcoming harvest.[21]

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The tipping point came in the 1670s, when a severe drought brought famine to the Pueblos.[22] The Spanish used this time of anguish to promote Catholicism, which they claimed would offer "protection and stability." But the "Spanish God" did not bring the rain nor stability to the Pueblo peoples. During this time, Apache and Navajo raids began to decimate food stores, and the Spanish military became increasingly weak against the tribes.[23] The Franciscans' suppression of the "old ways" shifted from a burden to a death sentence. In 1675, Governor Juan Francisco Trevino arrested forty-seven Pueblo medicinal men on charges of witchcraft, executing three and flogging the rest.[24] This is evidence that the Spanish would blame Indigenous spirituality for the colony's failures.[25]

Among those flogged was Po'pay of Ohkay Owingeh. This moment of humiliation is often considered the catalyst for the revolt.[26] It transformed the Puebloan political struggle against its occupier into a "Holy War." The Pueblo leadership realized that their survival required not just the removal of the Spanish soldiers, but the total purging of the Spanish influence that had "offended the spirits" and caused the drought.[27]

When the uprising began, the targets were not just soldiers, but the symbols of the new faith, as seen by the destruction of the Virgin of Macarna (fig. 1).[28] Friars were killed at the altar; chalices were smashed; and baptismal waters, something that symbolized entry into the Spanish spiritual world, were "washed off" in rivers using the yucca root. This was a sort of anti-baptism, a ritual cleansing meant to unmake a Christian subject and restore the Puebloan self.[29] Thus, it is

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evident that the revolt was also a theological reclamation. The Puebloans were not fighting for the freedom to believe as they chose, but for the power to exist within a cosmos that the Franciscans had tried to close off.

2. The Architecture of Independence (1680–1692)

The archaeological record of the independence era demonstrates the indigenous attempt to physically erase Spanish signs, a gesture of freedom and control over their own traditions. By reshaping their physical world, they aimed at "cleaning" the landscape of colonial influence, manifesting their own cultural survival.

The expulsion of the Spanish in 1680 was an act of revolution; the subsequent 12 years of independence were marked by cultural freedom. However, during this decade of independence, the written records are nearly non-existent, as a result of the destruction of Spanish documents during the revolt. This lack of written records forces historians to turn to the archaeological record. In examining the archaeological material remains from this time frame, specifically, the conversion and modification of buildings, a pattern begins to emerge. The revolt did not merely lead to the rejection of Spanish rule; it also sparked a revitalization movement. By reshaping their architecture, the Puebloans erased the physical signs of Spanish influence and reestablished their own spiritual world.

The most immediate architectural change was the destruction and repurposing of the Franciscan mission compounds.[30] For eighty years, the mission churches had dominated the landscape of Puebloan villages.[31] During the independence period, the Puebloans did not abandon these buildings; they destroyed them, burning them to the ground.[32] Specifically, with churches, after being burned to the ground and any remaining religious material was smashed, the Puebloans would replace them with Kivas.[33] At several sites, including Mission Pecos and the other villages in the Galisteo Basin, archaeologists have uncovered Kivas built directly on top of ruined churches.[34] By rebuilding kivas – considered the centers of Puebloan religion – on top of churches, they were demonstrating their victory over the Spanish.

Beyond modifying existing villages, the independence period saw significant changes in settlement styles. During the 17th century, under the Spanish administration, Puebloans were forced into dense, overcrowded valley floor clusters to help the Spanish control them and enforce mandatory church attendance. Yet, following the revolt, the independence period saw widespread abandonment of Spanish missionized villages in favor of the more defensible mesa-top settlements.[35] While early historians attribute this move solely to the fear of Spanish retaliation, the architecture of these new settlements suggests a more nuanced motivation: culture. As Liebmann states, the layout of these mesa-top villages often resembled the ancestral building style of the pre-Columbian era. These pre-Columbian-style buildings included communal plazas that enabled ritual dances. By physically moving their communities from the Spanish-contaminated valley floors, which were associated with Spanish domination and disease, and returning to the higher places of the ancestral Puebloans, they were cleansing themselves of

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the Spanish colonizers. The architecture of these mesa-top communities enabled the community to retain traditional Puebloan social structures, which the Spanish had sought to eliminate through their imposed housing grids. Additionally, the physical difficulty of accessing these mesa-top settlements served two purposes: it provided military defense and isolated the Pueblo lands from the outside world, allowing them to create a space where the old law of the Kachinas could be practiced without fear of interference.

The archaeological evidence of the independence era supports the idea that the Pueblo revolt caused the long-term cultural survival of the Puebloan peoples. By physically destroying the Spanish missions and building Kivas in their place, and by moving entire populations to ancestral mesas, the Puebloans created a twelve-year period in which culture became so ingrained in their environment that it re-acculturated them as Puebloans. Consequently, when Diego de Varga returned in 1693, he did not find the scattered conquered population, but a society that had rooted itself in its identity. Even though the Spanish eventually reoccupied the territory, the spatial and spiritual reorganization of the Puebloans, which had occurred in those twelve years, allowed the core of Pueblo identity, the kiva, the dance, and the language to survive during the second conquest. The erasure of the Spanish landscape in 1680 is therefore one of the causes of the survival of Pueblo culture today.

3. Leadership and Unity

The mobilization of distinct linguistic and political communities under a common cause marked a significant transformation in inter-Pueblo relations. As Alfonso Ortiz has noted in his discussion of Po’pay’s leadership, the coordination required for the Revolt fostered the

emergence of a new, supra-local “Pueblo” identity that temporarily transcended the long-standing pattern of village autonomy and isolation.[36]

The suppression of Indigenous religion appears to have been the central catalyst for the Revolt, though it intersected with broader political and economic grievances. The more difficult question, however, is organizational: how did more than 40 autonomous villages, divided by geography and language, orchestrate coordinated, simultaneous military action? The answer can be found in political unification engineered by Po’pay and the Revolutionary Leadership Council.[37] Before 1680, the idea of a unified "Pueblo people" was mostly a Spanish construct.[38] In reality, each Indigenous Pueblo group was a separate settlement.[39] There were Hopi, Zuni, Keres, Tewa, Tiwa, and Towa, who had little in common militarily and linguistically.[40]

Logistically, the revolt was a masterpiece of military communication. As many historians note, the distances between the Hopi mesas in the west and the Rio Grande Pueblos in the east were massive, bridged only by runners.[41] Furthermore, each tribe spoke a different language. A Tewa speaker from Ohkay Owingeh could not communicate with a Zuni speaker from the western frontier without a translator or the use of sign language. Yet, in August 1680, these distinct groups united under the leadership of Po’pay, a Tewa religious leader based at Taos Pueblo.[42] Po’pay was not a leader whose authority derived from his military rank or political maneuvering; his authority stemmed from his ability to convince people that he was chosen to lead by cosmological mandate. He claimed that he communicated with three spirits, *Caudi*, *Tilini*, and *Tleume*, in the kiva at Taos, who called upon him to lead a revolt against the Spanish,

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to restore balance to the world. By explaining to the other Puebloans that the revolt was a command from the spiritual world rather than his own political hunger, Po'pay was able to bypass the traditional autonomy that many Pueblos had.[43]

This unification required a shift in Pueblo life. For centuries, loyalty was owed first to one's clan, then to the village. The revolt required Puebloans to recognize their shared enemy and come together in the face of it, thereby superseding these local loyalties. This period marked the emergence of the idea of "Pan-Pueblo" identity.[44] The Spanish, by persecuting all Puebloans equally regardless of their language or location, accidentally created the conditions for a unified Indigenous opposition. Po'pay harnessed these conditions, creating many alliances that included even the traditional enemies of the Pueblo, such as the Apache, to support their shared cause.[45] By breaking down the walls of village isolation, the revolt enabled a wide range of resistance strategies. When the Spanish runners were captured, Po'pay was forced to advance the date of the revolt by a day. This required the rapid dissemination of information across separate tribes.

The significance of this unification is beyond the military victory of the rebellion. While the political unity under Po'pay eventually failed in the years following the expulsion of the Spanish, which caused civil conflicts between tribes, the precedent of unity remained.[46] The revolt gave rise to the idea of an "All Pueblo Council," a decision-making body to be convened in times of crisis. This body still exists today. The modern political cohesion of the Pueblo tribes allows them to advocate for water rights and sovereignty in the US legal system, tracing its lineage directly to the runners of 1680.[47] Thus, Po'pay's largest contribution was not the

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temporary removal of the Spanish but the installation of the idea of a unified political identity that prevented the Pueblo people from being divided and conquered in the centuries that followed.

4. The Reconquest and the "New Status Quo"

The historiography on the Spanish return to New Mexico is sometimes characterized as the "Bloodless Reconquest" of 1692.[48] According to the official journals of the Governor Don Diego de Vargas, the restoration of Spanish rule was a diplomatic triumph in which the Puebloans, recognizing the might of the Spanish King and the error of their spiritual apostasy, peacefully submitted to colonial authority.[49] However, this account is entirely fictional. It leaves out the violence of the 1690s and misinterprets the actions of the Puebloans as submission.

The Reconquest was not a return to the pre-1680 order, but the beginning of a new and different type of colonial relationship. While the Spanish asserted political control, the violence of the revolt and the subsequent resistance of 1696 forced the colonial powers to concede on the issue of religion. The "success" of the Pueblo revolt was not in keeping the Spanish out of the Southwest forever, something that would have been likely impossible given the military power of Spain, but in forcing a stalemate that protected Puebloan cultural practice.

To understand the transition of the Spanish colonial administration, we must first debunk the idea of the "Bloodless Reconquest."[50] When Vargas entered the territory in 1692, he did so

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with a small force, mostly relying on promises of diplomacy and pardon.[51] The Pueblo leaders, who had experienced strife and drought during the years of independence, accepted a ritual submission.[52] However, this was not a surrender; it was a tactical choice.[53] The Puebloans viewed this as a military truce to acquire Spanish protection against Apache raids, not an acceptance of their total domination.[54] The peace was shattered in 1693 when Vargas returned with soldiers and settlers to begin permanent occupation.[55] The Puebloans of Santa Fe, who occupied the Palace of the Governors and converted it into a Pueblo structure, refused to leave.[56] The resulting siege and execution of seventy Pueblo defenders started a bloody war of attrition that would last for years to come.[57]

This resistance ended in the "Second Pueblo revolt" of 1696.[58] This second revolt is sometimes overlooked in favor of the 1680 uprising; however, the 1696 revolt is just as important to understanding cultural survival.[59] It showed the Spanish colonial administration that the 1680 revolt was not unique.[60] The Puebloans no longer lived in the disjointed villages of the early 17th century. They were people who had fought for their independence once and were willing to risk it all to preserve it. The Spanish military crushed the 1696 uprising, executing leaders and even scattering some populations to live among the Navajo. The ferocity of the uprising changed the nature of the colonizers. The Franciscans realized that attempting to go

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back to the theocracy of the pre-1680 era would be impossible.[61] Attempting so would just cause perpetual warfare, something that the Spanish Empire could not afford.

As a result, a new *status quo* began in the early 18th century. During this period, the Spanish civil authorities needed Pueblo auxiliaries to fight the Comanche and Apache. As a result of Puebloan help, they scaled back the more aggressive policies they enforced. Additionally, in exchange for the Puebloans attending Mass, baptizing children, and paying tribute, the Spanish turned a blind eye to what happened inside the kivas. Thus began the compartmentalization strategy evident in Pueblo culture today. Unlike many other Indigenous groups who were forced to abandon their traditions or face extinction, the Puebloans used the post-revolt era to develop a blended existence. They adopted Catholicism not as a replacement for their own cosmology, but as an additional layer of protection. St. Francis and the Virgin Mary were incorporated into their pantheon of powerful spirits, but the Kachinas remained integral in the agricultural cycle.[62]

This survival physically manifested in the architecture of the 18th century. While Catholic churches were rebuilt in the Pueblo settlements, they were no longer located at the center of the plaza, as they had been in the 1600s. The kivas, once destroyed and hidden, later came to be located in closer proximity to the church. The Spanish friars, humbled by the martyrdom in 1680, stopped their public humiliation and kiva destruction. They accepted the surface-level Catholicism and allowed the Indigenous religion to flow beneath.[63]

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As such, the Reconquest was not a failure of the Pueblo revolt, but the moment in which its true victory was secured. The twelve years of independence enabled the Puebloans to revitalize their language, architecture, and ritual practices to such an extent that they could not be fully erased when the Spanish returned. The revolt forced the Spanish Empire to compromise its own ideology of "Spiritual Conquest." The survival of the Pueblo people into the modern era, retaining their languages and religions while surrounded by a dominant colonial culture, is the direct legacy of this hard-won compromise. They did not merely survive the Reconquest; they set the terms of their own subjugation, creating a space in which culture could live in the shadows until it could safely reemerge in the modern era.

5. Cultural Survival

The legacy of the Revolt lies in the strategy of compartmentalization that enabled Pueblo communities to preserve core cultural and religious practices under renewed colonial rule. Before 1680, the Franciscan objective was total replacement: the erasure of the kiva to make way for the altar. The violence of 1680 and the resistance of 1696 shattered this objective. The "new status quo" that emerged in the 18th century was a tactical agreement in which the Spanish administration, terrified of another uprising, ceased its aggressive suppression of Indigenous religion. In doing so, they allowed the Pueblo people to adopt a two-part existence: outward compliance with Catholicism and guarded, internal adherence to traditional cosmology.[64]

This strategy became the mechanism of survival in the modern era. When the United States government attempted to ban Indigenous dances in the 1920s or when federal boarding schools tried to strip Indigenous children of their language, the Pueblo communities relied on the

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defensive tactics developed after 1680.[65] Because the Franciscans had been forced to turn a blind eye to the kivas two centuries earlier, the Puebloans had already perfected the art of hiding the sacred. The survival of the Kachina dances and the private rituals of the kiva in today is a result of the truce forced by Po'pay's armies. Had the revolt not occurred, it is likely that the aggressive Franciscan theocracy would have succeeded in the total cultural genocide seen in other parts of the Americas.

Furthermore, the political organization of the 21st-century Pueblo nations is a modern-day descendant of the runners of 1680. The uprising gave rise to a "Pan-Pueblo" consciousness, allowing the Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Zuni, and Keres peoples to share a common political destiny. While the political alliance of 1680 fractured during the years of independence, the idea of unity remained, ready to be invoked once more in a time of crisis.

Today, this legacy is evident in the *All Pueblo Council of Governors* (APCG). This political body advocates for water rights, protects sacred landscapes such as Chaco Canyon from extraction, and negotiates with the United States federal government. It is a descendant of the Taos Revolutionary Council. The ability of the nineteen modern Pueblos to speak with a unified voice against external threats was created during the revolt. The revolt transformed "The Pueblos" from a Spanish administrative category into a political identity. When modern Pueblo leaders invoke their sovereignty, they reference the precedent of self-determination set by their expulsion of the Spanish Empire. An example of this invocation is the *Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony Act of 2021*, which was passed by the United States Government. This law protects Native American cultural artifacts from being exported, sold, or transported in most capacities.[66]

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More recently, the APCG celebrated its 342nd anniversary, commemorating the expulsion of the Spanish in 1680.

Finally, the success of the revolt is visible in the linguistic landscape of the American Southwest. In many Indigenous communities across North America, colonization caused the extinction of local idioms. Yet, in New Mexico, many of the major Pueblo languages are still spoken. The preservation of these languages resulted from the revolt, as the Franciscans sought to replace them with Spanish to facilitate communication. The expulsion of the friars in 1680 allowed a generation of children to be raised within their traditional linguistic and ceremonial context during the twelve years of independence. This generation has passed down the oral histories and ritual instructions that would survive the later return of the Spanish. The fact that Tewa or Keres is spoken today in a council meeting or a family kitchen is a result of the twelve-year gap during which the Spanish were forced out.

This paper has argued that the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 should be understood not only as a military uprising but as a cultural turning point that enabled the long-term survival of Pueblo identity. While the Spanish eventually returned, they found a world reclaimed by the Puebloans. The destruction of the missions, the unification of language groups, and the forcing of a colonial compromise allowed Pueblo identity to survive. The twelve-year period of independence created a space for a generation of Puebloans to re-root themselves in their ancestral traditions, organizations, and linguistic traditions that had been under assault by the Spanish. The essence of this preservation lies in the strategy of compartmentalization born from the conflict with the Spanish. However, possible gaps still remain in fully capturing the internal, lived experience of this era. Future research could eventually fill these gaps by integrating sociological approaches, such as conducting interviews, to gather firsthand perspectives on how this history and legacy

are perceived today. This victory is visible today in the physical and political landscape: it lives within the kivas that sit defiantly in proximity to Catholic cathedrals, the vitality of the Tewa and Keres languages, and the legal advocacy of the All Pueblo Council of Governors. The revolt did not just buy time; it bought the future. It turned the Pueblo people from subjects of a theocracy to leaders of their own survival. The legacy of the revolt is not that the Spanish left, but that the Puebloans remained.

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