Zuni Pueblo Economic Development:

Keeping the money leaving from the Pueblo

**Introduction**

In general, Native Americans have a significant amount of socioeconomic and educational issues. Similarly, Zunis, a tribal group that lives in New Mexico, suffer the same type of issues. The main issue that is going to be discussed in this paper is the lack of economic development in the Zuni Pueblo. Economic development, defined as monetary wealth of a location for the well-being of the residents, takes into consideration improvement in literacy rates, life expectancy, and poverty rates. Based on this definition, Zuni Pueblo is not developed economically. Literacy and standardized tests have the lowest scores in McKinley County, where the Pueblo is located, compared to the rest of the state counties. In addition to the low level of education, only small businesses exist in the Pueblo. This issue in the Zunis derives from historical context, which is heavily influenced by the reservation system, institutionalized racism, and Zuni social behavior based on their cultural values.

Zuni tribe is an ethnic group indigenous to North America, Southwest region of the United States. Zuni people reside in a Pueblo located 150 miles west of Albuquerque in McKinley County. This tribe lives in a reservation that is located in their ancestral land where they have lived for thousand of years; however, the United States government reduced the size of the land. As opposed to open-air prison reservation models where tribes and family were separated, this model of reservation has allowed Zuni culture to remain alive.

Furthermore, their geographic isolation has allowed them to keep their language. 85.6 % of the Zuni population speaks Zuni rather than English at home. Their traditions are focused on agriculture, art, and jewelry making. Linguistically, Zuni language is isolated from any other language. However, Zuni shares words with Hopi, Pima, and Keresan for religious purposes. This language is a healthy language because it is used as the main language in the Pueblo and at home for Zuni people.

Archeologists have found objects that relate Zunis to pre-Columbian cultures, such as Mongollon and Anasazi. Mongollon and Anasazi lived south and north of the Zuni River Valley respectively. As all the people in the Americas, Anasazi and Mongollon are believed to be descendents of the people who crossed to North America from Asia during the Pleistocene Period, the last ice age. Nevertheless, Zuni oral history differs from this explanation.

Zuni folklore supports the notion that they arrived at the Middle Place, currently where they live, by entering this world from the underworld portal located in the Grand Canyon in Arizona. They constantly migrated until they reached the Little Colorado River and its confluence with the Zuni River, currently located at St. Johns, Arizona. Eventually, they moved northeast to present-day Pueblo. When they arrived near Middle Place, there was a group of people living north of the Pueblo who did not want Zunis in their territory. This resulted in constant battles until the Zunis won. Additionally, two other groups of Zunis who separated from the first group joined the rest of the Zunis in the surrounding areas of Middle Place.

As they gathered together near Middle Place, a water spider joined them to help locate the exact sport for their village. The spider stretched its long legs out until they reached the four oceans, each located in each cardinal direction. It also reached to the highest point of the heavens and the lowest point of the underworlds. This way, the spider found the six directions. Its body, specifically its heart, was directly over the Middle Place where the Pueblo was built. In present day, Zunis live in the same Pueblo. In addition, St. Johns is known as the “Zuni heaven” because this is where Zunis return after death to live as deities in the pueblo below its lake.

**Contemporary History impacting Zuni life**

As all ethnic tribal groups in the Americas, Zunis were affected by colonization. First, they lost sovereignty when Spaniards conquered their territory. Then, Zunis became part of Mexico when *Insurgentes*, people who were born in New Spain and were seeking for independence from Spain, won the war against the Spanish Crown. Finally, after the Mexican-American war, Zuni territory became part of the United States. As part of the United States, Zunis were introduced to the reservation system.

A reservation was the only location where the United States government allowed Native Americans to reside in the past. Nowadays, 50% of the Native Americans live in a reservation today. The reservation system was invented because the government wanted to force Native Americans to assimilate to Euro-American culture or exterminate them if they resisted. There are two types of reservation models: open air prisons and reduced homelands.

Open-air prisons were located in the worst land that nobody desired. The land used for this type of reservations was not good for farming or to raise livestock. Usually, tribes were removed from their tribal ancestral land and relocated thousands of miles away. Furthermore, tribes and families were separated and placed with other tribes, so they could lose their tribal identity. In the reduced homeland model, the tribes were able to live in their ancestral land. Moreover, the tribes and the families were not separated and relocated. However, their territory was significantly reduced. This resulted in preserving their language and traditions because Native Americans were able to preserve their land.

In the case of the Zunis, they currently live in a reduce homeland reservation. However, the current reservations do not reflect the traditional territories of the Pueblos and leave important religious places outside the reservation boundaries. In addition to leaving religious sites out of their territory, the reservation system excluded them from the development taken place in the rest of the country. Besides the reservation system being imposed to Zunis, multiple factors in the past, which will be discussed in the next section, have yielded this result.

**What are the reasons the Zuni Pueblo could not develop economically?**

Historically, Native-Americans could not develop economically because they were not allowed to interact with society when living in reservations. Moreover, Zunis are geographically isolated. For many decades, Native-Americans were able to improve their economic status by joining the military. The past has left sequels in Zunis current economic position. For example, residents are forced to leave the Zuni Pueblo Reservation to satisfy their basic necessities. Zunis have to travel to Gallup, New Mexico to buy food and to pay for their bills because they do not have those services or grocery stores with a variety of goods in the Reservation. Furthermore, the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the Tribal Council must approve the lease of land or buildings to non-members of the tribe resulting reducing outside investment to the local community.

This situation creates obstacles to develop the Reservation economically. According to research done by the University of New Mexico, 70% of Zunis purchase their groceries in Gallup, 22% purchase their groceries in Zuni, 6% purchase groceries in Albuquerque, and 5.5% buy groceries in both places. From the people who buy their groceries in Gallup, 36% shop in Wal-Mart. These results show how transnational companies are taking away customers and money that could stay in the Reservation.

Even though the University of New Mexico – Gallup is about a 45-minute drive from the Pueblo, the Zuni group has a low rate of education because of their disadvantaged position. Zunis have a low enrollment rate in preschool resulting in low performance in standardized tests. Zunis reflect the lack of preparation in the standardized tests, reading, science, and mathematics, compared to the students from the rest of New Mexico. Besides, 98.5% of Zuni students who take standardized tests learn English in school as their second language. It is possible that one of the reasons for low performance on these exams might be because English is not their first language and, as a consequence, it is difficult for Zuni students to understand the questions of the exams. As a result, education in McKinley County, where the Zuni Pueblo is located, is ranked lower than in the rest of New Mexico.

**Alternative Monetary Investment in Zuni Culture**

In addition to the aforementioned reasons that hinder economic development, Zuni values are conflicted with Euro-American standard of success. In this tribe, some of the cultural values do not promote individuals to obtain material possessions through a career. Furthermore, if an individual obtains material possessions that person is expected to share according to Zuni social standards. As opposed to Euro-American society where material wealth results in social status, having abundant material is considered to be ignoring the concept of sharing, which is one of the most important social rules in the Zuni Pueblo. As a consequence, this tribal member will get disapproval from the rest of the community and will result in losing social prestige.

For example, an individual who was recently paid for his work is expected to give money to the nuclear and extended family to help them repay loans and to buy food and household products. In Zuni culture, an individual who is earning a stable income is socially expected to supply unlimited loans to the family members. As a result to the forced sharing, Zunis are not attracted to strive to make a career because professionals are expected to financially support their relatives. In addition to giving part of the paycheck to the family, the person has to buy articles used for the religious ceremonies. After spending money in family and religion, there is nothing left for personal satisfaction, savings, or to make investments.

In addition to spending the entire paycheck on communal goods, a gift requires a gift in return. Social standards demand that the gift in return should be more than the one that was received. In Zuni culture, giving a better gift in return gives social prestige to the individual and the family. Based on this honor system, the family is considered disgraced if the return gift is less valuable. As a result, a generous gift will cause economic stress to the recipient and the family. This leads to the conclusion that Zuni members are affected by judgments from the rest of the tribal group.

**Social Values, Religion, and Folklore in the Pueblo**

Zunis’ have behavioral standards that contrast with the Euro-American ones. For example, Zunis promote and embrace subordination and conformity. Moreover, society reacts with social censure to personal ambition, individuality, and profit notions. In Zuni culture, having a higher position does not increase the prestige in the individual. As a result, external staff regularly holds management positions in the reservation because high office positions separate the manager from the group.

It might be assumed that it can be more practical to pursue a career outside the reservation because more opportunities will be found in economically developed areas. Additionally, Euro-American social standards encourage professional development. However, relocating outside of the reservation will limit their religious practices because in most Native American tribes location and religion are intertwined. If a Zuni wants to be involved in religion ceremonies, the individual needs to be in the sacred Pueblo spaces. Similarly, religious ceremonies require time-consuming preparations. For most Zunis, religion takes priority over all private and occupational demands. Unfortunately, pursuing a career in a Euro-American work environment and practicing Zuni religion simultaneously is not a reality for Zuni people because employers do not recognize the amount of time demanded for religious activities in the Zuni Pueblo.

Another aspect in which religion has affected economic development in the Zuni tribe is when the Zunis and other Native American groups got together against the mining of coal near the Zuni Salt Lake. Regardless of the jobs that could have been created, Zunis were concerned that the decrease in the groundwater level will affect the lake. The Zunis gave more importance to the religious value of the sites than the ecological risks. The tribe did not want the water level of the lake to be affected because it is a sacred place within their territory. In this case, religion was more important for Zunis than the environment and economic reasons.

Moreover, Zuni folklore plays an important role in accumulation of wealth. Zunis believe that material possessions attract witches’ envy. Then, witches will use their supernatural abilities to cause mental and physical harm to the owners. Likewise, if a tribal member accumulates material possessions, people might suspect they used witchcraft to obtain their goods. Therefore, Zunis prioritize religious obligations and social rules over making savings and having more material possessions.

**Different Time Perception**

Another characteristic from Zuni culture that obstructs, according to Euro-American standards, economic development in the Pueblo is that people believe the deities plan ahead each individual’s life. Therefore, long-term planning for an education and a career is regarded as an interference of the expectations of the gods and to the natural order of life. Therefore, long-term planning is seemed as being disrespectful to the deities, unless the gods encourage it in through an individual’s dreams. In Euro-American culture, punctuality is a key factor for professional development. If an individual is late for a meeting with a supervisor or a client, they will be seen as not taking the job seriously. In contrast, in Pueblo culture is believed that someone should appear or an even should take place without anticipated the time it will occur.

**How is this lack of development currently affecting the Zuni Pueblo?**

The geographical areas impacted by the lack of development are the Zuni Pueblo, Gallup, and Albuquerque because the scarcity of jobs has forced Zunis to work in different cities. Albuquerque is a source of 309 jobs for Zunis. From the 309 jobs, 285 jobs are their primary employment. Similarly, Farmington is a source of 206 jobs, where 200 jobs are their primary jobs. In addition to working in different cities, workers have to live there during the weekdays. As a consequence, they spend money from their earnings in housing.

This lack of development has made the arts and crafts as Zunis’ main income resource within the Reservation. 25% of the artisans sell at fairs and festivals, 16% of them at stores outside the state, 5% sell online, and 45% sell to traders. Unfortunately for the artisans, finding non-member buyers is another challenge because most of their sales are made during the summer due to tourism. As a result, most of them have to travel to other cities to be able to sell their art. 55% of the artists sell their art at stores in Zuni, 39% sell in stores in Gallup, 7% sell in Santa Fe, and 10% sell in stores in Albuquerque.

However, obtaining the supplies to create the crafts is a challenge for Zunis as well. Most of the time, artisans have to travel to another town to buy the supplies. The transportation cost increases the investment to create their artwork. As a result, the crafts have to be sold in at a higher price so that the artists can make a profit. In order to maintain a stable source of income, Zunis need an arts and crafts supply store with reasonable prices in their community. Without having to drive to Gallup, reasonable prices for supplies will allow for artists to decrease their selling price or make a greater profit on sales.

Besides having a arts and crafts supply store in the Pueblo, having a laundromat, a dollar store, additional grocery stores, more banks, hardware stores, lumber stores, and auto parts stores that are owned by local residents will allow their money to stay in their community and increase their overall wealth. In addition to businesses, Zunis want education to be prioritized and improved. Also, they are expecting help from the local government to help them create jobs for college educated and skilled workers to increase the number of higher paying jobs.

**Are there any exceptions in the Zuni Reservation?**

Black Rock, a town inside the Reservation, has a different economic situation. Young families and medical professionals live in Black Rock. Also, 91.1% of the population has a high school diploma and 26.6% of the population has a bachelor’s degree, graduate, or professional studies. These factors have made that Black Rock residents have more money to spend on education and leisure activities. However, they often spend their money in businesses outside the Reservation due to the shortage of options inside Zuni Reservation.

**Are there alternatives to solve this issue?**

The local government does not allow large corporations or chains to open in the Reservations resulting in restricting economic growth. Nevertheless, to maintain a sustainable development for the community, businesses need to be owned by Zunis. Unfortunately, the local credit union does not give business loans. Therefore, residents of the Reservation have to get financial support from other entities. The Choctaw Nation Credit and Loan Department provides loans to Native-Americans who cannot get loans from other sources. This department provides small business loans, agriculture loans, and home purchase and improvement loans.

As 80% of the community’s income goes to other cities, the Zuni Councilwoman, Virginia Chavez, and other tribal officials are supporting the current economic development in the Zuni Pueblo by creating an investment committee. According to the Native Times, a Gallup bank is financing a bigger supermarket with a $2.75 million loan and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development is providing a guarantee for the loan. Moreover, a new airport with a longer runway is being built a few miles from Zuni. The airport will have a total cost of $5.5 million dollars. The Federal Aviation Administration covered 90% of the total cost of the project, the New Mexican government paid 5%, and the tribe covered the remaining 5%. Finally, the Pueblo has been leasing its share of slot machines to other tribes in southern Arizona.

**Relevant Legislations**

There is an act and a program that benefit Zuni’s economic development. The 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act prohibits people who are not Native Americans from marketing their products as Indian made. This act supports Zunis in selling their arts and crafts online and in the fairs during the summer when most of the tourists visit the reservation. Furthermore, President Barack Obama created the Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) program. This program provides funding to federally recognized Indian Tribes to create jobs. Native Americans communities have taken advantage of this program to improve the quality of life and to create well-paying jobs in the reservation. The RBDG indirectly benefits the Zunis because it is providing funding to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to provide technical assistance and training in their businesses. Additionally, the Choctaw Nation Credit and Loan Department is helping support some of the current projects within the Zuni Pueblo.

**Conclusion**

Euro-American practices, such as wealth accumulation, job growth, economic success, do not define human success in Zuni values. For this tribe, life revolves around religion, which requires a significant amount of time commitment. In addition, Zunis are not able to develop economically because their values and religion do not align with the majority of the Euro-American mentality of progress. Thus, Zunis will have to adapt and lose their cultural heritage if they want to survive in present-day American capitalism. The most important aspect is the construction a strong connection between individual and social well-being because Zunis constantly seek to develop community identity.

The recommendations to deal with the lack of economic development in the Zuni Pueblo is that future projects have to follow ethical values in Zuni culture instead of imposing Euro-American values that do not match with local aspirations and traditions. These projects need to be comprehensive and understand the cultural requirements. Job migration will be reduced if the jobs are created within the reservation, preventing in money to leave the Pueblo. If these projects that take into consideration Pueblo values are implemented, economic development and religious practices will coexist within the reservation. A practical benefit would be to reinvest the money obtained from the businesses to teach the Zuni language in a formal environment and provide financial support for the religious practices.

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