

ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Food sovereignty, Diné ontologies: spiritual and political ecology as tools for self-determination

Soberanía alimentaria, ontologías Diné: ecología política y espiritual como herramientas para la auto-determinación

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the different actors involved in the food sovereignty movement in the Navajo Nation. By first looking at the historical roots of colonization and western dominance over Indigenous lands and their food systems, I try to give some perspective on the actual movement to end colonization and capitalism. Both are seen as linked and are considered obstacles for the self-determination of the Navajos and Indigenous Peoples in general. The different actors involved (farmers, grassroots activists, intellectuals and academics) put forth food sovereignty as a key tool for decolonization. This might include a structural change in their political and economical lives, with interpersonal conflicts and frictions with the tribal government and the federal one. The tensions between the extractive economy, environmentalists and food sovereignty are present in the Navajo nation and impact their communities and the quality of their lives.

KEYWORDS Food sovereignty; Navajo nation; political ecology; self-determination; decolonial grassroots intellectuals.

RESUMEN Este artículo se centra en los diferentes actores involucrados en el movimiento de soberanía alimentaria en la Nación Navajo, Estados Unidos. Al observar primero las raíces históricas de la colonización y el dominio occidental sobre las tierras indígenas y sus sistemas alimentarios, trato de dar una perspectiva sobre el movimiento para terminar con la colonización y el capitalismo. Ambos se consideran vinculados y se consideran obstáculos para la autodeter-

minación de los Diné y los pueblos Indígenas en general. Los diferentes actores involucrados (agricultores, activistas, intelectuales y académicos) presentan la soberanía alimentaria como una herramienta clave para la descolonización. Esto podría incluir un cambio estructural en sus vidas políticas y económicas, fricciones con el gobierno tribal y el federal. Las tensiones entre la economía extractiva, los ambientalistas y la soberanía alimentaria están presentes en la nación Navajo e impactan a sus comunidades y la calidad de sus vidas.

PALABRAS CLAVE Soberanía alimentaria; Nación navajo; ecología política autodeterminación; intelectuales decoloniales.

Introduction

In this paper I will present the issue of food sovereignty in the Navajo Nation. For some Diné¹. This involves regaining control over their lives through daily practices that combine both what are considered "traditional values" as well as activating groups of resistance and solidarity among young water protectors inside and outside the border of the Navajo reservation.

My goal in this article is to show the uses of tradition by Native Americans for an anti-capitalist and anticolonial purpose. While specifically related to the Diné territory and history, these modes of resistance can also be seen among other Indigenous reservations in the United States and Canada (also called 'Turtle Island'), or even in Amazonia, Mexico and Palestine. Starting from the local and ending in a more global approach, I want to highlight what food sovereignty can add to the issue of self-determination and Indigenous liberation. Linking food sovereignty with the larger topic of self-determination, I also enter into the debate on the production of knowledge. How do we, as critical social scientists, engage in anthropological research with Indigenous activists? What type of knowledge is produced and what can ethnography and anthropology bring into the fight against environmental chaos?

I will first present some historical facts that made possible the current loss of sovereignty and the health issues related to the change of diets.

1. The members of the Navajo nation call themselves "Diné", the people. I will use both terms Navajo and Diné.

In doing so, I will look at how western politics, termed by my interlocutors as "White supremacy", is present today in the Navajo territory and in border towns² like Flagstaff and Gallup.

I will then explain how the traditional Diné concepts of *K'é* and *Hózhó* can be used as a base for understanding Native American spiritual and political ecology.

I will finish with the papers of Indigenous intellectuals and academics and the creation and transmission of decolonial knowledge and practices, that is, knowledge as a power game.

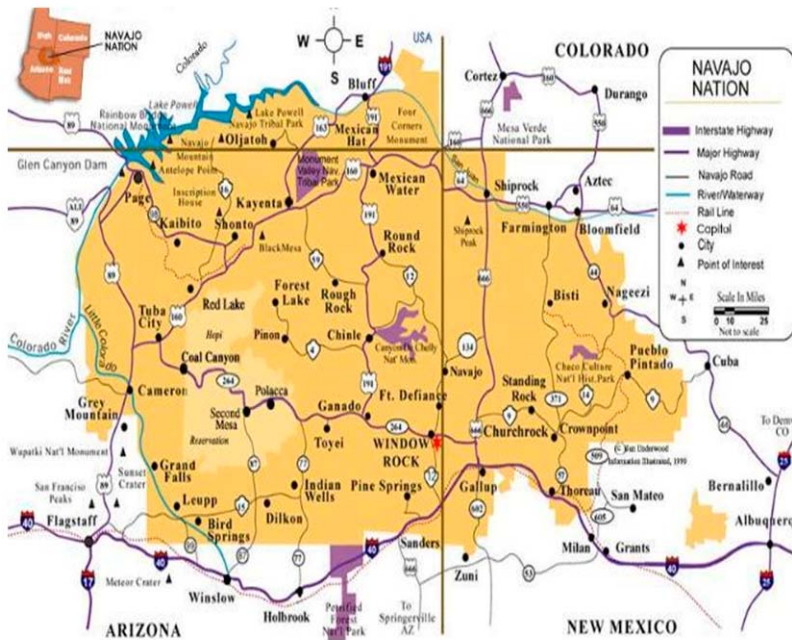


Illustration 1: Map of the Navajo Nation

While this article was originally presented in June 2018 in Middelburg, Netherlands, I started this research in October 2016. I have so far made three stays on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, for a total of nine months. Since February 2020, I have lived in Los Angeles and am attached to UCLA, Los Angeles as a Visiting Graduate Student.

2. "Border towns" is a term used to describe the cities surrounding Indigenous reservation and that benefit from Indigenous economy, like grocery shopping, laundromat, bars and discos. These cities are often seen as overly racist, violent toward natives and people of color. Police violence is also on the rise, like for example on Monday 8 april 2019, the shooting of an unsheltered Indigenous man

I am doing participant observation with two groups: one is mainly in Flagstaff (a border town) and the other around Greasewood (an hour and a half by car from the Diné capital of Window Rock in New Mexico); one is urban and off the boundaries of the Navajo nation and the other is rural and inside the reservation. Both groups have close ties, some individuals from each group are family members. They meet at events inside and outside the Navajo boundaries. They are composed of about twenty environmental activists, students and grassroots farmers. Their age varies between 18 and around 40.

I am interested in how they practice food sovereignty, either by advocating directly for it (as farmers, water and land protectors, lawyers), or indirectly (through educational programs in chapter houses, meetings, and protests).

My posture has been made very clear to my Diné collaborators since the beginning. I have a two-fold condition. I consider myself as an ethnographer as well as an activist. My main goal was to make my research useful for anyone working on Indigenous liberation and environmental struggles and food sovereignty. As Greenwood wrote: "(...) action research produces results that are more likely to be "valid" precisely because they are "engaged" directly in transformations of the phenomena they study" (Greenwood in Hale et al., 2008, p. 320). Action research is therefore beneficial for the investigation.

Though traditionally the ethnographer was considered to be the one producing knowledge that is no longer the case. Political and environmental activists are themselves producing knowledge that the ethnographer will use in her or his work. Social movements shape discourse, knowledge and imagine a future (Curley and Powell, 2012, p. 30).

Methodologies

One fundamental question then emerges: what is the role of an ethnographer? Why are we on the field and what is our use? What is the purpose of such research? As Casas-Cortés et al. have written, there is a shift in how we understand the aims and methods of both ethnography and political intervention, and so to cite them, "the role of ethnography should be understood not in terms of explanation or representation, but in terms of translation and weaving, processes in which the ethnographer is one voice or participant in a crowded field of knowledge producers" (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell, 2013, p. 199).

named Mat by police officer Nick Rubey. The video of the arrest and shooting is visible here: <http://www.indigenouaction.org/flagstaff-police-attempt-to-kill-unsheltered-indigenous-relative/> consulted April 9 2019; or the death of Loreal Tsingine shot by a police officer in Winslow, Arizona.

<https://eu.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2018/03/29/navajo-nation-sues-loreal-tsingine-shot-dead-police-officer-austin-shiple/471179002/> consulted March 39 2018. To this date, October 21 2019, none of the police officers have been detained nor judged.

This transforms the ethnographer into a collaborator, weaving nodes of interactions between different movements and practices, and bringing activists' knowledge in places they would otherwise maybe not have gone (Hale, 2008).

In recent years, "the ontological turn" in anthropology has in fact questioned traditional methodology. Pedersen defined this "ontological turn" as "a particular commitment to recalibrate the level at which analysis takes place" (Pedersen, 2012, p. 6). It is a movement that passes through what we study, giving the ontological back to the people, by, for example acknowledging that the dichotomy nature-culture is a redundant category for many cultures and taking Natives' definitions and demands seriously (see Descola and Palssón 1996, Efir, 2011).

Apart from observant participation, I do direct and semi-direct interviews, life storytelling, and social media ethnography, as well as informal walks and questioning in everyday life. I found walks to be a perfect time for interviews, allowing body and mind to wander and explore physical and mental ontologies. Walking and talking like this also puts the ethnographer and their interlocutor at the same level, sharing the same direction and walking on the same paths.

Diné are the members of the Navajo Nation. They are also known as "Navajos", a name given to them by the Spanish conquistadors, which my interlocutors reject. The Navajo Nation is situated between the states of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. With its 27 000 square meters, the Navajo Nation is roughly the size of Belgium. The Navajo Nation has its own government, with a president and vice-president. The territory is divided into small political units called "Chapter houses". There are 110 chapters, whose aim is to give voice to the local communities. They send their elected delegates to the Navajo Nation council, situated in Window Rock, New Mexico³.

This political organization is fairly recent for the Diné and tied to the US invasion in search of new lands to colonize and imposition of western political values. The Navajo government was created in 1923, under the pressure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A)⁴ and the government of the United States, as oil had been found on their land. Indigenous land and property became susceptible to mineral exploitation after the passing of two acts: The Metalliferous Minerals Leasing Act of 1918, and the General Leasing Act of 1920. The Navajo council was created as an Indigenous entity

3. Information available on the Navajo Nation government website : <http://www.navajo-nsn.gov>; consulted May 16 2018.

4. The BIA or Bureau of Indian Affairs was created in 1824 as the principal interlocutor between the federal government and Indigenous tribes and nations. It has been considered as the main opponent to Indigenous freedom, a key component to assimilation, land-grabbing, and cultural genocide. Despite its will to change and be perceived as a tool for tribes, the BIA is still described as a tool for neo-colonization by my interlocutors.

with whom to negotiate (Diné Policy Institute, 2014, p. 20). This political change has had drastic results that, according to Diné environmental activists, still have consequences nowadays.

Historical course

Before examining the impacts of western politics in Indigenous territories, I want to focus on the Diné social and political organization prior to the conquest. Traditionally, Diné are a matrilineal society (Witherspoon, 1969, p. 1973), divided into clans. They are matrilineal, which means that the family lives on the mother's territory, surrounded by their maternal relatives. They introduce themselves by giving their name and presenting the clans they belong to. There were four original clans, however with the passing of time they have been adopting new ones, and now over ninety clans can be counted. According to my interlocutors, this is a sign of openness of their people: new members are added and become Diné.

Before the American conquest and the deportation of the Diné in Fort Sumner, a tragic event known in *Diné bizaad* (Diné language) as *Hwéeldi* "the Long walk" (1864-1868), the land was held communally, the political leadership was not coercive. From an Anglo-American point of view, there were three problems with traditional Indigenous leadership:

- 1) There was a communal ownership of all land and religious structures preventing their sale and commodification.
- 2) Political decisions were made by mutual consent procedures.
- 3) There was a lack of central hierarchical authority (Mander, 1991, p. 265).

Therefore, the Americanization of Indian government took place in three steps:

- 1) The removal of children from their family and their land. The children were sent to boarding school, where they could not speak their language and practice their religion and culture. In those schools, they were educated in the European way and with European values, trained to hate their Indianness.
- 2) The Dawes Act of 1887: the communal ownership of the land was destroyed, and the land divided into private property. It was considered the best path toward assimilation to American society.
- 3) The creation of "puppet governments". A law of 1880 established that all mineral oil prospectors needed to obtain leases from the council speaking in the name of the Indians. That's how the Navajo council appeared. It took three attempts from the B.I.A. to receive an official approval from the Navajo council to give away all of its own leasing authority to the B.I.A. (Mander, 1991, p. 277).

Nowadays

The power held by the mining industry and the oil company (Peabody Company) is still prevalent today, as coal extraction is still practiced. The Uranium mines were shut down in 2005, when the Navajo Nation government passed the Uranium Mining Ban on tribal lands. Despite this ban, mining companies are still asking for licenses for new mines, even if these sites are sacred for the native communities.

The food sovereignty movement is a response to this extractive economy. Oil became the first industry to develop on the Navajo Nation. The groups I work with see the extractive economy as a form of neocolonialism. Rob Nixon qualified this as "slow violence". In his book *'Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor'*, he defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2).

He explains how the relationships between Indigenous peoples and environmental justice can't be taken for granted, but are the results of an evolution of activisms shaped by direct action and intellectual analysis. For a long time, the American branch of environmentalism neglected environmental justice. There was a clash between post-colonial theory and environmental theory (Nixon, 2011, p. 238). Green environmentalism was seen by decolonial thinkers as neocolonialism, a western agenda imposed by "full stomachs" on "empty-bellies" (terms used by Nixon in his book). There was a challenge of visibility for those confronting settler-colonialism.

My interlocutors are fighting to recover their sovereignty, and for them it starts with regaining control over their food system: decisions and management of their land, their water, their food and their political and economic organization. Food is seen as a medicine, something that nourishes not only the body but also the mind. The movement for food sovereignty is thus about much more than healthy food: it is about power, it concerns social and cultural organizations, and it involves local, regional, national and transnational partnerships.

Change of diets and health problems

I first became aware of food sovereignty issues by learning about the diet-related problems on the Navajo nation. The extractive economy on their land coupled with the colonization of their land and bodies had effects on the health of the Diné. The switch of diet, from local and Diné to industrial is considered responsible for many diseases. It has led to a decline in the frequencies with which Diné people share traditional foods.

Most of the younger generations have little knowledge of their traditional foods. The change first came with the trading posts, which had a huge impact on food prefe-

rences. For the first time, Diné were confronted daily with the Anglo-American diet, one that is high in saturated fats and sugar, something normally not found in traditional Diné diets. The major change in the Diné's diet happened after World War II. Even in the 1960's, diseases like diabetes were almost non-existent on the reservation. They are now major health problems.

In 1937, there was only one case of Diabetes Mellitus (DM) also known as type 2 diabetes, (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 3).

In 1990, 22,9% of Diné had diabetes; nowadays one in three Navajos is diagnosed with DM.; Some Indian Health Service⁴ health care workers have stated that, in certain regions they are diagnosing diabetes for one in every 2 patients (Gordon and Oddo, 2012).

Doctors and traditionalists consider these chronic diseases to be socio-cultural phenomena. Knowing the history of the lands and the food allow a better understanding of the current health situation in the Navajo Nation. When the land ceased to be communally owned and became individual, the *K'é* broke down. *K'é* is a Diné core value of interdependency that I will explain in more detail later in this paper. The values going along with the *K'é* weren't applicable anymore. The *K'é* system of mutual aid and agreement could not be followed. When land became a property, a commodity and a way to earn a living, the conflict with the Diné values became too problematic.

Food has been used as a weapon for colonization. Kit Carson infamously burned Indigenous grazing fields, therefore starving Indigenous peoples. After the Fort Sumner imprisonment of 1864, the government began to give food rations to the Diné (Iverson, 2002). Along with the problem of access to the lands and the Dawes allotment act, fewer families were self-sufficient and able to maintain the *K'é*. In a short amount of time, Diné started to depend on the government for their food. The latter made no effort to give a culturally appropriate diet to the Native Nations. After having lost their land, they became culturally colonized with a western-related diet. Nowadays, the poverty on the Diné Nation hampers any attempt at change.

The *K'é* and *Hózhó* concepts.

What is food sovereignty?

The declaration of Atitlan offers an introduction to the holistic values incorporated in the Right to food of Indigenous Peoples.

4. IHS: Indian Health Service is an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, responsible for providing federal health services to members of federally-recognized Native tribes and Alaska Native people.

“The right to Food of Indigenous Peoples is a collective right based on our special spiritual relationship with Mother Earth, our lands and territories, environment, and natural resources that provide our traditional nutrition; underscoring that the means of subsistence of Indigenous Peoples nourishes our cultures, languages, social life, worldview, and especially our relation with Mother Earth; emphasizing that the denial of the right to Food for Indigenous Peoples, not only denies us our physical survival, but also denies us our social organization, our cultures, traditions, languages, spirituality, sovereignty, and total identity; it is a denial of our collective indigenous existence...” (Declaration of Atitlan, 2002).

At this phase of my research I haven't yet come up with a proper definition of food sovereignty in a Diné field. I therefore use La Via Campesina's definition of food sovereignty as “right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets, and; to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources.”(La Via Campesina, 1996; see also Grey and Patel, 2014).

As Dawn Morrison, the coordinator of the British Columbia Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty wrote: “The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty describes, rather than defines, the present day strategies that enable and support the ability of Indigenous communities to sustain traditional hunting, fishing, gathering, farming and distribution practices, the way we have done for thousand of years prior to contact with the first European settlers...We have rejected a formal universal definition of sovereignty in favor of one that respects the sovereign rights and power of each distinct nation to identify the characteristics of our cultures and what it means to be Indigenous” (Morrison, 2011, pp. 97-98).

Spiritual ecology

The walks, mostly in the Diné landscape, are a great moment to appreciate and understand the links between Diné and their land. This precious link is a form of kinship that can be described as a 'spiritual ecology'. The anthropologist Leslie Sponsel defined spiritual ecology as “*a complex and diverse arena of spiritual, emotional, intellectual and practical activities at the interface of religion and freedom*” (Sponsel, 2001, p. 179). Spiritual ecology anchors humans in a holistic world: humanity is part of “nature”; daily life is a constant reminder of the Diné's kinship with other living beings.

In the Navajo cosmogony, (the?) Diné were given their territory by the Sacred Beings. Four mountains marked it out. They emerged from the previous underground

worlds. It was said that within the limits of these four sacred mountains they should live and prosper. They would become sick and die if they left the area. Diné need their land but it is the other way around too: the land needs the Diné to be well cared. If we place ourselves in a Diné ontological perspective, an ethnological work on Indigenous land should not only question the Diné, but also their landscape and everything that is not “five-fingers”⁵. The language of the non-humans might be different from that of the humans but it should be heard. Recent works such as “How forests think” by Eduardo Kohn have demonstrated that forests speak and that even dog-dreams can be analyzed.

According to Diné traditions, when offerings are not made, when the land has not been taken care of, both the land and the Diné become sick.

The relationship between Diné and their surroundings can be qualified as “kin-centric”; in the sense that some of my Diné interlocutors view themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family having common ancestors and origin. Life is sustainable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin. The kin includes all the elements of an ecosystem. Therefore, kincentric ecology enhances and preserves the ecosystem (Salmon, 2000, p. 1327).

As I wrote before, the Navajos are divided into clans; the origins of the clans and those of the animals and of the minerals are all combined together. The Navajos are the children of Mother Earth and Father sky, made out of white and yellow corn and of corn pollen. Their physical bodies are intertwined with the “natural” world (Reichard, 1990).

Therefore, there is no distinction between nature and culture. The *K'ǒ*, the Diné system of relationships connects every form of life: mountains, humans, animals, vegetables and water. In the Diné cosmogony, the individual is not separated from the rest. The natural order of the world is for us to be in harmony with everything that surrounds us: a good life is a life in balance.

All these terms are found in the concept of “Sa’ah naaghahi bik’eh Hózhó” (SNBH), most of the time known as simply “*Hózhó*”.

According to Whitherspoon (1969), “The Navajo metaphor envisions a universe where the primary orientation is directed toward the maintenance or the restoration of *hózhó*. *Hózhó* means “beauty” or “beautiful conditions.” But this is a term that means much more than beauty. For the Navajo, *hózhó* expresses the intellectual notion of order, the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony.

5. “Five fingers” is a Diné metaphor for human beings, just as “four legs” is a metaphor for animals like dogs, cats, horses, etc.

Hozho can be seen as a form of holism. The whole is more important than the specific. To better explain it: the body can live without a leg, but a leg without a body is nothing.

In the same way, a Navajo tends to the *Hózhó* in his life. Every aspect of the Navajo's life tends to restore or preserve *Hózhó*: social and cultural life, religion and art. In fact, these can't be separated one from another. This is the main idea of *Hózhó*.

The other major concept is the K'é. It came from the Holy Spirits and it is the Navajo system of clans, based upon the four original clans, created by the Navajo holy figure of Changing Woman.

The breakdown of the K'é system has a strong impact on the land disputes: "(...) Some growers see the disputes over land and the way that they tear families apart as a breakdown of the Diné system of K'é, which in years past would have helped to resolve land issues amicably" (Diné Policy Institute, 2014, p. 28).

In this way, when Diné who grew up in the Navajo nation are outdoors, relatives surround them. Their mental, physical and spiritual health depend on the relations they have with these relatives.

As Reichel-Dolmatoff puts it: "*What we call nature is conceived by Native Peoples as an extension of biological man, and therefore a (Native) never feels "surrounded by nature": a (native) walking in the forest, or padding in a canoe is not in nature, but he is entirely surrounded by cultural meaning his tradition has given to his external surroundings*" (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1996, pp. 8-9).

The past is always recalled. In a traditional Diné perspective, time is not linear but cyclical.

For the Navajo a place is sacred in itself, its sacredness is not determined by historical events. Its inner power has nothing to do with human activity. It is a theology of places (Cajete, 1999): the knowledge that a place is the fruit of a long and constant interaction between humans, animals, plants, minerals, spirits, sacred beings, and so on. It is through practical and empirical traditional ecological knowledge that these places are maintained, preserved and youngsters educated.

Restoring land and bodies

Going back to food sovereignty, it begins with the seed recovery. Each territory produces its own seeds. According to grassroots Diné farmers, the seeds miss their land. Part of the process of food sovereignty is regaining native seeds and protecting them. It means that seeds are living entities with their own agency and will.

It is both a political and spiritual endeavor: seeds are tied to a land and their transmissions from mother to mother connect the Diné not only to their land but also to the sacred, infinite time and to the wisdom deriving from all the people who previously held them. Diné believe that seeds have memories: they are the continuous

renewal. They are therefore sacred and should never be sold or considered propriety. It is one of the points used against their sale in supermarkets. In that sense, ecology becomes political. In an interview from July 2018, a community gardener and Diné intellectual told me that she was angry that white people would sell native seeds or store them for conservation purposes, like the company Native Seeds/Search in Tucson does. She felt that this belittled the Indigenous' responsibility and painted them, again, as incapable of preserving their own heritage. It was therefore one of the many manifestations of white supremacy in US environmentalism.

That is why food sovereignty is perceived as a spiritual and political tool for decolonization.

Kim Smith is a Diné activist, artist and editorialist of an Indigenous feminist online newspaper called "Indigenous Goddess Gang". In an online article published in April 2018, she wrote about the connection between land and bodies. Entitled "Healing the land is healing my body", she explained how health is "not just about what you're eating. It is about what you're thinking, saying and your environment", writing that "the way we treat the land is the way we treat ourselves", and that the Navajo Nation is "a resource colony" (Smith, 2018). She calls for seeds rematriation that is, for the Diné women to be in charge of the seeds. In this aspect, women are seen as naturally linked to the land; in this way we can better understand their roles of protectors and land defenders. Women, seen as mothers are then related to the mother of all: Mother Earth. These uses of womanhood are also a fairly new construction, which might in some aspects essentialize Indigenous cis-women, and limit womanhood only to cis-heterosexual women, denying LGTQI2+ their agency, erasing them from the land and environmental justice.

This example must remind us that the groups of water protectors and land defenders are neither static nor perfect. Like each political group, they have their own contradictions and complexities. What matters is that these topics and complexities are faced both internally and externally.

Political ecology

Escobar stated that political ecology links ecological concerns with social theory (Escobar, 2006). Political ecology works have documented how political and ecological forces can alter the meanings people give to different landscapes (Dallman, Ngo, Laris and Thien, 2013, p. 34).

Both the Navajo government and the non-governmental activists use these concepts. The ways these two groups achieve food sovereignty however are very different. The meetings organized between grassroots activists and the Navajo leaders differ as far as their actions, procedures and timelines are concerned. These different ontologies create "frictions" (Tsing, 2005) despite supposedly working toward a common goal.

The tribal government advocates that extractive economy can ameliorate the life of the Navajo nation: with the economic growth provided by the coal extraction (Peabody Company for example), roads can be restored or created, schools and hospitals implanted. The Navajo administration, also called by their dissidents “the boarding school generation”, believes in neoliberalism. In July 2017 they extended the lease of Peabody Company, allowing three more years of coal extraction.

For my interlocutors it was clear that the Diné government did not work for their people but for their own benefit and in favor of capitalism, and thus that it was the direct continuation of colonialism. This is well shown in the illustration below that appeared right after. It circulated on social media like Facebook and Instagram. The past and the present were linked. Pushing further, it means that colonialism can only be defeated by a structural change: the current institutions won't allow Indigenous peoples to decide over their lives, but rather turn Diné politicians against their own people using another divide and conquer technique.



Illustration 2. This image appeared in social media and in the streets around the Navajo nation in response to the three-years lease extension the Navajo government gave to Peabody Company. July 2017.

These decisions have direct impacts on the daily life in the Navajo nation.

The water to wash the coal and transport it outside the area is used at the expense of the Diné residents. Food sovereignty supporters, that are part of the environmental activists, are in favor of a restorative economy. The coal and uranium extraction have contaminated the soil, the bodies and the animals (Brugge, 2006).



Illustration 3. View of part of the sheep with many tumors. Two women butchered the sheep in order to be eaten during the construction of a hogan, a traditional Diné house in Colorado, August 2017, Greasewood. Photo by the authoress.

Both pictures depict tumors found in a sheep we had butchered a few hours before. According to the Diné environmentalists, this is more and more common. The animals drink water that is contaminated by uranium. Sheep are an essential part of the traditional Diné life. The Diné eat the meat and can sell the wool or use it to weave blankets. Butchering is also an occasion to gather- it has a social function. Sheep allow the Diné to participate in the global economy without leaving their land or engage in wage-based activities. Nowadays, sheep are eaten on special occasions and during ceremonies. They are highly respected and cherished. Sheep (“*dibé*” in Diné Bizaad) are like a member of the family. They are also a traditional food.

A massive problem emerges. Traditional and culturally relevant foods are supposed to be beneficial for the mental, physical and spiritual health of the Diné. But if the traditional food is dangerous and the industrial one also, what are the solutions? If the Diné can’t eat traditional food, how can they be sovereign? How can they maintain their traditions in a contaminated land? This is why food sovereignty is directly linked to environmental preservation and restoration.

Moreover, the companies contaminating the land are not Navajo-owned; they are in the words of activists “settlers” companies, Anglo-descendant. The Diné work in this extractive economy, but don’t receive any of the benefits. They are members of the proletarian class. This adds a class question to an ethnic one. Diné people there-

fore face two problems that are linked: they are poor people of color in a system that cherishes money and white skin. Far from being on the same page as water protectors, Diné coal miners are in favor of the coal industry, it has allowed them to feed their families and send their children to university. Andrew Curley, a Diné geographer at UNC is working on this topic, with Diné coal workers, in his article *T'áá hwó ají t'éego and the Moral Economy of Navajo Coal Workers*, in which he analyzes how a moral economy of the Navajo coal accounts for the mobilization of Diné labor in support of the industry despite years of exploitation and environmental damage. For the author, their mobilizations in support of the coal industry are an expression of a moral economy that is rooted in a Navajo subsistence ethic called *T'áá hwó ají t'éego*, an expression of hardwork and the maintenance of one's livelihood on ancestral lands.

Therefore, Diné environmentalists, politicians and coal workers all ground their practices in traditional Diné values and concepts with very different outcomes. They find ways to stay on their ancestral lands that seem faithful to their values.

Inhabiting their land, Diné look for different ways to ensure themselves a future and regain sovereignty, while at the same time not losing their past. Most of the time, this involves negotiations with a settler state and frictions between individuals, the tribal government and federal state. These fights for sovereignty, which food sovereignty is a part of, find echoes in other places not only in the United States, but also in the wider Americas and around the world.



Illustration 4. two diné farmers in a community garden in Greasewood, Summer 2017: in the community garden of Greasewood where they planted vegetables and organized teachings. The community garden is just outside the chapter house. Everyone can go, water it and take vegetables. The farmers are not paid to provide these teachings, they believe that by showing the way and involving people, Diné people will go back to growing their food and restore their health. Photo by the authoress.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I tried to show the different actors and forces present in the food sovereignty movement on the Navajo Nation.

These different examples remind us to not essentialize Indigenous environmentalists and communities. The Diné are not living outside of the American neoliberal economy and way of life. They too, are looking for ways to thrive, within the bounds of what are considered traditional Diné values within a capitalist world. Their struggles find their origins in a deteriorating environment and within a western society that is still trying to erase them.

Many factors are at play: economic, intergenerational, societal and cultural ones. For the Diné protectors I am working with, food sovereignty is a community challenge, with consequences in every household. Just like the western society sees its young generation fearing for their future and their planet, young Diné grassroots activists are actively fighting for theirs. It is both an internal fight to decolonize gender constructions (with LGBTQI2+ on the frontline) and a struggle for self-determination to talk firsthand of their issues.

In this aspect knowledge becomes a power game and Indigenous intellectuals shape the discourses and set the priorities.

Individuals and Community gardens are at the very basis of the local possibilities. They educate and involve members of the Chapter's houses. They are a direct demonstration on how to achieve food sovereignty. These teachings are then shared in workshops all around the Navajo nation, in fanzines and articles. Through social media, this knowledge goes all around the world. The tools of social and political ecology for self-determination are then visible worldwide. Diné protectors nurture their movement both with their tradition and with forms of resistance from other political groups around the world. If the agro-industrial capitalist industry is transnational, the answer proposed by grassroots farmers and activists starts at the local level in order to grow and reach the transnational audience. The network of solidarity is worldwide.

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