

## Historical Background

The Pueblo Rebellion of 1680 was a carefully organized revolt under the general leadership of Po'pay (Spanish Popé), a "medicine man" from San Juan Pueblo (now known by its Tewa name Ohkay Owingeh) that overthrew Spanish rule in New Mexico for twelve years. A traditionally peaceful people, the Pueblos had endured much after New Mexico's colonization in 1598: Catholicism was forced on them by missionaries who burned their ceremonial pits (*kivas*), masks, and other sacred objects and often tortured those who refused to convert. Puebloans were tried in Spanish courts and received severe punishments, such as hanging, whipping or dismemberment (of hands or feet) for trivial offenses. Even those who were accused of nothing were condemned to virtual slavery, being forced to work as free labour in the fields or on building projects (*encomiendas*).

In some versions of what has become the legend of Po'pay, he believed himself commanded by the tribal ancestor spirits (*kachinas*) to restore the old customs, much as in later "cultural revival" movements. In other versions, he was embittered by his imprisonment and whipping in 1675 and spent five years at Taos Pueblo plotting his revenge. During my discussion with Lieutenant Governor Martinez of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, I learned that they consider Po'pay to have been a purely religious figure and therefore as such would have been forbidden to be involved in violence or death. Other Pueblos celebrate him as a warrior leader. It is interesting to note that although Po'pay was acknowledged by the Spanish as the leader that inspired the Rebellion, he is not mentioned as being present in Santa Fe during the fighting in either the Spanish written record or Pueblo oral histories.

The generally agreed facts of the Rebellion are as follows. A few days before the day chosen for the uprising, runners were sent out to each participating Pueblo carrying knotted ropes. Every night a knot was untied, the uprising starting the dawn after the last knot was undone. In this way there was a full-scale revolt on August 10<sup>th</sup>, in which most of the Pueblos participated (some were presumed to be pro-Spanish and were not included). On August 21<sup>st</sup> the Spaniards were forced to flee, leaving 400 dead, including 21 priests. In addition to returning to "the old ways", in most versions of the story victory was celebrated by all or some of the following: washing off the stains of Christian baptism, annulling Christian marriages, forbidding the speaking of Spanish and use of Spanish names, and destroying churches. The Pueblos remained free from Spanish rule until 1692, when New Mexico was finally reconquered, or, at least, re-colonised.

Little is known of Po'pay's life before 1675, the year he was imprisoned by Spanish authorities on suspicion of witchcraft and of killing several missionaries. What happened after the Rebellion is equally murky. The written record is, of course, from the perspective of the defeated Spanish, and casts Po'pay in as dark a light as possible. Most of these accounts have him establishing a despotic reign with the result that the Spanish were either welcomed back or invited back in 1692. The Pueblo story is much less specific, and each again seems to have a slightly different version. But there is a general consensus that for many and various reasons, the Pueblos didn't maintain the level of unity that had led to the success of the Rebellion, and the return to the old ways didn't bring about the hoped for relief and prosperity.