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Bashas' Diné Markets and the Navajo Nation: A Study of Cross-Cultural Trade

Susan Carder

Located in the Four Corners region, the Navajo Nation is the largest Indian reservation in the United States, occupying more than 27,000 square miles in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Currently, more than 173,000 Navajos live on the reservation, a population that is very dispersed at a density of less than 6.5 persons per square mile. Governed by a twenty-four-member council, the Navajo Nation is semiautonomous, yet remains under United States federal oversight by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a subset of the Department of the Interior. The Hopi Reservation is landlocked within the Navajo Reservation and comprises 2,500 square miles, with a population of just less than 10,000.¹ It is in this unlikely marketing environment that Bashas' established a sustainable cross-cultural retail grocery operation.

CROSS-CULTURAL TRADE ON THE NAVAJO NATION

Trade has always been an integral part of Indian America. Trade between Navajo and Europeans was established as early as the 1500s, fueled by settler-colonialist capitalism. As Robert J. Miller explains, "European explorers, traders, and colonists . . . were primarily interested in acquiring Indian land and assets."² Originally, traditional Navajo life had been pastoral and agrarian, centered around Charro sheep, goats, and corn (maize). They had a self-sustaining economy in which the clan produced and consumed all basic needs. In 1864 the Navajo People (Diné) were relocated to Fort Sumner near Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico by what is now referred to as "The Long Walk." During their four-year captivity, the Diné became dependent upon the federal government, specifically their Indian Agent, for all basic needs. In addition, the Diné became accustomed to a foreign diet introduced by their Anglo overseers.

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While the Diné were held at Fort Sumner, the government troops practiced the “scorched earth” policy and destroyed all Navajo dwellings, crops, and livestock on their native land.³ When in 1868 the Navajo-US treaty was signed and the Navajo Indian Reservation was established, the Diné were allowed to return to their homeland in the Arizona Territory. Although the federal government provided the tribe with 15,000 sheep to assist in the transition, when the Navajo returned to the newly formed Navajo Indian Reservation their ability to resume a traditional life was greatly diminished. Encouraged by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Anglo traders followed the Navajo back to the reservation and set up businesses on or near the reservation offering a supply of basic goods.⁴

In 1868, cross-cultural trade involving Anglo traders became an issue for the Diné. The Navajo dependence on the Indian Agent while in captivity now converted to dependence on the traders to provide basic supplies like sugar, flour, coffee, canned peaches, tin ware, and blankets that had been introduced to them while in confinement. As the Navajo were allowed no cash, they would bring wool, sheep hides, piñon nuts, and textiles to the posts in trade for basic goods. As “pay day” came only twice each year (wool and rugs in the spring and lambs and piñon nuts in the fall) the traders extended credit to the Diné. This evolved into the pawn system whereby the Diné would “pawn” their belongings, such as jewelry, rugs, horse tack, or guns, in exchange for goods or trade tokens at the trading post. These items would be held for up to a year and redeemed with interest by the owner or sold by the trader as “dead pawn.” This trade system led to a state of Navajo dependency and was primarily beneficial for the trader, not for the Diné.

The trading post became an integral part of Navajo life, and by the close of the twentieth century there were more than 300 trading posts operating on the reservation. The trading post was a combination of the old general store, a bank (as the source of trading tokens and the accounting of pawn value), a post office, and a gathering place for the Diné. The trader became a liaison between the Diné and the Anglo world outside, serving as agents of change in a cross-cultural experience. Unfortunately, the physical environment of the trading post created a lasting perception of separation and subjugation. Nearly all the early trading posts utilized the same design: high wooden counters arranged on three sides faced the front door and formed a barrier between the customer and the trader. Quite often, the floor behind the counter was raised to give the trader added height and a psychological advantage.⁵

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT AND FOOD INSECURITY

The Diné have a kinship or clan system that follows the mother’s lineage. A clan’s wealth was measured by the size of its herd. It is estimated that by 1930 the average herding clan owned 150 sheep, sixty goats, and ten horses. However, in 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression and widespread drought, Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier determined that the Navajo land was being overgrazed. Without sufficient plant life to hold it, the soil was eroding, washing into Lake Mead, and threatening Hoover Dam. Under a government-imposed stock-reduction plan, 148,000 goats and 50,000 sheep were sold

or destroyed. Collier planned to give the Diné more land in return for reducing herds, but Congress never approved the plan. For an economy that relied mainly on livestock for income and sustenance, these changes drastically affected the Diné and their way of life. The Navajo familiarity with and demand for “outside” goods had increased, while at the same time their ability to contribute their part of the “trade” was greatly diminished.⁶

The Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act of 1933 provided surplus foods to low-income families, known as Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Indian Agents distributed ration parcels of bleached wheat flour, salt, lard, canned milk, and other Anglo foods. Becoming dependent upon these government-rationed food commodities, the Diné eventually moved into consuming many highly processed foods, and as they developed a taste for the only foods that were available, these cheaper, nutritionally empty foods became the new “tradition.” The quintessential example of a food derived from government rations that is now considered to be a “typical” American Indian food is fry bread—tasty, but devoid of nutrition.⁷ According to today’s nutritional standards, traditionally the Navajo had a nearly perfect diet: lean meats, protein, fruits and vegetables, and high-fiber nuts. Once relocated, the Navajo never fully returned to their traditional lifestyle. The reduction of their livestock and the addition of sugary, processed foods resulted in a lack of availability of nutritionally adequate foods. There was a dire need for healthier choices.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention use community food assessment (CFA) to determine the locations and incidences of food deserts—areas with limited access to healthy, fresh food. A high proportion of Native Americans live in what can be described as food deserts. Food insecurity can be defined as “the consequence of inadequate consumption of nutritious food.” It is not necessarily poverty that creates food insecurity, but the lack of a local source for healthful foods.⁸ Without a source for nutritional foods, food insecurity for the Navajo people was inevitable. In 2000, a research project by Diné Community College in Shiprock concluded, “What the Native peoples need is local grocery stores that will recognize the unique aspects of their traditional diets and provide specialty foods along with healthy basic commodities.”⁹

NAVAJO DISCONTENT WITH THE OLD SYSTEM OF TRADE

The early traders did not take ownership of the land, but worked under a “license” issued by a tribal leader. Because licenses could be canceled at any time, traders invested very little in the initial structure or upkeep of trading posts. By the 1950s there was growing discontent with Anglo traders among the Navajo, who perceived them as outsiders taking advantage of the Diné through a monopolistic system. This discontent was fed by an undercurrent of growing Navajo desire for self-determination. In 1953, the Navajo Tribal Council passed a resolution on trading: the Council would regulate prices, collect a gross sales tax of 1.5 percent as trading post rent, and generally bring trading under tribal control. In the end, with BIA approval, the trading posts secured twenty-five-year leases specifying a tax on gross sales that would last until 1978. Initially, this was seen as a win-win decision: the traders gained long-term lease tenure, while the Navajo Nation gained rent revenue.¹⁰

During this same period, many Navajo moved from the reservation. More than five hundred Navajo men served in World War II, continued expansion of mining in the area required laborers, and many federal projects off the reservation attracted Navajo workers. Navajos who left the seclusion of the reservation and experienced life “on the outside” had new ideas, new wants, and new needs when they returned.¹¹ A pickup truck became one of those needs, giving the Navajo freedom to leave the reservation for the border towns of Farmington, Gallup, or Flagstaff. Stores such as Fed-Mart in Gallup and Babbitt Brothers in Flagstaff, as well as pawnbrokers such as Bill Richardson in Gallup, created direct competition for the reservation trading posts. The old traders would watch as pickups filled with Navajo families passed on their way to the nearest border town.

As fourth-generation Navajo trader Bruce Burnham said, “You wouldn’t think a set of car keys would make such a difference.” Burnham also stated: “But the other thing that came with the pickup truck was freedom of movement. And so they always had a neighbor or someone that was willing to put a tank of gas in their truck and haul them to Flagstaff or to Farmington or to Gallup or to Page. And so, boy, here the pickup’s going . . . whoosh, past the front of the trading post heading for town! That’s when things really changed.”¹² Another catalyst for change was education. In 1962, Navajo Tribal Chairman Paul Jones, and Vice-Chairman Scott Preston allocated \$10 million for a Navajo scholarship program. Navajo youth were encouraged to get a college education. Experiencing life off the reservation firsthand, these young people learned to live in two worlds. Educated Navajo demanded change.¹³

The BIA had always regulated Navajo trading, with pawn a vital, necessary component of that trade for more than one hundred years. By the early 1960s, many began to argue that the BIA was too permissive in overseeing the traders’ practices and policies.¹⁴ Throughout the period of national discontent in the 1960s and 1970s, the young Navajo became involved in activism focused on the problems and issues of reservation life, tribal government, the dominance of Anglos, and BIA bureaucracy. The traders were seen as a major source of this discontent: the traditional Navajo economic system did not include the concept of capitalism and profit; the pricing system of the traders lacked transparency; many traders took advantage of the Navajo through unethical practices; and the access to border-town retailers provided an alternative for the Navajo who saw themselves as “captive customers” of the trading posts. In addition, the young Navajo resented the patronizing attitudes and the centuries-old paternalism of the Anglo merchants in the border towns and began to fight against them.¹⁵ In the late 1960s change took place in federal, BIA, and tribal governance, with considerable effect on traditional trading practices. The reservation became a place where forces of change met forces that resisted change.¹⁶

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy envisioned a national service corps “to help provide urgently needed services in urban and rural poverty areas.”¹⁷ Twenty Anglo volunteers from across the United States were recruited for the first VISTA program on the Navajo reservation. In January, 1965, the first AmeriCorps VISTA members, including Jon Colvin, arrived in Chinle.¹⁸ In 1966, the Dinebeeiina Nahiilna Be Agha’diit’ahii (DNA) was created, which loosely translates as “Lawyers Who Contribute

to the Economic Revitalization of the People.” The DNA was a group of Anglo attorneys whose purpose, as the name indicates, was not merely to represent Navajos in various legal suits, but to be a force for social and economic reform. Through the 1960s and 1970s, one of the primary objectives of the organization was to eliminate traditional trading practices and encourage a more Native-controlled economic system on the reservation. In 1967, Peterson Zah (Diné from Low Mountain) became executive director of the People’s Legal Service (the DNA) and later went on to become chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council and the first president of the Navajo Nation.¹⁹

Lucy Moore, the spouse of a DNA lawyer, recalls, “in 1970, the tribe created its own VISTA-type program, DAI, which stood for Diné Ahilndáálnish Inc. or the People Working Together. Funded with the same federal dollars supporting VISTA, DAI was an effort to shift the direction and priorities of the volunteer project to suit Navajo needs.”²⁰ These Navajo AmeriCorps (or DAI) members assisted tribal members with home repairs, weatherization, and other service support to help them remain in their homes and live independently. DAI members also received training during their service year to develop technical, professional, and leadership skills. The DAI focused on economics and consumer rights. The DAI worked together with the DNA, and in Chinle DAI initiatives and DNA legal actions were mutually supportive.

In 1969, the Truth in Lending Act was passed, requiring that all credit lenders, including traders and pawnbrokers, reveal interest rates and specify all debts for payment and extensions. Because the new lending laws directly affected the traders, across the reservation this act became the fuel for divisive controversy regarding traders and the pawn system.²¹ Indian grievances inevitably arose: on October 1, 1971, the DNA lawyers filed a class-action lawsuit against the proprietors of the Pinon Mercantile Company, alleging blatant violations of the Truth in Lending Act and citing grievances such as increased interest rates on pawned items after the transaction had been completed. The *Pinon* case was settled in the spring of 1972, with the traders paying \$32,500 to the plaintiffs. This legal action proved a significant harbinger of future events on the reservation. The *Pinon Mercantile* case, other lawsuits, and a growing number of other trading complaints filed by Navajos through the DNA caught the attention of lawyers and federal government agencies by calling attention to hidden finance charges and failure to comply with the Truth in Lending Act.²²

THE END OF THE TRADING ERA

In 1972 the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) launched a large-scale investigation of trading practices on the Navajo Nation and in June 1973 published a report titled “The Trading Post System on the Navajo Reservation.” The report duly recognized the importance of pawn as an economic institution for the Navajo people, noting “Pawning personal possessions to obtain extra purchasing power is a prominent feature of the Navajo economy . . . by pledging items, Navajos are able to supplement their meager income.” However, the FTC also called direct attention to the fact that present pawn regulations “contain minimum standards which fail to prohibit offensive conduct.”²³ Calling for major changes to the trade system, the report had a dramatic effect on the Navajo and the Indian traders both on and off the reservation.

Colin Tanner, a trader and the owner of the T&R Market near Gallup, stated:

The DNA thought they were going to change trading. They thought that the posts should be run by Navajos so they could make a profit for themselves. But they didn't understand. That's not the Navajo way. The Navajo People share with one another to get by; they didn't have a need or desire in their culture to turn a huge profit. So what the DNA wanted to do could have never worked, and in the end it hurt the Navajos a lot more than it helped them.²⁴

DNA director Peterson Zah explained: "The traders didn't like what we did. But we didn't have a choice. The complaints against the traders were just too overwhelming to ignore."²⁵ Robert Hilgendorf, senior attorney at the DNA's Chinle office, agreed. "I think the trader will continue to exist and probably should exist," he said. "We're not trying to eradicate the trader or trade system. I think it's like any other institution on the Navajo Reservation. They have to recognize that times are changing."²⁶

One such change was the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (PL 93-638). This act authorized federal government agencies to enter into agreements with, and make grants directly to, federally recognized Indian tribes. These tribes now had authority over administration of these funds, which gave them greater control over tribal welfare. Self-determination lessened BIA influence and increased tribal ability to manage projects without waiting for federal agency management.²⁷

Following the FTC findings in 1975, the Navajo Tribal Council passed the Navajo Tribal Trading Post Act, with very specific regulations concerning pawn, interest rates, extension of credit, and lease options. Unfortunately, these new regulations had unintended consequences that ultimately affected many reservation families. Traditional traders couldn't or wouldn't comply with the new regulations and were forced to close or move off the reservation to the border towns. Additionally, as William S. Kiser notes, "Realizing that off-reservation pawn laws in New Mexico remained mostly unchanged, many traders from the Arizona reservation moved across the state line and opened up shop there."²⁸ The Navajos had been heavily reliant upon the reservation trader for essential merchandise items and were detrimentally affected. As the traders retreated, many of the trading posts became progressive trading posts or convenience stores. The convenience store, although keeping the moniker "trading post," became a new cultural norm for the Navajo. The shelves of these progressive trading posts were stocked with sugary candy, salty snacks, carbonated drinks, tobacco, and cigarettes. Some offered a few basic goods and a couple of gas pumps.²⁹ With fewer basic provisions and increased high-sugar, empty-calorie options, the convenience store represented a further step away from the traditional diet.

The closing of the trading post also disrupted an economic system they had grown used to over many years and relied upon.³⁰ The DNA and the Navajo Tribal Council had unwittingly destroyed an institution that, in spite of many flaws, was nevertheless an integral part of the Navajo economy.³¹ Some traders became intermediaries between weavers and collectors. As the demand for Native American arts increased, many store operators would pay cash for handcrafted items from the local Navajo and then sell to tourists or distribute to gift shops off the reservation.³² The Rough Rock Trading

Post, established in 1897, is one of the few trading posts that have remained authentic, at least in appearance.³³ Today the post carries a small supply of groceries but is best known for its rug room, containing an impressive assortment of rugs, pottery, and baskets. Many trading posts, such as Old Red Lake, collapsed from neglect and became the targets of vandalism. Established by the Babbitt Brothers in 1891, today Old Red Lake's original adobe stone exterior and its interior wall of Arbuckle Coffee crates provide a fading glimpse of the trading post era. A pay phone, a Coca-Cola vending machine, an icebox, and a lone gas pump stand outside the ramshackle building.

By 1976 a system of trade that had been in place for more than one hundred years was now in ruin. Fewer than fifty posts remained offering some basic goods. For the most part, the Navajo people were left with limited options: a convenience store or a trip off the reservation to Fed Mart or later, Wal-Mart. Although many Navajo had mobility, most local residents had to travel off-reservation one hundred miles or more to the stores in Farmington, Gallup, or Flagstaff.³⁴ This change in buying habits affected the economic patterns of communities, and, in particular, the economics of the elderly and those who rarely left the reservation. It was difficult for the Navajo Nation to build an economy with little industry to generate jobs, limited retail business, and personal income, mostly from government stipends, being lost to Anglo-owned outside businesses. The Navajo now faced new forms of economic abuse by border-town business practices such as payday lending, exorbitant interest rates on pawn, and inflated retailer pricing. Further, spending money off-reservation drained capital out of the Navajo Nation economy.³⁵ Taking business off the reservation (which continues today) also affects the Navajo culture. Individuals are influenced by bars, payday loan companies, less-than-scrupulous pawnbrokers, and the discrimination that is prevalent in the social and economic relationships between the Navajo and the non-Navajo.³⁶

The crucial issues that emerged were: what sort of exchange system or trade system should be in place on the Navajo Nation? If traders were forced out, would anyone else come into the communities to provide the goods and services needed? If the system were changed to an essentially nonprofit, carefully regulated business run by the Navajo Nation, who would run such a business? And, most importantly, was it possible for a capitalistic approach to business to become compatible with Navajo economic and cultural environments?³⁷ The traditional Navajo economy is called *int'iib*, which literally means "control security and secure resources to benefit."³⁸ The Navajo economy resembles centrally planned socialism more than market capitalism in that today, tribal leaders govern and manage economic affairs for the Navajo Nation, with the tribal council and individual chapter houses exercising control over land use and assigning private-use rights to tribally owned assets. In addition, the BIA has oversight authority for the federal government.

THE DINEH COOPERATIVES INC.

As originally envisioned by the DNA, several of the vacated trading posts became occupied by Navajos and were operated under a cooperative model. Eventually, fifteen or more of these co-ops, located in small communities across the Navajo Nation,

arranged for Associated Grocers to deliver goods to a central site for distribution to each store. From a business perspective, these co-ops struggled from the outset and were destined for certain failure. The Navajos involved had little business knowledge, no management experience, and limited understanding or acceptance of the concept of profitmaking. The Navajo co-ops were so short-lived that their impact was minimal.³⁹

At this time the most successful DAI office in Chinle, where Jon Colvin and Nathan Begay were involved, still provided a variety of services to the community and had formed a separate entity, the Dineh Cooperatives Inc. (DCI). As Ronald Tanner wrote in 1982, "The DCI was established in 1971 to combat the abuses of the traders. The initial aim of the group was to set up consumer and community cooperatives as alternatives to the trading posts. They thought the economic problems of the reservation could be countered with an alternative system, that the cooperative approach could cure the abuses of capitalism."⁴⁰ While the idea of the co-op held promise, the execution was thwarted by lack of knowledge of retail business in general, and lack of specific knowledge or experience in the grocery business. The less-than-successful attempt to develop cooperative markets did point to the need for shopping options. Although unforeseen at the time, as other co-op units and the DNA turned to the DCI in Chinle for help in managing the struggling co-op businesses, the DCI would become the foundation for economic development on the Navajo Nation.⁴¹

In the mid-1970s the federal government began offering grants to nonprofits classified as Community Development Corporations (CDCs). Responding to what was seen as the greatest local need, the DCI selected a retail shopping center as its first economic development project and formed a CDC (DCI Shopping Center Inc.) to focus on bringing private sector capital onto the reservation to create jobs for the local residents. Jon Colvin was named president and CEO of the newly formed corporation for shopping center development.⁴² The DCI proposed that funding would come from a combination of \$2 million from the Community Services Administration and \$1 million in Community Development Block Grant funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The major goal was to bring both services and employment opportunities to the Navajo people within the framework of Navajo goals for self-determination.⁴³

The DCI's development of a shopping center faced many internal obstacles as the land-use regulations on the Navajo Nation are diametrically opposed to development. A summary of these challenges was reported by the Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development:

- (1) All land is in trust status that impedes collateralization;
- (2) The Navajo Nation and the BIA work in a very restrictive government-to-government relationship. Nearly every issue must be taken "to Washington" for approval;
- (3) The Navajo people are granted grazing permits for the land. The Navajo Nation holds the land in trust but the grazing permittees have *de facto* veto power over proposed use changes. For example, fifteen acres of land could have five individual grazing permittees. Arrangements would have to be made with each of the individuals before the land could be released back to the Navajo Nation for development;

(4) Business Site Leasing (BSL), as it is now called, remains a cumbersome bureaucratic procedure requiring both BIA and various tribal approvals.⁴⁴

It took the DCI several years to secure the land rights for fifteen acres and to gain approval from the Navajo Tribal Council, the BIA, and the Chinle Chapter House (similar to a county organization) to create a master lease for the proposed shopping center. The DCI Shopping Center signed a fifty-year land lease with the Navajo Nation—the first land lease ever signed by the Navajo Nation.⁴⁵ Before project development funding could be finalized, the DCI needed to identify an anchor tenant for the proposed development in Chinle, to be named the Tséyi Shopping Center. It was decided that a supermarket would best fill the consumer need for products, serve to attract residents to the shopping center, and increase appeal to other retailer-tenants.

THE FIRST BASHAS' DINÉ MARKET AND THE NAVAJO NATION SHOPPING CENTERS INC.

As Nathaniel Begay remembers, at first the Navajos' search for an anchor supermarket was difficult:

In 1979 . . . Woody Maggard, Howard Bitsui, and myself, Nathaniel Begay . . . took a trip to Flagstaff, Arizona for a scheduled meeting with Babbitt Brothers Grocery Store and the Safeway Supermarket; and traveled down to meet with A. J. Bayless in Phoenix and Bashas' Market in Chandler, Arizona. . . . Even though there was a feasibility/market study concluding the need of a Grocery Store on the Navajo Nation, our presentations to Babbitt, A. J. Bayless and Safeway were disappointing, fruitless, and unsuccessful. With only one remaining grocer to visit, we met with Mr. Edward (Eddie) Basha, Jr. owner of the unknown Bashas' Markets of Chandler, Arizona. With our Diné way of thinking—*there should always be four efforts to be made*. We were all a bit nervous before our appointment but with confidence we had a successful meeting with Mr. Eddie Basha. When we entered Mr. Basha's office, he had his boots propped up on his desk, greeted us, and offered us to sit down. We started out with setting up our presentation charts and slide show and he told us to put that (expletive) away. He said he had been waiting for us, and was ready to build a grocery store for the Navajo people.⁴⁶

Johnny Basha, son of Bashas' cofounder A. N. "Ike" Basha, Sr., recalls that Eddie Basha's unconventional approach drew on teachings from his elders:

The relationship with the Navajo Nation began by Eddie and the acting Navajo Chairman. At the time the Navajo Chairman was either Peter McDonald or Peterson Zah, not sure which one because they both served numerous terms and at different times. Eddie was invited by the Navajo Nation to come to "take a look." Eddie drawing upon lessons taught to him by his elders did not approach this as a typical business deal, but rather as a partnership.⁴⁷

With the first agreement for a store in Chinle, Eddie Basha, Jr. made a commitment for Diné Markets to be a part of the community and the Navajo Nation. Bashas'

Diné Market became the anchor tenant and, in retrospect, as Nathaniel Begay stated, “became the cornerstone for economic development on the Navajo Nation.”⁴⁸ Members of the Bashes’ management team met with local residents and tribal leaders to discuss market needs. The product line and merchandising strategy was the result of a cooperative effort between the customers, tribal leadership, and Bashes’. As the financial arrangements were worked out, “Bashes’ invested in the reservation through a grant of \$100,000 given to the DCI. An additional \$1 million was earmarked for fixture costs and inventory for the new store.”⁴⁹ As part of the original lease agreement with DCI Shopping Center, Inc., Bashes’ agreed to return 25 percent of profits to the Navajo Nation. Eddie Basha also promised a competitive pricing structure. The Navajo Nation granted Bashes’ the first right of refusal for future stores.

In addition, Bashes’ guaranteed that 95 percent of the employees would be Navajo with a goal of reaching 100 percent Navajo employees within five years. Bashes’ agreed to hire and train Navajo management for the store. Bashes’ and the DCI coordinated the hiring. A store manager and management team were the top priority. Twenty-five potential managers were selected and then taken to Phoenix. After several days of orientation at Bashes’ headquarters, where they learned the history and philosophy of the chain, the Navajos were apprenticed in Phoenix-area stores. They worked side by side with Bashes’ veteran employees. Bashes’ employees voluntarily provided housing during the training. In February, 1981, several Bashes’ managers moved to Chinle to select the ninety employees who would form the workforce for the new store. These front-line employees were sent to Phoenix for three days of intense on-the-job training.⁵⁰

Bashes’ executive vice president in 1981, Wayne Manning, explained the approach: “We planned to build a supermarket as nice as any in Arizona. We wouldn’t cut back just because the supermarket was on a reservation. Our prime concern was to provide the Navajos with the same shopping experience they could find in a major city.”⁵¹ Maintaining culture was also important. Bashes’ was receptive to DCI’s concept of the project. The shopping center’s design harmonizes with Navajo culture, tradition, and beliefs. As the Navajo language is more oral than written, the store became a *visual* supermarket. The Tséyi Shopping Center opened in Chinle in March, 1981. Native design, symbols, and decorative art are prominent throughout the store. With sixty-five thousand square feet of retail and office space, the facility features both interior and exterior Navajo design in the form of graphics, relief design, and rugs. Jon Colvin, vice-president of DCI in 1981, further explained:

From the beginning the emphasis was on quality super-marketing, adapted to Navajo needs. For example, the parking lot was paved, even though the surrounding area had few paved roads. Parking spaces were made extra wide because most shoppers would come in pickup trucks. We even landscaped with desert plants and trees native to the Navajo lands. We made a modern shopping center mesh with the ways of the Navajo.⁵²

Chinle store director Winifred Tah started with Bashes’ Diné Market in 1982 as a part-time deposits clerk. She worked in almost every capacity in the Chinle

store, completed management training, and was appointed store director in 2009. She summarized her experience with Bashas' this way: "Trey Basha and Johnny, and other Bashas come in and greet everyone and shake hands and tell us what a great job we are doing. Other management people call to ask if we need anything. In a business world where many Navajo feel they are outsiders, in the Bashas' world we are family."⁵³

Based on the success of the cooperative effort between DCI Shopping Center and Bashas' Diné Market in Chinle, shopping center development was seen as a viable means to create jobs, provide goods and services, and generate revenues for the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation decided to take a larger role in retail development. In 1983, the Navajo Tribal Council created the Navajo Nation Shopping Centers, Inc. (NNSCI), originally managed by the Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development as part of the Navajo Nation's Overall Economic Development Plan.⁵⁴ Beginning in 1983, the Navajo Nation Shopping Centers forged a dynamic relationship with Bashas' and the Diné Markets. Following the model established with the first store in Chinle, the Bashas' Diné Market became the anchor store in Tuba City, St. Michaels, Kayenta, Crownpoint, Pinon, and Dilkon. In 1984, Johnny Basha was named director of real estate and became responsible for handling development of all future grocery stores.

I want to share with you a lesson that Eddie taught me. . . . Eddie told me to always conduct myself as a guest on the Navajo Nation and realize that it is a privilege for us to serve the Navajo people. Second, if I perceive a cultural barrier in my work on the Navajo I must always remember the cultural barrier is mine to overcome, not the Navajo's. I must follow these two guiding principles. To this day, we conduct ourselves under these guiding principles laid out by Eddie Basha. He is the man that made it happen. Our successes on the Navajo Nation are due to his commitment to the Navajo people.⁵⁵

In 2013, under the direction of Nathan Begay, CEO, NNSCI is an independent corporation operating as a Tribal Enterprise of the Navajo Nation. NNSCI currently manages ten shopping centers with more than 3.1 million square feet of leasable space situated in strategic locations throughout the Navajo Nation. Each location has been carefully researched and assessed to serve the needs of these specific locations. In addition to population and traffic studies, community involvement sessions were held to determine potential market. Begay continues to work on plans for future development.

THE BASHAS' DINÉ MARKET MODEL

Bashas' Inc. is a privately owned corporation that operates a total of 130 stores in Arizona, maintaining four distinct formats: Bashas', AJ's Fine Foods, Food City, and the Diné Markets. A vertically integrated organization, Bashas' operates a central distribution center with an extensive fleet of trucks, trailers, and refrigerated trailers. Bashas' delivers directly from the distribution center to each Diné Market on the Navajo Nation. The seven Bashas' Diné Markets are operated as one strategic business

unit under the broad umbrella of the parent corporation. In 2013, there were seven Bashas' Diné Markets on the Navajo Nation. In keeping with Eddie Basha's original promise, pricing is similar to its mainline stores based on a cost-plus strategy. Only in Window Rock, where there is one competitor, Texas-based Lowe's Grocery, is a more competitive pricing strategy used. Bashas' Diné Markets advertising includes a weekly insert in the *Navajo Times* and the *Navajo-Hopi Observer* reaching all of the population served by its seven stores.⁵⁶

Bashas' Diné Markets is the major private employer on the Navajo Nation with a total of 355 full-time-equivalency employees working at seven sites. Only five of the employees are non-Navajo, a 99-percent Navajo employment rate. Navajo society is matriarchal so it is not unusual that all of the seven store directors are female. In Chinle, all of the individual department managers are also Navajo women. The store directors meet regularly with the other store directors in their region—both on and off the Navajo Nation. The managers of the Diné Markets' bakery and delicatessen meet as a group due to the uniqueness of these operations and product offerings.⁵⁷

Bashas' product line strategy is in line with its overall corporate strategy: tailoring the merchandise to the consumer. Typically, demographics of the customer base for each Bashas' store are used to design the product line strategy for that specific store. However, in the case of the Diné Markets, adaptation and adjustment in both product and quantity is based more on cultural uniqueness than measureable demographics. As the Chinle store director, Winifred Tah, explains: "We have different needs here than the Bilagáana [white man or Anglo] do. We have our special ceremonials, dances, rodeos, and other unique family-oriented events that require specific foods. Bashas' management is very sensitive to our specific product needs. Where else would you find fifty-pound sacks of Bluebird flour?"⁵⁸

In general, the Diné Markets have limited brands in large-quantity packaging. The Navajo culture supports an extended family structure with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all living in a small settlement. Many travel as a group thirty or forty miles from home to the nearest Diné Market. The product and merchandising strategies reflect the shopping habits for these large extended families, the biweekly or monthly shopping habits of a rural population, and make a visual contrast with the competing convenience stores offering limited stock.

Ten-pound tubs of Clabber Girl baking powder, five-pound bags of Mama Lola's dry corn, twenty- and fifty-pound muslin sacks of Bluebird flour, and twenty-pound sacks of Brothers corn meal are stacked high in the aisles, a reflection of brand awareness and preference that was developed more than 100 years ago by the traders. Two-pound blocks of lard take up about 64 cubic feet of cooler space in the Diné Markets. Aisles are stacked with canned Spam, which appears to be a Navajo favorite, supersized cans of hominy, and gallon jars of dill pickles. Fiesta brand soft drinks have a large presence: two-liter bottles and cases of Fiesta colas and lemon lime sodas (a Bashas' Food City store brand) occupy one whole corner of each store. Folgers and Food Club are the only coffee brands offered in most stores. No alcohol products are available, as the Navajo Nation is a "dry" nation.

In addition to Bashas' Food City store brand, Libby's is the predominant brand for canned fruits and vegetables. Squash, corn, beans, and potatoes are in demand and available in large quantity. It has been especially beneficial to the Navajo people to reintroduce a large selection of fresh fruits and vegetables into their diet. In the meat department, the product mix differs from a mainline Bashas'. Because mutton has always been a mainstay of the Navajo diet, Bashas' Diné Markets stock more mutton than beef. Traditionally, the Navajo do not waste any part of the sheep and therefore, the Diné Markets carry everything from large slabs of mutton to packaged roasts and chops and even sheep intestines and brains. Other unusual products in the meat department, reflective of the Navajo tradition of using every part of the animal, are packages of pig's feet, cow's liver, tongue, and blood sausage.

Like its predecessor, the trading post, the Diné Market has become a central fixture in the Navajo community and to the new Navajo way of life. Wells Fargo Bank has ATMs in each supermarket. Each market has a separate check-cashing facility, most accessed from outside the main store. CellularOne has a store-within-a-store at each supermarket. Each supermarket has at least one computer and monitor with Internet access for customer use. DVD rentals are available. One aisle in each store is devoted to tack and livestock feed. The deli does well in the Diné Markets because there are limited places for Navajo to eat out in the small communities. However, the Navajo hot food case is not exactly like an average Bashas' deli. One of the most popular items is mutton stew, a combination of mutton, corn, potatoes, and other vegetables, served with traditional Navajo fry bread.⁵⁹ The bakery also contributes substantially to overall sales. It does not sell as much bread as the mainline Bashas' stores. There are, however, consistently strong sales in pastries, cakes, and donuts. Highest consumer demand comes from special-order decorated cakes.

After opening the Chinle store in 1981, store director, Jimmy Attakai, commented:

Now, many customers treat the store as a local neighborhood super, coming in to pick up some milk, eat a donut, and visit with friends. We've become a social gathering place for a lot of Navajos. On any given morning, most of the fifty seats in the upstairs are filled with Navajo who are talking to neighbors, changing a baby, eating some mutton stew. People occupy the seats as if they are on their own turf, in a traditional Navajo home rather than a modern supermarket.⁶⁰

The stores are busy. Visits to the individual stores revealed a flurry of activity both inside and outside. The parking lots are full of dusty SUVs and pickup trucks at most any time of the day. Showing the importance of knowing your local market, Chinle store director Winifred Tah explains that the busiest days are the first and third day of each month when the federal allotment checks come in. In addition, food stamp cards are distributed alphabetically, and because the cards of two large groups of people with the same last names are loaded on the tenth and the thirteenth of each month (Begay and Yazzi), business also peaks on these "Begay and Yazzi days."⁶¹

Bashas' is a privately held corporation and financial data is not readily available. The NNSCI does not provide detailed revenue figures to the public. However, it is a common belief among Navajo Nation business leaders that the Diné Markets

are profitable. It is “understood” that the Chinle store leads all Basha’s stores in net profits. Although Basha’s filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009 and emerged in 2010 having reorganized by closing more than thirty-three stores, the Diné Markets were not impacted. In a tough market with tough competitors, a niche marketing strategy paid off.⁶² There have been thirty-plus years of continuous lease agreements, and the number of Diné Markets has increased on the Navajo Nation. Further, as reported in a food industry trade publication, there is a sizable scholarship fund based on profits:

Over the years, the portion of profits that Basha stipulated for scholarships before opening that first store has grown to about \$6 million. And besides the scholarship money, Basha says with no small amount of pride that the payroll from Basha’s Dine Markets has added \$143 million to the Navajo Nation. Some of the original workers . . . are still with the company; a few have gone on to other commercial ventures, and Basha takes pride in both categories. It means his goal of helping the tribe develop entrepreneurially is being met.⁶³

Although specific financial data is not available from Basha’s, the NNSCI, or the Navajo Nation, it is fair to conclude that the arrangement has been beneficial for the involved parties.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MODEL REPLICATION

The model for supermarket success on the Navajo Nation is rather simple. The Navajo Nation desired to stimulate economic development in order to create jobs for the members and income for the nation, make available basic goods and services within the local community, keep its money at “home,” preserve culture, and prevent food insecurity. Although the presence of the Diné Markets is not a panacea for food insecurity among the Navajo, it does break the downward trend that favors nutritionally void foods and represents a major step in providing Navajo people with healthy and traditional choices. This new version of cross-cultural trade created a sustainable business that is beneficial to the Navajo people, tribal enterprises, and Basha’s.

The most recent statistics reported by the Selig Center of the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia reflect an increasing buying power of Native Americans across the United States. One reason is that the Native American population is growing more rapidly than the total population and is expected to continue to do so: from 2000 through 2010 the Native American population grew by 26.7 percent, compared to a general population growth of 9.7 percent. In addition, the Native American population is relatively young, with a median age of 29.0 years compared to 37.2 for the general population.⁶⁴ Comprising 1.5 percent of the US population in 2010, Native Americans controlled \$67.7 billion in disposable income. With this amount of buying power, the Native American consumer presents attractive business potential.⁶⁵

Of the 5.3 million individuals identified as Native Americans in the 2010 census, 22 percent, or approximately 1.2 million, live on tribal lands. Judging by the success of

the Diné Markets on the Navajo Nation, with its population of 173,000, there is huge potential for nearly two hundred regional grocery chains to create a similar distribution channel to serve 334 reservations across the United States.⁶⁶

The Navajo Nation is not unique. An example of opportunity for replication is the Standing Rock Reservation in South and North Dakota. This is a 2.3 million-acre reservation with a population of 15,000 members, mostly Lakota Sioux. The tribal council completed a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for 2013–2017. Among the top ten goals is to increase the Local Multiplier Effect (LME) and to provide more local retail shopping opportunities. The addition of grocery stores was named as a primary goal by community involvement sessions held in conjunction with the CEDS. The report indicates that the typical LME for rural areas is 3.0; the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation has a LME of 0.5. The CEDS report concludes, “Standing Rock needs to create a more vibrant private sector economy. It is important that Standing Rock create a collaborative means by which tribal government and the private sector can effectively work together.”⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

This project’s overarching questions were: What factors contributed to the success of Bashas’ Dine Markets? What allowed an outside retailer to enter a market in the midst of cultural change and promote cultural identity rather than destroy it? Will the Navajo Nation Office of Economic Development be able to continue to harness new economic forces without destroying the values and practices of the Navajo people?

For fifty years Bashas’ had been in the grocery business in Arizona with specific experience in serving cultural clusters. Believing that profitmaking and the goals of the Navajo Nation were not mutually exclusive and that its existing distribution system would work in spite of the greater physical distances, Bashas’ adopted a niche marketing strategy with a concentrated product line that offered limited options—but options that were specific to the Navajo shopper and preferred by them.

The lease agreement was critical to overall success. The Navajo Nation Council has authority over all leases on the reservation and assured Bashas’ a noncompetition clause and right of first refusal for future locations. Additionally Bashas’ was offered a very low square-footage rental rate in exchange for a profit-sharing program that returned 25 percent of the profits back to the Navajo Nation. Bashas’ also agreed to a very specific hiring program that guaranteed at least 95 percent of the employees would be members of the Navajo Nation.

As anchor stores for the Navajo-owned shopping centers, Bashas’ became a magnet for other retail businesses. A wide variety of food products and nonfood items became available to the Navajo people in their own community. By interior and exterior design, each Diné Market is culturally integrated. Navajo shoppers are able to purchase fresh meats, produce, and baked goods, fostering a diet that is much healthier than one based on convenience store snack foods or fast food restaurant options. The Diné Market is an excellent example of successfully tailoring a retail channel to meet the needs and wants of a niche market.

I conclude that the success of a cross-cultural trade enterprise requires strategic adaptation and adjustment to include careful attention to the needs and wants of the consumer; sensitivity to cultural differences; adopting a strategy that combines standardized operations with localized implementation; and a business model that provides benefits to both the corporation and the people. Basha's exemplifies successful adaptation in a cross-cultural environment. Basha's Diné Markets are Navajo stores, on the Navajo Nation, for the Navajo people.

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