

# NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL NEGOTIATION AT MISSION SOLEDAD

Paul Farnsworth  
Department of Geography & Anthropology  
Louisiana State University  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

## ABSTRACT

As at all the California Missions, Native Americans provided the labor upon which the economic viability of Mission Soledad depended. Their role in the economic system directly affected the degree to which cultural changes occurred in the mission. As the mission's economic system changed between 1791 and secularization, so did Native American cultural responses to life in the mission. Rather than being the result of Spanish missionary zeal or Spanish domination, oppression and violence, the creolized culture of the Native Americans at the mission was negotiated using strategies of accommodation and resistance to the Spanish. Because their labor provided the economic foundation for the institution, Native Americans controlled this negotiation, allowing them to preserve, albeit in modified forms, the core elements of their traditional culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long focused their analyses of cultural change in the California Missions on the Spanish, and their dominance over the Native Americans. "Pro-church" scholars attribute Native American cultural changes to the innate superiority of Spanish culture and civilization, and the obvious attraction of Christianity. "Pro-native" scholars emphasize the corporal punishments and brutalities that forced Native Americans to adopt Spanish cultural elements, despite valiant, but futile, resistance.

While this is an oversimplification, it does reflect the continuing Euro-centric bias in Mission studies. Native Americans are seen as reactive, not pro-active players. The purpose of this paper is to explore the active role that Native American people played in shaping, protecting, and redefining their culture in the Missions.

### POWER RELATIONS AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION IN THE MISSIONS

To date, there has been very little consideration of the concept of "power" in mission studies. The basic assumption has been that "power" lay solely with the Spanish. I challenge that assumption. Disenfranchised groups may be

dominated by others, but usually find mechanisms to challenge and resist that domination. Disenfranchised groups adopt "coping strategies" that enable them to survive physically and culturally. Some would argue that the Native American people in the missions did not survive, physically or culturally (e.g. Cook 1976). Certainly the death toll was phenomenal (Cook 1976, Jackson 1994), and the culture of those who did emerge from the missions was radically different from that prior to European contact. However, a large number of Native Americans did emerge from the missions at secularization (Jackson 1994), while a population of mixed blood individuals also have their origins in the missions. Neither group could be described as Spanish in terms of their culture, retaining Native American elements and newly created elements resulting from creolization or syncretism of New and Old World elements.

Native American people were not powerless in the mission context, although they were certainly dominated by the Spanish. Consequently, culture change in the missions was directly affected by the power negotiations that occurred between the two groups. One area within this larger negotiation was the realm of culture, where both the missionaries and the Native Americans had their own agendas.

Based on the traditional descriptions of mission life (e.g. Webb 1982), it might seem that this power negotiation was completely one-sided. However, given the overall Spanish design for exploiting their New World holdings, and the specific arrangements made between the Spanish government and the Franciscans for conquest and control of California, the Spanish missionaries needed Native American peoples' labor to accomplish their goals (Jackson and Castillo 1995, Weber 1992). Ultimately, this was the source of the Native Americans' power in the missions.

The Franciscans had been given complete secular and religious power over the Native Americans by the Spanish government in return for the missions supplying the basic needs of the military and civilian colonists, as well as the Native Americans (Jackson and Castillo 1995). The missions could only achieve this if they produced surplus food, raw materials and manufactured items. In reality, the demands of the military and civilian settlers were usually met regardless of the actual productivity of the mission in a given year. Any shortfall was taken from the Native American's allocation (Jackson and Castillo 1995). Nonetheless, it was the fundamental dependence of the entire colonization system upon Native labor that gave the Native Americans their power. Through the withdrawal of their labor, or the way in which they carried out their labor, the California Indians could exert power over the Spanish, albeit in a limited, and, at times, self-destructive fashion.

## **NATIVE AMERICAN RESISTANCE IN THE MISSIONS**

Historians have discussed the mechanisms of Native American resistance based largely on the documentation left by the Spanish (Cook 1976, Castillo 1989, Jackson and Castillo 1995). These include outright rebellion, running away, murder of missionaries, refusal to follow missionaries' instructions, work slow downs, and theft or destruction of property. Abortion and infanticide were other forms of resistance that were well documented.

Fugitivism is usually viewed as the most common form of resistance employed by Native Americans (Cook 1976, Jackson and Castillo 1995). I would argue that while fugitivism was

certainly an important response, the most common forms of resistance were those which the Spanish could not identify as deliberate acts of resistance, and as such were not recorded. Examples would be work slow downs, breakage of tools, loss of tools, theft of tools and supplies, apparent misunderstanding of instructions, feigning sickness, and other passive techniques (Castillo 1989).

The Spanish response was to implement measures to maintain discipline (Cook 1976, Castillo 1989, Jackson and Castillo 1995). The mobility of Native Americans was limited through the layout of the mission complex; the construction of dormitories for unmarried individuals and barracks or standardized housing for married couples were oriented for maximum visibility and control from the missionaries' quarters and military barracks. Stocks and shackles were used to restrict the mobility of individuals in response to specific acts of disobedience. The most common method used to maintain discipline was flogging. For men, flogging was not only painful, but humiliating as it was carried out in public, and for those of higher status could result in significant loss of status. Such punishments were painful and demeaning, and very common. All of the accounts of former Native American residents at the missions recorded in the late nineteenth century as well as oral histories recorded in the early decades of the present century mention corporal punishment (Castillo 1989, Jackson and Castillo 1995). Resistance in ways that would avoid drawing the lash from the Spanish soldiers or Native American *alcaldes* was the most common response.

As a result, most Native American resistance went undocumented, and it may be that the effectiveness of Native American resistance can be best identified from the archaeological, rather than the documentary, record. This is not to say that we will find evidence of individual acts of resistance, for even when we find a broken tool, there is unlikely to be any way to assess whether it was broken accidentally or deliberately. What we can find is evidence of the material culture used by Native Americans at the missions, and through careful evaluation of its nature and context, identify the results of cultural negotiations at a given time and place.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL NEGOTIATION AT MISSION SOLEDAD

For this discussion, three assemblages from Mission Soledad (MNt-233) have been selected (Table 1): a midden deposit associated with the Indian neophytes' barracks, artifacts recovered from the floor of the mission's kitchen, and the contents of a garbage pit associated with the missionaries' quarters. For the purposes of this discussion, all three assemblages will be treated as contemporary, although in reality the neophytes' dwelling assemblage dates to about 1800, while the other two assemblages date to around 1809-10 (Farnsworth 1987, 1992).

Native Americans active resistance to the Spanish is perhaps best documented by the persistence of their traditional culture in the archaeological record. The culture change classification which I have published previously (Farnsworth 1992), includes one index that represents the degree of continuity of traditional Native American culture at Mission Soledad (Table 1).

Native Americans maintained the greatest degree of cultural continuity associated with their dwellings at 67 percent of the assemblage, while in the mission kitchen in the main quadrangle, there is less evidence of Native American cultural elements at 31 percent (Table 1), despite the cooks being Native American women (Farnsworth 1992). The Spanish missionaries display a very low proportion of Native American cultural elements at 15 percent (Farnsworth 1992). These represent either substitutions for European items due to the difficulties of supply on the Spanish colonial frontier, or the activities of the Native American servants who worked in the missionaries' quarters.

Information from the earlier levels of the kitchen floor, dating to approximately 1798 suggests that there was a decline in the percentage of traditional elements of continuity maintained by Native Americans in the kitchen context during the period from 1798 to 1809 by approximately 10 percent (Farnsworth 1992). However, this degree of change over the decade

is not enough to change the basic trend discussed in this analysis.

The application of functional classification to the Soledad assemblages (Table 1) provides significant information. The Native American domestic assemblage only divides into four categories, with one of these, beverage storage, being minimally represented. This emphasizes the narrow range of activities represented, and the Native American's focus on very basic facets of life -- food consumption, domestic activities including cooking, and personal adornment.

The largest group is domestic activities (Table 1). The group encompasses the lithic artifacts of traditional Native American culture as well as food preparation items, which in this context were also primarily traditional in nature. The kitchen assemblage has the second highest proportion of artifacts in this group, while the missionaries have the least, which results from their food being prepared in the mission kitchen by the Native Americans. Thus, their low percentage results from the power relationship between the two groups.

The neophytes have a large proportion of their material assemblage in the personal adornment and clothing group (Table 1). This group contains mostly beads in this case. In traditional California Indian cultures, beads were both worn as items of adornment and functioned in the exchange system as a form of money. The Spanish introduced glass beads, which continued to function as symbolic indicators of wealth and status, even though it does not appear that within the mission system they functioned as currency. The Spanish rewarded cooperative Native Americans with beads, yet once away from Spanish surveillance, these beads would be exchanged and ultimately functioned within the Native Americans' own social system. The smaller proportion of beads in the kitchen may, at first, seem surprising, as the cooks were trusted Native Americans, after all, the missionaries had to eat the food they prepared. However, these women are unlikely to have enjoyed high status within the traditional social system, where cooking was a traditional, and expected, female activity. In order to maintain social ties with other Native Americans, the cooks would probably have used their beads

in exchanges with other Native Americans to reinforce their participation in the traditional social system, and de-emphasize their relationship with the Spanish.

The assemblage from the Native Americans' dwelling has the least emphasis on food consumption (Table 1). This again may appear surprising, as the availability of a regular food supply is commonly believed to be a major factor that attracted Native Americans to the missions (Webb 1982, cf. Jackson and Castillo 1995). However, it should be noted from historical accounts that they typically received three meals per day from the mission kitchen, and are recorded as eating at all times of the day as they worked in different parts of the mission or in agricultural activities (Geiger and Meighan 1976:83). The neophytes' dwellings were not the sole focus of their food consumption activities, just one of several locations where they ate. In addition, the traditional Native American artifacts for food consumption in California were made of wood and basketry, which would not preserve in the archaeological record. Thus, it can be argued that the paucity of artifacts in this group reflects Native Americans' ability to continue traditional food consumption patterns and material culture.

In the mission kitchen assemblage (Table 1), food consumption and domestic activities are the largest groups. This is consistent with the function of the kitchen. The presence of beverage storage and consumption items is also consistent with the room's function. The presence of the personal adornment items, i.e. beads, confirms that Native Americans were doing the cooking. The presence of non-domestic activity items in the kitchen is probably a reflection of the use of the kitchen by all segments of the mission community, and the social nature of food preparation.

The functional analysis highlights the presence of an artifact related to ideology in the kitchen assemblage. Given the nature of the site, the presence of only one Catholic religious item may be surprising. The artifact is a crucifix of a type given by the missionaries to favored Native Americans. Its presence confirms that the kitchen was a place where favored and trusted Native Americans would have worked, and the absence

of similar artifacts from the Native Americans' dwelling both confirms their limited distribution and represents a different relationship between the occupants and the missionaries. It further suggests that these Spanish status items did not enter the traditional redistribution system in the same way as beads.

The presence of over 15 percent of beverage storage items in the missionaries' assemblage, but only approximately 2 percent in the Native Americans' assemblage (Table 1), suggests that access to alcoholic beverages, in this case wine, was strictly controlled by the missionaries. The missionaries could obtain wine for their own use, the Native Americans could not. Similarly, the presence of European material culture for beverage consumption, be it for wine or chocolate, in the missionaries' assemblage, but not the Native Americans' dwelling, apparently reinforces this power relationship.

However, this interpretation assumes that these beverages, or the material culture associated with them, were desired by Native Americans. In fact, there are relatively few references to Native Americans drinking in the mission's documentary record. In the responses to the 1813-1815 questionnaire, of 17 missionaries who responded about Native Americans' dominant vices, only one mentioned drunkenness while another referred to Native Americans as drinkers, as part of a long list of perceived vices (Geiger and Meighan 1976:105-106). There is no evidence, as far as I am aware, documenting any Native American desire for non-alcoholic, non-traditional beverages such as chocolate, coffee, or tea, for which the European material culture was found at the mission, but not in the Native Americans' dwelling. Thus, while this pattern could represent Spanish control over access to goods, there is no power or control relationship if the Native Americans did not desire access to the goods in question. The absence of these items from the Native Americans' dwelling can plausibly be interpreted as active resistance to European introduced beverages.

The same argument cannot be used, however, when classes of items are missing from all of the assemblages. For example, no health and hygiene items were recovered in these

assemblages, and yet the documentary record shows that sickness and disease were rife at the mission (Geiger and Meighan 1976, Farnsworth 1987). The missionaries letters include requests for medicines and doctors to be sent, both for themselves and their charges, but they were not available (Farnsworth 1987). Thus, feigning illness would certainly have been a very effective way the California Indians could have actively resisted Spanish forced labor, and one which the Spanish could do little about, given the lack of Spanish doctors or European medicines. But, in the absence of any material culture related to health and hygiene, we can only resort to the documentary record on this issue.

Many Native Americans in the missions learned Spanish (Geiger and Meighan 1976:19-21). Again, this can be viewed reactively, as a Spanish imposition, or pro-actively. Native Americans learned Spanish because it enabled them to communicate with each other when traditional languages were not adequate, because individuals speaking different traditional languages were mixed in the missions. It also enabled them to understand what the Spanish wanted, and thus avoid unnecessary punishments. Finally, it prevented secretive verbal communication between the Spanish whenever Native Americans were in the vicinity. Thus, through language, Native Americans in the missions could empower themselves, while the Spanish could not be sure that it was active resistance to them.

Native Americans' general refusal to learn reading and writing (Geiger and Meighan 1976:35-37), despite Spanish efforts to teach them compared to the apparent facility with which Native Americans did learn when they chose (Geiger and Meighan 1976:35-37), was also a form of active resistance to the Spanish. Inability to read prevented them from participating in several

aspects of Spanish culture, especially in aspects of religious services and Bible study (Geiger and Meighan 1976:35-37). Native Americans surely recognized the Bible as being of great symbolic significance to the missionaries, and refusing to read must have frustrated missionary zeal. Native Americans had no use for writing in their traditional cultures, and little to gain by learning in the mission. The absence of any artifacts related to writing in the archaeological assemblages is testimony to the active resistance Native Americans displayed to this activity.

## CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary exploration that attempts to give primacy for the development of Native American cultures in the missions to Native American actions, moving away from the portrayal as purely reacting to the Spanish. Native American culture in the missions was the result of a complex series of cultural negotiations with Spanish culture. These negotiations involved active rejection of many Spanish elements, as well as acceptance, modification and syncretism of others. Depending upon the context, the creole culture that resulted could be enormously varied. The cultural negotiations which occurred were but one facet of a broader series of power negotiations between the two groups. In these negotiations, Native Americans controlled one key element, their labor, upon which, ultimately, Spanish success depended. If Native Americans could not be made to labor for the Spanish, the entire enterprise would collapse. Spanish brutality, violence, and genocide could only go so far. There had to be a pool of labor remaining. Ultimately, it was this that allowed Native Americans to negotiate the survival of a significant degree of traditional cultural elements, despite the apparently overwhelming dominance of the Spanish technologically and militarily.

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**Table 1. Analysis of Three Assemblages from Mission Soledad.**

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Context	Missionaries' Garbage Pit	Mission Kitchen	Native Americans' Midden
Approximate Date	1809	1809	1800
Continuity of Traditional Cultural Elements	14.5%	30.5%	67.1%
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Domestic Activities	26.9%	35.2%	52.6%
Food Consumption	30.8%	31.4%	14.3%
Beverage Consumption	3.8%	1.9%	0
Food Storage	0	0	0
Beverage Storage	15.4%	4.8%	2.3%
Health & Hygiene	0	0	0
Personal Adornment & Clothing	11.5%	17.1%	30.8%
Currency & Tokens	0	0	0
Tobacco & Recreational Drugs	0	0	0
Security & Restraint	0	0	0
Household Decor & Lighting	0	0	0
Nondomestic Activities	11.5%	8.6%	0
Communications	0	0	0
Ideology	0	1.0%	0
Minimum Number of Items	26	105	133

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