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Negotiations of Power: The Persistence of Indigenous Meanings of Space in Mission-era

Alta California

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Indigenous Meanings of Space in Mission-era Alta California

Across all cultures, there is one shared medium through which humans exist: space. Space can be defined as the natural land that people live on, it is also constituted of the artificial structures that we build on it. Interpretations of writings by the humanist geographer, Yi Fu Tuan, have described space as, "...a multiplicity of mental constructions which all rely on the interaction between the human body and its environment" (Mahoudeau, 2016). It is the physical realm through which individuals live their lives in and through. It is through this exchange that people are able to develop particular meanings of space including religious ideologies, sentiments of belonging, or even domination. Each of these examples are commonly displayed and dictates how and why people treat spaces differently and in turn, one another. As people build their emotional ties with an environment, they feel a sense of entitlement towards it and strive to project their personal desires onto it. This tendency has been magnified by groups of people to maintain or create ownership of land (Mahoudeau, 2016).

The leveraging of land is used as a method to manifest and protect different ideologies that at their core, serve as a way of control. The definition of control provided by Michel Foucault is incredibly relevant in understanding this complex phenomenon. Some of the most pertinent forms of control exist in minute ways as structures that contextualize our existence; in other words, they can exist in the most simple means, including the simple act of observation (Foucault, 1997). One way that this type of control via land has occurred is the colonization of North America, which can be adequately represented by the establishment of the mission system in California. Just as the physical nature of the state was permanently altered as a consequence of colonization, so were the lives of its first inhabitants.

While to the colonizers, the physical space of California was a mode to exert power through, Indigenous people viewed it as a channel to assert their identity and heritage. Colonists were trying to create new practices and social structures for themselves; Indigenous people wanted to use it to continue living as they had. Both parties were forced to use the land as a medium through which to negotiate these desires with one another. Native Americans brought to the missions did this by continuing to create their own artifacts and returning to their ancestral villages to maintain their connections with their homes (Peelo et al., 2018). Colonizers allowed this to happen as long as their needs for control were met as well. There were negotiations on both sides that reflect the social impacts of colonization in California. However, these changes should not be regarded as a beginning or ending of past ideals, but rather a process of continued ways of being for both Indigenous Californians and missionaries of the Spanish Empire.

Background of Issue

Before contact with the Spanish, Indigenous ways of life were highly adapted to the rhythm of the natural world. Spanning across six primary regions, each diverse group carefully balanced the use of their environments' resources to live both comfortably and sustainably (Paddison, 2005). Through these varied regions, there existed hundreds of distinguished cultures with unique linguistic and cultural practices; there were approximately 300 dialects and 100 languages spoken throughout the state (Clarke, 2016). Despite this vast network of separate cultures, they all had highly individualized ways of being that were contingent upon the particular ecosystems that they lived in. The relationship between Native lifeways and the landscape was co-influential; as cultural practices were developed, the environment was impacted. This fact is displayed by studies that reveal how different groups used various

harvesting and management techniques, including irrigation and controlled burning (Paddison, 2005). Their lifestyles were incredibly entangled with the ecosystems of California, as well as the passing of seasons; as the seasons shifted through the landscape of California, so did its Native inhabitants (Pauls, 2019). Any disconnection with the environment was a disruption of highly developed habitus; the missionization of California removed people from their ancestral landscapes and the fundamental elements for their way of existing.

As Spanish missionaries began to colonize California, they brought with them certain western ideals directly related to religion and the meaning of space. From 1769 to 1833, 21 missions were erected in the state as a mechanism to expand control and order of the land (McWilliams, 1979). The missions placed in California are pertinent symbols of power that the alteration of the state's land originated from. As explained by McWilliams, "The greater the distance between Mission and native village, the more homesick the Indian became, with the number of fugitives and apostates increasing in direct relation to the expanding area of conversion." (McWilliams, 1979). Through a process called *reduccion*, the missions used religious ideologies to reduce cultural diversity in Alta California by creating an ordered citizenry by converting the region's vast Indigenous population to Catholicism (Allen, 2016). This forced conversion was rarely voluntary and the result of extreme maladaptive, manipulative coercion and forced removal from tribal villages. Since the missions were placed along the coast of California, Indigenous people who lived inland or in Northern California were removed from their land so that they could be brought to and processed by the missionaries (Panich, 2015). Groups as far as the Miwok in the Sierra Nevadas were transported to the missions to become converts and work the land surrounding them (Panich 2015). Given how strongly Native life was

associated with their corresponding natural ecosystems, such displacement was devastating and triggered a nonconsensual dispossession of cultural identity. In other words, the acculturation of Native Americans in California aimed to systematically strip them of their sense of self, including their strong ties to ancestral landscapes. The missions aggregated Indigenous peoples in one area to more easily have control over them.

In addition to converting Native Californians to Catholicism, the missionaries also exploited them for labor to maintain and grow the strength of the missions (Clarke, 2016). Due to intensive forced labor and crowded living conditions, Indigenous people suffered from high mortality rates. To note, several missions yielded almost as many successful conversions as they did deaths of Native Californians; research of historical records has shown that while there were approximately 101,000 baptisms, there were 71,000 burials across all the mission sites (Gordon, 2006). This shows how significant of a role the missions played in the genocide of Native Californians, which only heightened in devastation later on as more people moved to the western U.S. during the Gold Rush (Reed, 2020). To note, the pre-contact population of Native Californians has been estimated to have been as many as 300,000 people (Library of Congress). Research has shown that from 1770 to 1900, the Indigenous population in California declined by over 90%, from 310,00 to 20,000 (Reed, 2020, pp. 33). In invoking the first stage of decimating the population of Native Californians, the missionaries greatly devastated the structure of Indigenous identity as relationships were suddenly disrupted and generational knowledge was lost. To cement the reality of the mission system, missionaries intentionally destroyed a way of life; this effort was supported by the decrease in Native Californians as it made it easier for them to exploit a small number of survivors. These statistics show the tangible and devastating

outcomes that the enforcement of abstract ideals can have on even the most prominent communities. When viewed objectively, the displacement and erasure of Native life in California by the Spanish missionaries was inherently strategic. One of the primary concepts used by colonizers was that of *terra nullius*, a Latin term that translates to “nobody’s land” (Borch, 2001).

Apart from the doctrine of Catholicism, the notion of *terra nullius* was likewise integral to the compartmentalization of California’s land and its people. By considering spaces as unoccupied, it transforms them into uncharted land waiting to be possessed. As explained by Benjamin Madley (2004), principles like this were ingrained inside of the minds of early colonists; in believing that land beyond their own was not properly claimed, they validated their invasion of it. It is important to note, however, that western colonizers only viewed such places as uninhabited as the living practices of those in them were not the same as their own. In other words, Indigenous ways of life in the Americas were considered to be uncivilized by Europeans and thus, were not viewed as formal owners of the continent's land (Borch, 2001). Furthermore, this justification for conquering land allowed possession of it to serve as a representation of power. In placing missions across California’s coast, the Spanish effectively centralized their power and created controllable entities to draw their political and economic resources from. Missions were indicative of Spanish societal order and were essential conceptual markers in idealizing the landscape. While the missions were components of Spanish society, they were still acted upon in emergent ways by those who lived within them.

Indigenous people were not necessarily complacent in this rapid domination. In fact, many communities resisted and in some instances, even killed missionaries attempting to erase

their way of life (History.com Editors, 2018). To explore how the California mission system is an example of occupied space as an assertion of power, it is necessary to analyze three different aspects of the issue: how the origins of colonists' perspective of space were translated into a form of systematic functioning in the missions, how Indigenous Californians reconciled their own beliefs of space amongst the imposition of others, and how the interactions between the two groups operated. While the outcome of colonization in California resulted in changed perceptions of land for indigenous communities, these changes should not be regarded as a beginning or end of past ideals. Instead, they should be considered to be a continuation or mode of survival.

Analysis

During the missionization of California, inhabitants new and old transformed their culturally circumscribed behaviors. Missions established in Alta California were initially established by the Spanish to assert their claim to California's land before another imperial entity could (Clarke, 2016). Their construction differed from past Spanish endeavors as they brought few individuals with them and were focused on establishing bases populated by soldiers. Their development was rapid and required a constant flow of labor that could support their efforts. This intention to advance Spanish expansion was something that can be seen in the historical records of the missions and their physical remnants. The design and distribution of the missions alone is something that deeply reflects these origins of control.

While the leveraging of California's land was the ultimate goal of the Spanish, the territorial marking of space was implemented using a specific model. The Spanish mission-style architecture is still commonly associated with the state's identity and it was essential to creating

modes of domination. In Catherine Ettinger's (2003) article about the missions, she explains how their design came to be associated with protection by the missionaries. She says the following regarding architecture: "It structures the landscape with forms that reflect and reinforce the ideas and customs of the social groups that intervene in its production and use" (Ettinger, 2003, pp. 1). This is important to recognize in relation to the missions' construction as they were inherently symbolic of the Spanish's gesture towards planting their presence in a foreign land. Everything beyond the mission buildings was new and unrecognizable to them. The missions were a tangible way for them to ground themselves in the space they had moved into. The physical structure allowed them to carry out their own personal and social rituals linked with their Spanish heritage. Furthermore, in building the missions, the missionaries were able to create spatial order in generating social networks between the 21 missions. Their existence affirmed that there was a secure community for its inhabitants to be a part of and provided a foundation for the new society they envisioned, including the amalgamation of Native Americans as a part of the population (Ettinger, 2003).

At the missions, Indigenous people lived in quarters called pueblos after they had been converted, earning them the title of neophyte (Library of Congress). Although these places were distanced from the actual mission buildings, they were still inside of the missions' jurisdiction. As neophytes, the Native people were restricted in what cultural habits they could practice. Having gone through a process of reeducation, neophytes were not only discouraged from engaging in their cultures' rituals, but they also had restricted access to the space and resources to do so. However, within their quarters and through personal development with missionaries, neophytes found ways to sustain their heritage. Archaeological research has shown that at the

pueblos, it was common for neophytes to practice their burial rituals (Panich, 2015).

Additionally, many were granted the opportunity to periodically visit their home villages, or even to return to them at the end of their lives (Peelo et al., 2018). The ability to move beyond mission walls made them less confining and protected Native Californian's ability to interact with the landscape how they wanted to. Contrastingly, the maintenance of cultural practices in them was an assertive motion of continued identity. These negotiations of spatial interaction secured that the ideas of the missionaries would continue to develop and that the cultures of Native Californians would persist in some form. While such negotiations can be traced at all of the missions, research at Mission Santa Clara de Asís is particularly useful in considering this phenomenon given the diverse composition of its Indigenous inhabitants. At Mission Santa Clara de Asís, there existed Yokut from the San Joaquin Valley, Miwok from the Sierra Nevadas, and Ohlone from the coast of the Bay Area (Peelo et al., 2018).

One of the most interesting displays of sustained Indigenous agency at the California missions is the continuity in burial rituals. In Lee Panich's (2015) research at Mission Santa Clara de Asís, he considered archaeological, ethnographic, and historical records to understand the mortuary practices of the site's Indigenous neophytes. By comparing the ethnographic data recounting pre-contact mourning rituals with archaeological data, he was able to determine that the three different tribes at the mission maintained their practices (Panich, 2015). More specifically, he found that each of them included grave goods in the graves of their deceased (Panich, 2015). Additionally, he noted the presence of pit features, which are common components in pre-contact burial ceremonies, at the mission grounds (Panich, 2015). This case study is one of many showing that it was not uncommon for Indigenous neophytes to perpetuate

their long-held cultural practices at their mission dwellings. While the deceased were not able to live their lives in an entirely traditional manner at the missions, the maintenance of burial rituals ensured that they would be laid to rest in a way that aligned with their identities. On a more spiritual level, the ability to practice these methods secured that the deceased neophytes would enjoy an afterlife that was in line with their beliefs, not those of Catholicism. Additionally, many Indigenous neophytes were able to actively connect to the land from which they had been taken from during the last stages of their lives.

As previously discussed, given how the population of the missions was constructed, they were home to Indigenous people from various tribes. Coming from different regions made it difficult to sustain established relationships amongst groups and to preserve ties to their homeland. These two dynamics were both intrinsically linked with the spatial nature of where the tribes originated and at the missions, had to be sustained through somewhat less tangible means. In another study of Mission Santa Clara de Asís, Sarah Peelo et al., the authors use a database containing marriage and death records to track patterns in marriage between groups and visitations (Peelo et al., 2018). Through their analysis they found that nearly 9% of the Indigenous population at the mission died outside of its walls; this suggests that near the end of their lives, some individuals returned to their villages (Peelo et al., 2018). The authors note that this practice of visiting or moving to villages at the end of life was also common practice at Mission Dolores in San Francisco (Peelo et al., 2018). In their evaluation of the marriage records, it became clear that neophytes would select to marry within their own group or neighboring tribelets (Peelo et al., 2018). Despite their displacement from their original lands, Native people used marriage as a tool to enliven their historical territories and subsequent

sociopolitical ties. Although they were not physically present in their villages, these strategic marriage practices enabled them to carry on the social structures that were initially shaped by their traditional landscapes.

From reviewing the case studies by Panich and Peelo et al., it is heavily suggested that the sacred nature of death was honored by missionaries. Furthermore, it has been shown that Indigenous neophytes found deliberate means to celebrate their identity even in oppressive circumstances. Not only were Indigenous perspectives regarding the proper ways of being in the world not erased, but they were also preserved in unfamiliar social environments. Although missionaries developed an overlying control of California, its Native people asserted themselves in various ways. The overlapping ideals of the Spanish and Indigenous Californians played a large role in how the state would be structured both spatially and socially.

Conclusion

The complicated process behind changing perspectives of space in California was spearheaded by the creation of the California mission system. Through the physical structure of the missions to their distribution, they served the Spanish Empire as tools of control. By bringing the complex and widespread population of Native Californians to these sites, it became practical to program individuals to a homogenized mode of being. However, the Indigenous peoples' unwillingness to be complacent led to unique social behaviors within and beyond the mission walls. This exploration of the tenacious, Indigenous social action at the missions provides insight into the conceptual origins of the designation and meaning of space in California.

Ultimately, reviewing the intention behind the construction of the missions is essential to understanding the boundaries they created for the Indigenous people brought to them. However,

as a response to these restrictions, Indigenous neophytes modified their burial and marriage rituals to create cultural continuity. The dynamic exchanges that occurred between missionaries, Native Californians, and the Californian landscape reveals the non-static character of the two demographics involved in the process of missionization. Furthermore, it suggests that the meaning of space is extendable to those who inhabit it.

How space is distinguished determines the interactions that people have with it. For example, in California, and the United States as a whole, efforts to control perceptions and spatial limits of Indigenous life have been sustained through the reservation system. The reservation system was established as a part of a mostly one-sided treaty that sanctioned unrestricted Native access to portions of land (Elliot, 2016). Given the decimation of their population, Native Americans from separate tribes were grouped together in these spaces. Like the missions, a majority of them were a great distance from their ancestral homelands. Today, tribal groups at some of the reservations have turned them into a source of revenue through the establishment of casinos (Clarke, 2016). However, they still did not have complete power in choosing which spaces to live in. They have reconfigured their identities in these places, but the lack of association with particular parts of land effectively stripped them of the form of agency they had previous to colonization. Extensions of meta-analytical research on the persistence of Native Californian identity can be applied to such structured environments to provide new insight into the ongoing process of colonialism in the United States.

The impacts of settler and religious colonialism in a post-contact landscape are entwined in the daily lives of Californians. While sentiments of Indigenous agency and identity have persevered across time and space, the dire impacts of missionization have as well. Human ideas,

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including those related to power and control, are not compatible with the binaries of beginning and end. In other words, the displays of Native American culture in Alta California during the mission era were a continuation of a way of being in the world. The colonization of California was not the end of Native culture, in many ways, it reaffirmed the strength of Indigenous communities and their deep relationship with the natural world.

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