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Feeding family and ancestors: Persistence of traditional Native American lifeways during the Mission Period in coastal Southern California



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of plant foods in domestic and ceremonial contexts at a Native American Gabrieliño/Tongva village occupied during the Spanish Mission Period in coastal southern California and highlights the remarkable persistence of traditional practices. Prior perspectives of the Mission Period have stressed that Native lifeways were quickly and profoundly disrupted in areas near newly established Spanish missions in California. This study reveals that despite the unprecedented changes associated with Spanish colonization, Native Americans within the Los Angeles Basin continued to emphasize native plant foods during mortuary events, mourning ceremonies, and feasting. Food, especially during ritual events, is a medium that cements the community together and reinforces social networks. By continuing the traditional emphasis on local wild plants, along with selective use of new introduced domesticated plants, food remained an important agency of cultural identity that helped the Gabrieliño/Tongva to maintain and reinforce social relationships during a period of dramatic culture change.

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1. Introduction

If the statement “you are what you eat” is accurate, then what you believe influences what and when you eat. Meals play a key role in creating traditions and reinforcing cultural continuity and intergenerational stability, particularly among immigrants or generations undergoing rapid culture change (Dietler and Hayden, 2001; Lewis, 2007; Sutton, 2001; Twiss, 2007, 2012; van der Veen, 2007). Food, especially in ceremonial contexts such as mortuary offerings or ritual meals, is a medium that cements the community and reinforces social networks (Carr, 2006; George, 1996; Hayden, 2009; Jing, 1996; Kan, 1989; Schiller, 1997). This study explores cultural perceptions and the relationship between food and ritually-driven ideology by examining how plant foods were used in public (ceremonial) and private (domestic) domains after European contact among the Gabrieliño/Tongva in the Los Angeles Basin of coastal southern California.

Prior perspectives of the Mission Period (1769–1834 AD) in California have stressed that, due to a variety of ecological and social factors, Native lifeways were quickly and profoundly disrupted in areas near newly established missions (Hackel, 2005; Larson et al., 1994; Milliken, 1995). This study of macrobotanical remains

from a Native American Mission Period village reveals the remarkable persistence of traditional practices despite the Spanish establishing a nearby mission in the Los Angeles Basin. At this village complex alongside Ballona Lagoon of the Santa Monica Bay, the Gabrieliño/Tongva continued to emphasize native plants during mortuary events, mourning ceremonies, and feasting. The results of this study suggest that food remained an important agency of cultural identity during a period of dramatic culture change, and that aboriginal populations while emphasizing wild plant foods also appear to have made conscious decisions about the selective use of non-native domesticated plants in ceremonial and ritual practices. Through discussion of the use of particular combinations of wild and introduced plant species in specific public and private contexts, this study also explores the importance placed on plant foods as a symbol of cultural identity. In doing so, the study sheds light on how these events functioned to both maintain and recreate social relationships among the Gabrieliño/Tongva during a time of unprecedented cultural upheaval.

2. Food, social identity and colonialism

Food is one of the tangible elements in cultural negotiations of social interaction, stratification, identity, and religion. Food provides a visible representation of social interaction and identity (Anderson, 1993; Counihan, 1999; Franklin, 2001; Mills, 2008;

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Mintz, 1996; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002; Trubek, 2000; Twiss, 2007, 2012). Food is linked to memory and these memories link to important relationships, events, and practices (Haines and Sammells, 2010:9; Holtzman, 2006). In archaeological research, the nature and purpose of suprahousehold (community) meals has in particular been a highly debated topic (Dietler, 1996, 2001, 2007; Dietler and Hayden, 2001; Hayden, 2001, 2009). Food preparation has been tied to social status and female identity; for example the capabilities and reputation of a woman as a good cook or preparation of particular meals or dishes earns her special social status (see Counihan, 1999:33). How food is prepared, presented and consumed is associated with class identities, as exemplified by French haute cuisine (Anderson, 1993; Trubek, 2000). Which foods are consumed in general or at particular events and times is reflective of both culture and religion values; for example food taboos (beef and pork by Hindu and Islamic practitioners; root vegetables such as onion and garlic by Jains; fish consumption during lent by Catholics). Foods are very often closely linked with national and/or ethnic identities (Franklin, 2001; Mintz, 1996).

Anthropological studies of food, be it focused on subsistence, technology, social dynamics, status and interaction, gender, ritual or economic and political power, have demonstrated that food interlaces with the different parameters of a society in a complex interplay (Klarich, 2010:3). Interactions between food (procurement, preparation, processing and consumption) and elements of societies such as gender, class, race, political power, ritual, and religion provide insight into one of the most basic aspects of human condition – cultural identity. Behavior associated with food is an ideal means to study cultural identity because not only does food permeate daily practice but its archaeological correlates are also readily available in most contexts (Mills, 2008). For example, VanDerwarker et al. (2007) use macrobotanical data to demonstrate that during the contact period, the Sara Indians in North Carolina retained their cultural identity by maintaining their plant diet and consuming familiar foods. Consumption of familiar foods was ubiquitous in both daily and feasts during a time of cultural upheaval and colonial threats to traditional lifestyles.

The relationship between food (procurement, preparation, consumption) and construction of social identities, particularly during colonial contexts has emerged as an important research issue. Dietler (2007) has fittingly recognized that food is an important medium for the enactment of colonialism; therefore unraveling the links between food and identity will aid in understanding the transformative effects of colonialism in cultural identity. Dietler (2007) presents compelling arguments in addressing a fundamental research question of why and how people adopt “alien” foods. He argues that the adoption of alien foods is primarily through actions of individuals or social groups “located differentially within complex relational fields of power and interest” (Dietler, 2007:226). As such foods/goods/practices are adopted by elite or lower classes and then are slowly incorporated by the rest of the group. Dietler (2007:227) also discusses different scenarios for why demand for “alien” foods would increase from taste to use of particular foods to strategically identify social roles. Once new foods are adopted by a group, the process of legitimizing them as an acceptable food in all realms of life involves their social validation. Wiessner (2001) and Dietler (2007) propose that ritual communal/suprahousehold feasts are the best venues to introduce and validate new foods and transform them to acceptable items for daily meals.

The complex development of cultural identity, especially in pluralistic cultural settings such as colonies, involves multidirectional processes in which diverse cultures can actually create new identities which encompass a meshing or hybridization of traits, such as ethnogenesis, creole culture, or *mestizaje* (e.g. Deagan, 2001; Haley and Wilcoxon, 1997; Haley and Wilcoxon, 2005; Lightfoot, 2005;

Lightfoot et al., 2013a; Panich, 2010, 2013; Voss, 2008). In a colonial context, all aspects of food (procurement, processing, preparation, presentation and consumption) become important media to maintain and demonstrate sociocultural identity for both the colonizers and the colonized populations. Identity can be expressed in a range of activities involving food; furthermore, different aspects and degrees of cultural identity are expressed at different stages of food processing, preparation and consumption (Scott, 2007; Twiss, 2007:8). As such, food can be both a medium of solidarity or differentiation within a group with the inclusion of colonial foods in particular contexts and/or available to only particular classes (see for example Mintz and Du Bois, 2002:109).

The processes of colonialism have varying effects on how indigenous and colonizing populations respond to incorporating new foods into their traditional diets. In these contexts, food remains an important indicator of social change and identity (Dietler, 2007). Given that food is an integral component of individual and group identity, one wonders if there would have been cultural resistance to the adoption of new “non-local” foods into an existing and successful system. Alternatively, would this adoption be a desired process of selective incorporation of exotic foods? From the perspective of the native or indigenous population, if food and food practices are cultural markers, then adopting the new foods of a colonizing culture would transform ethnic traditions. Alternatively, certain foods could have been adopted in specific contexts but not others; for example, new introduced foods could have been perfectly suitable for occasional consumption, but not as part of daily diet. Finally, would there be more resistance to adopting new foods and practices relative to other material culture?

3. Prior perspectives on native lands and lifeways in the California Mission Period

Several scholars (Hackel, 2005; Larson et al., 1994; Milliken, 1995) have discussed how the introduction of domesticated animals and plants into California by the Spanish during the Mission Period had a deleterious effect on the continuation of native lifeways. Lightfoot (2005) discussed broad patterns of cultural change and re-articulation during the Mission Period, and demonstrated how the landscape changed beyond the Mission walls (Lightfoot, 2005:57).

The introduction of new plants and animals triggered a major ecological change that, together with a number of associated Spanish practices, had, in particular, far-reaching effects on the diets of native Californians. Hackel (2005:65) argues eloquently that the “dual revolution” involving demographic collapse and ecological change was as effective in conquering California as a climactic military victory, and asserts that the Old World agents of “ecological imperialism” proved innately suited to the new region and so conquered with a brutal efficiency, undercutting its peoples and the foods they relied upon through demographic and ecological revolutions that dramatically transformed California’s human and natural landscape. Hackel (2005:71) further stresses that the environmental degradation radiated rapidly from centers of Spanish settlement to more remote areas, similar to the spread of European diseases. The initial vectors of this ecological degradation were domesticated animals, followed by the spread of non-native weeds which adapted effectively to the new environments.

Anderson et al. (1997) assert that the pace of change was so rapid and far-reaching, especially at lower elevations, that by the time trained botanists and plant geographers arrived in the late nineteenth century to document and take photographs, many landscapes had been greatly modified. The arrival of the Spanish brought about the end of a variety of traditional land management practices, most notably the prescribed burning events considered

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