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Little Choice for the Chumash

Colonialism, Cattle, and Coercion in Mission Period California

DEANA DARTT-NEWTON AND JON M. ERLANDSON

Archaeological data indicate that the Chumash people and their ancestors lived, thrived, and survived along the California Coast for at least eleven thousand years.¹ Over the millennia, they adapted to environmental conditions that included high resource productivity and diversity, as well as to regular perturbations in local environments that included droughts, El Niño events, and other cyclical changes operating on a variety of scales.² For the coastal Chumash in particular, the close juxtaposition of a variety of marine and terrestrial habitats, intensive upwelling in coastal waters, and intentional burning of the landscape made the Santa Barbara Channel region one of the most resource-abundant places on the planet.³ This natural diversity and productivity supported the Chumash and their culture, allowing the sociopolitical and technological culture to remain relatively stable for millennia.⁴

With the colonization of Alta California by Europeans beginning in AD 1769, however, came a series of unprecedented blows to the Chumash and their traditional lifeways. Anthropologists, historians, and other scholars have long been interested in documenting the collision of cultures that accompanied the European exploration and settlement of the Americas. Only recently have more realistic examinations of this “American Apocalypse” become widely available or have Native people published these histories in their own words.⁵ In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Chumash elders provided a rich body of ethnographic data for anthropologists and other scholars to mine, but the published record of Chumash history has been told, translated, and interpreted primarily by non-Native scholars.⁶ Today, the use of ethnographic information and

trends in Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies inform the work of Native scholars in the retelling of their histories and have inspired us to address a previously unexamined bias that underpins popular published accounts of Chumash history.

We recognize that deeply submerged or ingrained in the intellectual history of Western science resistance to a full accounting of this apocalyptic history is still widespread and takes a variety of forms. In California, many early histories virtually ignored Native peoples or portrayed California Indians as primitive “diggers” whose cultures were extinct. Others were “white-washed” accounts of life at the missions that served as the colonial tools of the Spanish government.⁷ Some recent accounts are more subtle, questioning the identity and authenticity of Native peoples, especially those who demand the repatriation of museum collections or criticize anthropologists for not adequately protecting traditional cultural values, including village, cemetery, and sacred sites.⁸

Another anthropological approach is to explain postcontact changes in Native Californian societies as responses to something other than colonial oppression, especially droughts or cyclical resource shortages caused by overpopulation, overexploitation of resources, or environmental fluctuations.⁹ In such ecological scenarios, California Indians who moved to the Spanish missions made “optimal” or “risk-minimization” choices primarily to avoid problems associated with harsh or unstable climatic conditions. As a result, primary blame for the consequences of such choices is deflected away from Franciscan fathers, Spanish soldiers, and European colonialism and toward the vagaries of nature.

In this article, we examine aspects of one recent example of this last anthropological genre, a complex paper on the missionization of the Chumash Indians of the California Coast published in *American Anthropologist* by Daniel O. Larson, John R. Johnson, and Joel C. Michaelson (1994).¹⁰ Our intent is not to denigrate the authors of that article—two of whom are old friends of the junior author—but to explore the implications of such explanations, reexamine some of the data on which they are based, and present ethnohistorical data that indict Spanish colonialism as the primary cause of the wrenching cultural changes that afflicted the Chumash between about AD 1542 and AD 1834.

BACKGROUND

When Spanish explorers first entered the Santa Barbara Channel area in AD 1542, they found Chumash-speaking peoples occupying the mainland coast, interior valleys, and islands from approximately the Malibu (Humaliwu) to San Luis Obispo areas. California is a state generally renowned for its high population densities, elaborate technology, and socio-economically complex cultures.¹¹ The coastal peoples flourished with only limited reliance on domesticated plants or animals (i.e., tobacco, dogs) but the intensive exploitation of a wide variety of marine, estuarine, and terrestrial resources. Like many Native American and other Indigenous cultures, they also actively burned the landscape to maintain the productivity, diversity, and accessibility of terrestrial plants and animals.¹²

Along the mainland coast, the Chumash relied on hunting, gathering, and fishing to harvest a wide variety of animals and plants from terrestrial and marine environments “stacked” between the mountains and the open sea. Along with abundant oak groves, chaparral, and riparian communities, large estuaries, a mosaic of sandy and rocky shorelines, and extensive kelp beds provided a wide variety of resources. The diversity and productivity of resources available along the mainland coast, when combined with sophisticated maritime technologies and extensive commerce and craft specialization, allowed aggregations of as many as six hundred to one thousand peoples to live in some coastal towns.¹³ Intensive trade among Chumash groups (and neighboring tribes) living on the islands, the coastal mainland, and interior valleys was facilitated by the use of shell bead money, large plank canoes (tomols), and extensive trail systems.

The Chumash and their neighbors were devastated by Old World diseases after European contact, possibly beginning in the sixteenth century AD.¹⁴ Equally devastating were other colonial processes that began with Spanish settlement of the mainland in AD 1769 and continued under later Mexican and American regimes. In the years following the demographic collapse of Chumash society, the reduced intensity of Native fishing, hunting, gathering, and land management practices (burning, etc.) may have led to significant ecological changes, including a rebound in the population of major economic species of fish, shellfish, and sea mammals early in the Spanish colonial period.¹⁵ Such resource recovery, aided by the increasing incorporation of the maritime Chumash into the Spanish

agricultural and pastoral economy, may have increased the productivity of marine and estuarine resources in the Santa Barbara Channel area.¹⁶

Although the Spanish colonization of the Chumash region is often thought to have begun with the Portola Expedition of AD 1769, the first mission was not established in Chumash territory until AD 1772, when Mission San Luis Obispo was founded in northern Chumash territory. Spanish colonial facilities in the heart of Chumash territory were not established until AD 1782, when the Presidio Santa Barbara and Mission San Buenaventura were founded, followed by Mission Santa Barbara in AD 1786 and Mission La Purisima Concepcion in AD 1787. The final mission founded in Chumash territory, Mission Santa Inez, was not established until AD 1804. From these epicenters in space and time, the Christian conversion and socioeconomic disruption of Chumash society radiated outward like a tidal wave that grew to devastating proportions during the ensuing decades.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE, RISK, AND MISSIONIZATION

In their 1994 article, "Missionization among the Coastal Chumash of Central California: A Study of Risk Minimization Strategies," Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson focus on the period between AD 1786 and 1803, when over 85 percent of documented Chumash conversions and movements into the missions took place. Although recognizing that the introduction of foreign diseases and "pressures of missionization" affected the Chumash, Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson place primacy on ecological factors. They state that the decision to move to the missions may have been based on a desire to minimize risk and was an acceptable alternative under the pressures of "high climatic variability, several years of droughts, and significantly elevated sea surface temperatures."¹⁷

While natural environmental fluctuations may have played a role in the movement of Chumash people to the missions (particularly in the abandonment of Channel Island villages after AD 1810), we contend that colonial oppression and Spanish-induced environmental degradation were the chief culprits. No amount of scientific data can blunt the harsh realities of the mission period, when the Chumash and other California Indians died by the tens of thousands and most survivors were reduced to a humiliating slavery-like condition.

For the most part, we do not dispute Larson, Johnson, and Michael-

son's (1994) climatic or environmental reconstructions. While they argue for greater climatic and resource variability from AD 1780 to 1830 generally, they provide little specific evidence for severe drought or El Niño events during the critical period from AD 1786 to 1803. Significant questions have also been raised by James P. Kennett and B. Lynn Ingram about the accuracy of a key source of their information on sea surface temperature and marine stability (or instability).¹⁸ More importantly, the Chumash survived several millennia of cyclical environmental variations under conditions of both high population and intricate sociopolitical structures.¹⁹ Although the effects of such perturbations can be seen in changes in Chumash health and economic organization, Spanish accounts from the late eighteenth century suggest that the coastal Chumash were generally thriving prior to the local establishment of the missions. Although natural resource fluctuations may have contributed to some of the difficult decisions faced by Chumash people around the turn of the nineteenth century, these are unlikely to have played a more important role than Spanish colonialism.

As Glenn Farris recently noted, the movement of the Kashtayit (and other) Chumash to the Spanish missions may have been more closely related to the growing impacts of Spanish agricultural production on acorns and other traditional Chumash plant foods.²⁰ Regarding the impacts of the Ortega's livestock on the natural environment, Farris cited a letter written by Father Gregorio Fernandez of Mission La Purisima in AD 1803. Written in opposition to a land grant petition by rancher Francisco Reyes, the letter stated:

It is also very certain that the Neophytes of the Missions of Santa Barbara, La Purisima and San Luis will be much prejudiced, particularly those of Santa Barbara from los Dos Pueblos as far as the Gaviota; and those of this mission, from la Quemada as far as los Pedernales, which have for several years, been deprived of the grain produced by the native soil, the same having been consumed by the stock of the Senores Ortegas, and the other individuals on his rancho. . . . The harvests of this mission are not sufficient to give two rations of atole and one of pozole daily to 1060 neophytes which the Mission has; wherefore it is necessary to support them on the wild grain, which the goodness of God has furnished on their native soil.

TABLE 1. Average Annual Size of Mission Livestock Herds in Chumash Territory Mission

YEARS (AD)	SBV	SB	LP	SI	TOTALS	% GROWTH
1784–1790	1210	491	734	0	2435	—
1791–1800	7381	4177	3268	0	14826	609
1801–1805	21176	12267	8299	1679	43421	193
1806–1810	29405	14186	16817	4706	65114	50

Notes: Data from Costello (1990); SBV = San Buenaventura; SB = Santa Barbara; LP = La Purisma; SI = Santa Inez; growth values are from previous time period.

Significantly, Fernandez' letter makes no mention of drought, suggesting that the movement of many Chumash to the missions was not caused by natural climatic fluctuations but by the severe effects of Spanish livestock grazing on the acorns, seeds, and other plant foods that were one of the foundations of Chumash subsistence (see figure 1). It is not surprising, given his position as a missionary, that Fernandez did not mention the effects of mission herds and flocks on the traditional plant foods of the Chumash, which John R. Johnson noted as a significant factor in Chumash migration to the missions.²¹ Fernandez's letter also suggests that Mission La Purisima, at least, was not capable of providing adequate food to its Chumash Indian population, raising doubts that the Chumash abandoned their traditional territories because of the better nutritional opportunities at the missions. The only significant drought Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson recognized in the Santa Barbara Channel area between AD 1786 to 1803, the drought of 1794–95, was not associated with a significant increase in mission recruitment among the Chumash.²² We note, however, that domesticated livestock can have an unusually heavy impact on local plant communities during droughts, exacerbating the general environmental degradation caused by Spanish settlement and expansion.²³

Data presented by Johnson show that between AD 1770 and 1796 the Chumash population of the region between Gaviota and Cojo on the western Santa Barbara Coast declined by 67 percent, while cattle herds in that region increased by 400 to 500 percent.²⁴ Other ethnohistorical data also suggest that the move to the missions was far from an "ac-

ceptable alternative.” Along with the venereal disease and corporal punishment common at the missions, Phillip L. Walker and Travis Hudson list at least three major epidemics among the missionized Chumash between AD 1797 and 1801: a typhoid and pneumonia epidemic in AD 1797, an unknown (“catarro”) illness in AD 1798, and an AD 1801 epidemic of pneumonia, diphtheria, and possibly pleurisy.²⁵ The 1801 epidemic inspired a messianic uprising, in which a neophyte woman at Mission Santa Barbara warned that the spirit Chupu had appeared to her and declared that Chumash people who allowed themselves to be baptized, failed to renounce Christianity, or informed Spanish authorities would die. The uprising was quickly squelched, and those involved were punished severely.²⁶ Another Chumash woman, Luisa Ignacio, also reported that the Indians often attributed witchcraft to sickness and death, suggesting that the use of bad medicine was probably the reason for the coming of the whites, “like a punishment from God.”²⁷ Spiritual cause and effect was (is) often the explanation within Native communities for the unpredictable and uncontrollable. In both cases, submitting to the edicts of the mission resulted in severe supernatural consequences.

Johnson discussed the complexity of the conversion process, with the interplay of numerous economic, demographic, political, and social factors, but noted that grazing by mission livestock and the suppression of Native burning were a significant contributor.²⁸ Because of the startling mortality rates in the disease-ridden missions, nearly continuous recruitment of Indian labor was necessary to facilitate their ranching and agricultural work.²⁹ In January of AD 1803, the viceroy of New Spain decreed that converted Indians could no longer live in their villages and must move to the missions.³⁰ This official edict provided the legal justification for the heavy recruitment of Chumash people to the missions from AD 1803 to 1805. During this crucial period, Spanish recruitment of the Chumash to the missions increased from approximately 200 individuals in AD 1802 to roughly 1,200 people in AD 1803, but Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson provide no evidence for severe drought conditions, El Niño events, or other natural environmental problems.³¹

In his book *The Chumash*, Robert O. Gibson also attributes the marked increase in Chumash movement to the missions in AD 1802–3 not to climatic variability but to the consequences of Spanish colonialism:

The most probable explanation for this unlikely situation was that disease, land loss, and starvation in the Indians' villages and towns left them with no choice but to enter the mission system. By this time, most of the Indians' traditional leadership was disrupted, as were their craft guilds, religious institutions, and family relationships.³²

Like Gibson and Johnson, we believe that the flow of Chumash people into the missions was due not so much to natural resource instability but to resource depletion by Spanish cattle, active colonial recruitment and coercion, new and frightening diseases, and fear of metaphysical consequences.³³ We can only speculate on the use of psychological and religious manipulation that occurred to accomplish this replenishment of labor, a campaign Gary Coombs and Fred Plog reduced to an "effort on the part of the fathers (through baptisms) to balance population and food supply."³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

In the 1990s, proposals by the Catholic Church to canonize Father Junipero Serra—the architect of Alta California's mission system—enraged thousands of Native and non-Native peoples, leading to protests in the streets of Los Angeles. To many members of modern Chumash and other California Indian communities, attempts by anthropologists to explain the movement of Chumash peoples to the Spanish missions as primarily a response to climatic variability is equally outrageous. We found little or no support for the notion that droughts, El Niño events, or generalized climatic or ecological instability were major motivating factors in the rapid movement of the Chumash into the Spanish missions between AD 1786 and 1803. Instead, we see the rapid missionization of the mainland Chumash during this period as a result of the timing of the establishment of several missions and a presidio in the heart of Chumash territory, a response to the devastating impacts of foreign diseases on traditional Chumash society, the increasing impacts of cattle and other domestic livestock on traditional plant foods, and the colonial edict of AD 1803 declaring that converted Indians could no longer reside in their home villages.

The Chumash and their ancestors survived for more than eleven thousand years in a dynamic coastal environment, including numerous cycles of drought, El Niños, and other climatic and resource perturbations. Describing the movement of many Chumash into the missions primarily as an optimal or “acceptable alternative” to climatic variability helps obscure the fact the Chumash were under assault by a colonial juggernaut that included armed Spanish soldiers, Franciscan priests who saw unconverted Indians as godless savages, Old World diseases, territorial dispossession and disenfranchisement, and the exponential growth of cattle herds on mission lands and private ranchos.³⁵ As Alta California was inexorably drawn into a global colonial economy, these impacts disrupted the traditional economic and social fabric of Chumash society to such an extent that many Chumash had little choice but to move to the missions.

We are not suggesting that droughts and other natural environmental perturbations did not influence Chumash decision making during the mission period. We believe, however, that the effects of such perturbations pale in comparison to the overwhelming impacts of European colonialism. Nor are we suggesting that the Chumash were passive or hapless victims of an evil empire. They were caught in a devastating drama created by the global competition of European powers, with circumstances that left them with little or no choice but to adapt to colonial rule. As expected, the responses of individual Chumash varied tremendously. Some moved to the missions, while others found work on ranchos or in pueblos. Some adopted Christianity, intermarried with the foreigners, and accepted the dictates of a new social and economic order. Some fled to the islands or the interior trying to escape the yoke of colonial oppression. Still others actively resisted the Spanish in armed rebellion and were hanged.

Given the devastating consequences of their contacts with Spanish, Mexican, and American colonialism, we believe that reducing the complexity of Chumash responses to colonial oppression to generalized cultural ecological modeling and attributing a generic response primarily to climatic variability does an injustice to the Chumash people, both past and present. There is a general reticence among many Americans in both the scholarly community and the general public to confront the darker sides of colonialism. As a discipline, however, a decolonized anthropology can benefit from a reexamination of the history of Western colonial-

ism, its effects on Indigenous peoples around the globe, and the impacts of Western interpretations, theories, and models. Emerging trends in Indigenous methodologies within the social sciences offer viable and exciting pathways to understanding and interpreting the experiences of Native peoples. A “decolonized,” or Indigenous, anthropology recognizes that as the writers of cultures and histories, scholars have an enormous responsibility to the people that these histories affect, some of whom are living Indigenous communities. We do not fault the anthropologists working among us; rather, we ask them to consider the ramifications, for instance, of reducing the causes of the Nazi Holocaust or the killing fields of Cambodia to natural environmental change or ecological principles. How are these events different from the apocalyptic history of Western colonialism in Native North America?

NOTES

We dedicate this article to the Chumash people, past and present, who remained strong under the most difficult conditions. Me' pschumawesh. An early version of the article was presented at the Society for Ethnohistory meetings in 2001. We thank Glenn Farris for providing ethnohistorical data critical to our argument, Robert Hoover for encouraging us to publish this article, and John Johnson and anonymous reviewers for editorial comments that improved it. We are also indebted to the editors of *American Indian Quarterly* and Dr. Sonya Atalay for their assistance in the editing and production of this paper.

1. Erlandson et al, “An Archaeological and Paleontological Chronology,” 355.
2. J. Johnson et al, “Arlington Springs Revisited,” 541.
3. Walker and Hudson, *Chumash Healing*.
4. King, *Evolution of Chumash Society*.
5. Castillo, “Impact of Euro-American Exploration”; Castillo, “Native Response”; Deloria, “Research, Redskins, and Reality,” 457; Echo-Hawk, “Ancient History in the New World,” 267; Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust*.
6. Hudson and Blackburn, *Material Culture*, vols. 1 and 5; Librado, *Breath of the Sun*; Librado, *Eye of the Flute*.
7. Barton, *Tree at the Center of the World*; Older, *California Missions*; Stoddard, *In the Footprints of the Padres*.
8. Haley and Wilcoxon “Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition,” 761; Wilcoxon et al, “An Evaluation.”
9. Coombs, “Migration and Adaptation”; Coombs and Plog, “Conversion of

the Chumash,” 309; Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, “Missionization among the Coastal Chumash,” 263.

10. Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, “Missionization among the Coastal Chumash”.

11. Arnold, “Complex Hunter-Gatherer-Fishers,” 60; Arnold, *Origins of a Pacific Coast Chieftdom*; Landberg, *Chumash Indians of Southern California*; Hudson and Blackburn, *Material Culture*, vols. 1 and 5.

12. Timbrook, “Chumash Ethnobotany,” 141; Timbrook, Johnson, and Earle, “Vegetation Burning by the Chumash,” 163.

13. Brown, *Aboriginal Population*; King, *Evolution of Chumash Society*.

14. Walker and Hudson, *Chumash Healing*; Walker and Johnson, “Effects of Contact”; Erlandson and Bartoy “Cabrillo,” 153; Erlandson et al, “Dates, Demography, and Disease,” 11; Preston, “Serpent in Eden,” 2.

15. Broughton, *Resource Depression*; Preston, “Portents of Plague,” 69.

16. Erlandson, Rick, and Vellanoweth, “Human Impacts,” 51.

17. Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, “Missionization among the Coastal Chumash,” 263.

18. Kennett and Ingram, “20,000 Year Record”; see also Kennett and Kennett, “Competitive and Cooperative Responses.” Piasis, “Paleo-Oceanography,” 366.

19. See Arnold, “Complex Hunter Gatherer-Fishers”; Arnold, Colten, and Pletka, “Contexts of Cultural Change”; Colten, “Prehistoric Subsistence”; Glassow, Wilcoxon, and Erlandson, “Cultural and Environmental Change”; Kennett, “Behavioral Ecology.”

20. Farris, “Reyes Rancho,” 177; Erlandson and Dartt, “Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Kashtayit.”

21. J. Johnson, “Chumash Social Organization,” 134.

22. Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, “Missionization among the Coastal Chumash,” 281.

23. D. Johnson, “Landscape Evolution”; D. Johnson “Episodic Vegetation Stripping.”

24. J. Johnson, “Chumash Social Organization.”

25. Walker and Hudson, *Chumash Healing*.

26. Walker and Hudson, *Chumash Healing*.

27. Walker and Hudson, *Chumash Healing*, 28.

28. J. Johnson, “Chumash Social Organization,” 133–35.

29. Castillo, “Native Response.”

30. Sandos, “Christianization among the Chumash.”

31. Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, “Missionization among the Coastal Chumash.”

32. Gibson, *The Chumash*, 76.

33. J. Johnson, "Chumash Social Organization."
34. Coombs and Plog, "Conversion of the Chumash."
35. Larson, Johnson, and Michaelson, "Missionization among the Coastal Chumash," 263.

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