

Acculturation and Inequality in Power Among the Native Groups of Baja California

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Abstract

There is a general image that has endured up to our own time and that has permeated even our contemporary viewpoint. It is that the Yumans (the Paipai, Kiliwa, Cocopa, and Kumeyaay) are fragile figures who have not possessed and do not possess any capacity for response, resistance, or creativity, and that they are only there to be swept aside or to be saved. An attempt is made to show that through the concepts of acculturation and inequality in power we can recover evidence of the survival strategies these native peoples have used since ancestral times and continue to use to maintain themselves physically and culturally in confronting the natural environment, explorers, missionaries, soldiers, ranchers, filibusters, miners and prospectors, colonizers and land speculators, cattlemen and ejidatarios, and even public officials.

The shaping of the identities of societies has always been characterized by the so-called “winners’ perspective,” even though the victories involved may be pyrrhic ones. In the case of Baja California, the process started with immigrants who arrived in force in this territory, in particular beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, and who were concentrated in the new settlements of Ensenada, Tijuana, and Mexicali (Canales Cerón 1995:6). This contributed to a regional identity based upon a supposedly urban origin, and accordingly there was an effort to define foundation dates for these cities.

These circumstances stimulated a belief that there was nothing worth keeping from rural life and from the periods prior to the founding of the cities. Everything else was prehistory, in a negative sense: “...humanity is cities; humanity is cultivated fields and all the works and achievements of settled man...farther back...lies the land of nobody, where swineherds, cowboys,

foragers, charcoal makers, and a collection outlaws roam around, all of them nomads, essentially savage men...” (Dupeyron 1996:17).

The historical stages when there were nomadic Indians, when there were missionaries, soldiers, and Indians, and when there were ranchers and Indians, were either forgotten or considered unimportant as precursors to the historic fact of the emergence of urban society in Baja California. The later society was always oriented toward the Old World, and for that reason, it was thought to lack any past that was rural, illiterate, and “poor.” Everything that was prior to or outside of “civilization” was discounted or ignored, and was believed to have contributed nothing to present-day society. The principal objects of this amnesia were the native groups and their strategies for survival (Magaña Mancillas 1997, 1999a, n.d.). As Falcón (2002:14) has pointed out, “the inhabitants of the American world have been condemned as inferior and incapable to being compared with Western ‘civilization,’ the only thing worthy of emulation.”

From this perspective, it was established that Western penetration into the peninsula by means of the missions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had “put an end to” the peninsular native peoples. The latter were static entities incapable of resisting the Western onslaught. For example, Río (1998:204-205) notes, “Given that what was established was a system of social relations of dominance, in which the Indians constituted the subordinated social sector, either to accept or to reject the foreign culture was not a choice

that the native groups could make for themselves or that could result purely from their own initiative.”

It has been supposed that the native groups, particularly in the area of Jesuit influence, were subjugated and eliminated by mission action, without the Indians having had the least capacity for devising means of adapting themselves to the new circumstances. This view is summed up in a magisterial manner by Lemoine Villacaña (1959:621): “...the Californians, truly in need, could not, or did not want to, or were not allowed to take their seats at the banquet of imported prosperity; they scarcely tasted the blessings of the wheat culture, but instead persisted to the end with their own cactus culture, into which they had been born and within which they would have to die.”

The process of acculturation has been presupposed to be a collision between two cultures incapable of flexibility or exchange, in which one of them had to disappear completely when confronted by the other, dominant group, which in its turn did not suffer, and did not deserve to suffer, any change: “It cannot be said that the Jesuit program of cultural change had any equally coherent and viable counterpart on the side of the native population that might, with difficulty, have come to possess its own objectives, completely different from those of the dominant group: such were not...organized resistance to domination and preservation of the integrity of the indigenous cultural traditions” (Río 1998:204-205). But are these not part of a “coherent and viable” native “program” for maintaining an identity in confronting the other? Certainly there are no thoughtful writings about this strategy by the peninsular peoples, as there are from the missionaries, but that does not exclude the possibility that the ideas were present and were transmitted orally.

For her part, Rosa Elba Rodríguez Tomp (1997:69) believes that the position taken by various scholars has a strongly ethnocentric character. Concerning what she calls the “thesis of cultural subjugation,” she

points out that “in analyzing what occurred between the natives and the missionaries during the colonial period, an ethnocentric focus is frequently used that tends to consider the culture of the former as so poor and so fragile that they immediately let themselves be seduced by the imposed cultural elements and irrevocably converted themselves into mission Indians; or indeed they quickly died out as distinct groups when faced by the trauma produced by the arrival and settlement of the foreigners.”

Accordingly, it would be “a mistake to think of mission activity as a sudden and overwhelming phenomenon that affected the entire territory of the Baja California hunter-gatherers immediately and uniformly” (Rodríguez Tomp 1997:71). Nonetheless, this is the view that has persisted up to our own time and that has permeated even our contemporary perspective: that the Yumans (the Paipai, Kiliwa, Cocopa, and Kumeyaay) are fragile figures who have no capacity to respond, to resist, or to innovate, and they are there only to be swept aside or to be saved.

However, I believe that the concepts of acculturation and inequality of power can help us to recover the survival strategies used by the different Yuman groups since ancestral times to maintain themselves physically and culturally in confronting the natural environment, explorers, missionaries, soldiers, ranchers, filibusters, miners and prospectors, colonizers and land speculators, cattlemen and ejidatarios, and even public officials.

Going back to what was written by Río, it is evident that in a “system of social relations of domination,” one of the parts is played by the dominant power. That is, an asymmetry exists with respect to power. Harmony and proportionality between the parties to the relationship has been upset in favor of one of the social groups; in our case, in favor of the Western group (Abbagnano 1995:1073). This is a general phenomenon with American Indians: “The historical develop-

ment of the Indians of Mexico was shaped since the conquest by unequal relations of power that arose, first of all, from colonial domination, and after independence, from the republican institutions that subordinated communities to class relationships and to the interests of the State, which largely revolved around property” (Radding 1993:268). Nonetheless, this does not imply that those who were dominated did not possess a certain degree of social power. The “ability to influence action or social change... differs greatly from individual to individual, but it is not entirely lacking in anyone, however humble or insignificant” (Fairchild 1992:227). Accordingly, native peoples may have been able to establish survival strategies permitting them to adapt to the new circumstances, and even to play a role in them, once we take as a starting point “the notion... that there exists a degree of autonomy for dominated individuals, groups, and communities [through which they sought], to the extent that they could, to create a niche for themselves within the power structure” (Falcón 2002:20).

There are reports and documents showing that the historic Yumans had forms of resistance going beyond theft, murder, or flight, and it is important to “consider their defensive mechanisms, which went from disputes over symbols and morality to rebellions of great courage and depth” (Falcón 2002:19). The refuge areas east of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir and the Sierra Juárez were facts that greatly shaped the very existence of the “Dominican mission frontier” (Meigs 1935).

With the decline of the Dominican missions, the inequality in power was adjusted in light of the defenselessness of the frontier ranching families, who even came to be criticized for having lost their “civilized” context and for moving closer to the native culture (Magaña Mancillas 1998, 1999b). This situation began to be reversed with the continually increasing presence of the Mexican state acting through the peninsular authorities, from the military Colony of the

Frontier Region of Baja California, which negotiated with and rewarded the native captains, to the political leadership of the Northern District, which ignored and subjugated them (Magaña Mancillas 1999c).

Acculturation goes hand-in-hand with inequality in power. At the outset, when the inequality in power is less disputed, it would seem that cultural exchange is advantageous to both parties. In contrast, when the dominance of the Western group is very strong, the loss of traditional cultural norms is greater for the native group and the use of such knowledge by the Westerners is minimal. This limited the ability of progressively more westernized Yumans to adopt strategies for cultural survival.

Thus, confronted by Dominican missionaries and soldiers, the historic Yumans possessed several successful mechanisms, ranging from confrontation to deception. On the other hand, with the ranchers the situation provided them with a rich cultural exchange owing to the latter’s weak position as a dominant group. However, with the strengthening of the Mexican state’s presence in Baja California, the dominant group was progressively less disposed to tolerate the historical and contemporary Yuman peoples, culminating in the policies of homogenization and intolerance of the state after the Mexican Revolution.

In recent years a new area of virtual refuge has been opened up in the reservations of southern California and Arizona. Confronted by governmental institutions immersed in the “demand culture” that orients the entire bureaucratic mode of operation, the flexibility and effectiveness of the economic aid received from U.S. native groups, both in substance and in morale, has made it possible for the Yumans to break out of that vicious circle.

Confronted by a state that considers itself dominant and the keeper of national truth as heir to the nineteenth century liberal movement (Hernández Silva

1997:189), the Yumans are escaping to their new refuge. Just as the mountains were impassible frontiers for the soldiers and missionaries who were pursuing “runaway” and “criminal” Indians, the dividing line between Mexico and the United States is being converted into a real and effective hope for resistance.

This situation, which appears to be unprecedented, is in reality a new adaptation by the groups belonging to the Yuman tradition, based on their ancestral strategy of mobility, first physical, then cultural, and now economic. The Yumans of Baja California have been able to reunite themselves and recover the dignity of being natives, with self-confidence in confronting the Mexican state that is homogenizing and intolerant despite its rhetoric, with multiple possibilities for development, and with the redemption, by themselves and with help, of their past and their culture.

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