The New California Mission System: Museums, Gift Shops, and Historical Archaeologists

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Introduction

Historical archaeologists are uniquely positioned to undertake the task of historical deconstruction. The archaeological record presents an important base from which historical texts may be challenged and hegemonic ideologies questioned. Archaeologists working on the Spanish California Mission system are particularly well placed to challenge the sterilized version of mission history displayed in mission museums and presented in "popular" historical texts. Unfortunately, few mission archaeologists have been interested in critically examining that "dominant story" (Keene 1986) and most have been active participants in its reproduction.

The dominant story I am referring to is embodied in the "new mission system", a physical and conceptual system whose creation has been patterned more by the needs and desires of ethnic, religious, class, and state interests, than it has been constructed through careful analysis of the historical evidence of the mission period.

The "new mission system" is materially represented in 21 mission restoration projects, all of which are on or near the original Spanish mission sites. Millions of tourists visit these sites each year. In the words of Maynard Geiger, a mission historian:

The missions of California are the cynosure of all eyes. Millions of people from all over the world have visited them and continue to do so in ever increasing numbers [Geiger 1986].

Because of this popularity, the groups in control of these various projects - the Catholic church, the state, and local restoration committees (comprised almost entirely of middle to upper class whites) - hold sway over an incredible historical, educational, and ideological resource.

Perhaps because these groups control archaeological access and significant funding sources for each mission site, the great majority of mission archaeologists either adopt an "acceptable" (i.e., uncritical) version of history in their published work or stick narrowly to the production of site reports, avoiding historical analyses altogether (Bennyhoff and Elsasser 1954; Gibson 1976; Greenwood 1978; Hageman and Ewing 1980; Hoover 1985; Hoover and Costello 1985; Langenwalter and McKee 1980).

My purpose here is not to vilify the mission archaeologists but to illustrate and problematize the version of history presented in the "new mission system" so that those archaeologists who work within it, and in similar situations elsewhere, may begin to think more about the larger context within which such work is completed, and the social effects of that work.

In order to ground my critique I will focus upon one particular restoration project, Mission San Jose de Guadalupe, located in Fremont California. To begin, I will briefly
Figure 1: Exterior of the church restoration project at Mission San Jose de Guadelupe. Mission San Jose is located at 43300 Mission Blvd., Fremont, California. Photo: Sheila Tully.

explain the process by which that restoration, and the "new mission system" in general, came to be.

The Selective Destruction and Reconstruction of the California Mission System

Twenty one Franciscan missions were established in California, the first at San Diego Alcala in 1769 and the last at San Francisco Solano in 1823. In 1833, 12 years after Mexican independence from Spain, the missions were "secularized" by decree of the Mexican government.

The basic mission layout consisted of a church, a quadrangle, soldiers' barracks, Indian quarters, and outlying production structures such as tanning vats and orchard facilities. Extensive fields and irrigation projects surrounded the inner mission buildings. All that is left of that original system today, after a selective process of destruction and reconstruction, is a set of "restorations" made up almost entirely of churches and Padres' quarters.

While the process of mission destruction and restoration has been selective and ideologically patterned, it has by no means been conspiratorial. In one episode of destruction at mission Soledad several townspeople bulldozed the Indian burial grounds in order to create a parking lot for the mission church. In doing so they removed the visual evidence of the mission's most important effect upon Indian life: death. By placing greater importance in the church and simultaneously discounting the worth of the Indian remains, the restoration...
committees merely acted out their culture's system of values, as did the other restoration groups throughout the state.

Such actions have, nevertheless, had an important editorial effect on the visual text of the mission system. The local leaders and restoration committees have valued and protected those aspects of the mission system which most closely relate to their own class, ethnic, and religious interests (e.g., Padres' quarters), while destroying or neglecting those elements not considered to be part of their own heritage (e.g. Indian burial grounds and living quarters) or not compatible with their view of mission history (e.g. soldiers' barracks).

The visual text which has resulted from this editorial process therefore not only lacks the story of the Indian labor force, but the Spanish military element as well, leaving only the Padres to greet the millions of people who visit the "new mission system" each year.

A Subverted Tour of Mission San Jose de Guadalupe

The most detailed illustration of "new mission system" ideology is found within the restoration projects' museums. I will focus upon one such museum, that of Mission San Jose de Guadalupe, a restoration project which is intermediate in size and complexity.

A visit to Mission San Jose starts with a "self-guided" tour, aided by a series of handouts, written explanations, and signs. Of course, such aids and controls never exist completely unopposed. If you listen closely you will hear a woman in the next room proclaim, "that ain't where the old church used to be!"
The most involved part of the tour is a 20 minute slide show entitled, The Mission Bells Shall Ring Again. It was produced by the Catholic Diocese of Oakland in conjunction with Mission San Jose's local restoration committee.

The narrator begins by explaining that the missions are part of "our heritage" and for that reason deserve our attention. He further explains that the Franciscan mission system was "the first educational system on the West Coast" and the first agent of "cultural change", as if the various peoples who occupied California throughout millennia were locked into a state of cultural immutability, waiting patiently for those experts of "culture change," to show up and "educate" them.

Expanding upon the first educational system theme, the narrator next labels the missions "industrial schools." Of all the common analogues to which an American audience might relate: farm, ranch, prison, plantation, etc., it is significant that the authors of the presentation have chosen the "vocational school" to serve as the model, a model which places Spanish/Indian relations into a teacher/student paradigm rather than that of captor/slave, management/labor or any of other numerous possibilities. This "benevolent mentor" paradigm remains the dominant theme for the entire tour.

Next, it is explained that we "must examine important persons and events." The first and most important person is Junipero Serra. The event we are presented is the founding of Mission San Diego, the first in the Alta California (present day California) chain. Serra is shown standing in a Christ-like pose in the center of the screen while the awed Indians crouch at the periphery, passively accepting their new father figure. The narrator describes the Indians using terms normally reserved for children.

Of course, no mention is made of the Indian attack on the fledgling Mission San Diego in 1775 or of the revolt six years later in which a Friar was killed by the resisting Indians (Fogel 1988:51,62-69). Even events which occurred at Mission San Jose de Guadalupe itself are omitted, such as the story of Sergeant Amador capturing eighty runaways and nine "pagans"; or another account in which the Spanish massacred eleven Indians and captured thirty others; or another in which 1000 Indians were killed after a running battle, an episode during which, "those not killed outright [in battle] were hung without further ceremony" (Wright 1950:65-66). Obviously, such an admission of conflict would subvert the basic claim of the new mission presentation: that the Indians sanctioned their own subordination as willing catechists and hungry students.

The slide presentation goes on to explain that the Mission San Jose church, built in 1809, was a gift from the church hierarchy to the Ohlone Indians. Those conscripted to build the church and forced to worship within its walls are in this way represented not as builders, conscripts, or slaves but as beneficiaries.

The next image is that of Padre Duran organizing the Indians' "natural" musical talents. His role is explained as that of music teacher, continuing within the teacher/student paradigm.

Following this brief introduction to Spanish/Indian "contact" the slide show begins its ascent into more audience-relevant images. Who better than the archetypical American frontiersman, Jedediah Smith, to provide that segue. Jedediah visits the mission, providing us with a visual and aural image of healthy Spanish/American relations.

This is in stark contrast to an earlier scene involving the Russian Fort Ross. It was explained that the Spanish, fearing loss of territory, began colonizing Alta California in earnest when Russians began exploiting some of the Northern areas for furs. Forboding music played as the fort sat under a red and darkened sky.
Figure 3: One of many plaques, monuments, and other artifacts honoring those who provided funds for the restoration project. Photo: Sheila Tully

True enough, the Russian presence was a motivating force for the Spanish, but it is interesting to note that while this international tension is presented, the significant Spanish/British, Spanish/American, American/Mexican, American/Native American, and Spanish/Indian conflicts are left out altogether. Perhaps the cold war made the Russian component acceptable fare while presentation of Spanish/American conflict, for example, would have subverted the authors' intentions of having the audience identify themselves with the Spanish.

Upon the advent of mission secularization, the Indians disappear from the slide presentation altogether as the narrator goes on to talk about the American gold rush days. The Indians' existence for the slide-show audience is therefore totally dependent upon the friendly confines of the mission.

That conspicuous disappearance is never explained, however. The Indians that were brought in, forced to live and die in the missions, as well as those few that somehow survived, simply disappear with the change of a slide. What amounts to genocide is thus conveniently deleted from "our heritage."

This conspicuous replacement of "death" with unexplained "disappearance" is a central theme in the works of the authors of the "new mission system". Geiger, for example, never explains the demise of the Chumash in his mission guide The Indians of Santa Barbara: in Paganism and Christianity, even in the concluding chapter which he aptly entitled, "The Indians Disappear" (Geiger 1986:42-43). This Chumash disappearing trick is even more interesting given that they were, according to Geiger, "the most culturally advanced" and "the
best documented" of California Indians (Geiger 1986:3). From the perspective of those in charge of maintaining the new mission doctrine, however, some things are better left unsaid.

Finally, the slide show concludes with the story of the reconstruction effort. The narrator explains that the "complete reconstruction" of Mission San Jose will include the church, the Southwest part of the quadrangle, and what they have called "connecting elements" (more of the Padres' Quarters). Once again, no evidence of Indians or soldiers to get in the way.

The Museum Exhibits

Immediately outside the screening room, one encounters a bulletin board which contains pro-Serra newspaper clippings and associated literature. One article contains an illustration of the latest painting of Padre Serra, commissioned by a pro-sanctification priest. In the painting, Padre Serra has been updated for the 1990s, sporting a full head of hair, a lean body, and a strong yet benevolent expression. The commissioner and author of the new and improved Serra were obviously aware that the stern, chubby, bald man encountered in the various historical paintings is hardly adequate for their present purposes.

The mission museum never provides a sense of the historical person of Padre Serra. The museum designers have substituted an abstract set of symbols of piety and sacrifice for historical substance. Recorded accounts of his life which are discordant with this new image, such as his work for the inquisition, are never presented (Fogel 1988:45-47; Serra 1984).

As a reminder of the the state's stake in that version of history, a state assembly resolution hangs in La Sala of mission Nuestra Senora de la Soledad. The document heaps praise upon Junipero Serra, the "father of California," for his founding and governance of the Spanish California Missions. In that role, Serra has become not only an historical subject, but the symbol of a particular present as well (Costo and Costo 1987; Fogel 1980). Like all such historical icons (flags, presidents, and wars), the image of Junipero Serra must therefore continue in such a purified state if he is to remain a powerful symbol of a contemporary power structure. The fate of the sign (Serra) and the signifier (Catholic Church and the "State" of California) are in this way intertwined. To stain one is to stain the other.

Skipping over the next few rooms, which have more to do with the Anglo history of the town of Mission San Jose than Spanish Mission or Spanish California history, we enter the room entitled "Industry". Only Spanish technologies are presented in the room, despite the fact that archaeological work at most missions has uncovered evidence of a very significant amount of Indian lithic materials and even evidence of Native Californian processing techniques in butchery and basic food production (Deetz 1963). The mission visitor here, however, is only exposed to European implements and techniques.

More importantly, the fact that it was Indian laborers that utilized these implements (often producing goods which the Padres sold or consumed) is ignored in the written explanations. A two page description of tile making, for example, only mentions the involvement of the Padres and their horses, implying that somehow this combination of forces produced the tiles, neglecting to mention that it was the Indian labor force which actually produced the mission tiles. In this way we are exposed to the technological ingenuity of the Spanish but not to the oppressive social technology which empowered the Padres and provided for their existence.

The next chamber has been designated the "Ohlone room," the sole area reserved for what are defined in the museum as "Indian artifacts." Although the Ohlone comprised 99
percent of the total mission population, artifacts associated with them occupy a mere ten percent of the museum's exhibition space. As for the presentation of the Ohlone, the conventional museological method has been utilized. The method I refer to involves placing conquered peoples, such as the Ohlone, within ahistorical museum settings, or even in natural history museums, such as is the case in the California Academy of Science's "Hall of Man." Conversely, Western colonists, who are presented as part of "our heritage," are placed in historical settings, in history museums. Although the authors of Mission San Jose had to deal with both, the historical and ahistorical, they nevertheless manage to reproduce this museological ethic of apartheid quite well. The Spanish and Indian artifacts are both spatially and historically separated within the museum. While the Spanish are placed in the historic context of the mission, the Native Americans are represented solely in a prehistoric context, thus becoming historically irrelevant.

The titles used to describe the Ohlone are instructive. In the prehistoric setting of the museum, the Ohlone are defined by their economic mode of subsistence: "hunter-gatherers." This is in contrast to the historical moments presented earlier in the slide show and in the new mission historical literature in general, in which native Americans are defined in religious, not economic terms, as "neophytes" (students of Catholicism and Spanish culture). Therefore, the labelling changes from one based upon the mode of economic subsistence to that of religious status once the boundary of history is transgressed. While this labelling system is categorically inconsistent, the topological switch allows the museologist to remain ideologically consistent. The naturalistic image of the "hunter/gatherer" (presented as an ahistorical being) is dropped in favor of the historically comprehensible and ideologically
acceptable image of the student, the "neophyte." While a term like "industrial-agricultural labor" would perhaps be more analytically consistent following the hunter/gatherer precedent, it would not fit the "vocational school" theme, the ideological framing device preferred by the "new mission system" authors. Unfortunately, archaeologists have also faithfully adopted this terminology (Hoover 1985; Hoover and Costello 1985).

Exiting the Ohlone room one enters a mock-up of the Padre's chambers. The exhibit is an 8' by 8' partition of a slightly larger room, protected by an extremely low ceiling. A bare-branch stick barrier stands between the onlookers and the exhibit. The cramped "cell" is occupied by a simple desk, books, a candle, a chest, and a water jar. The entire presentation is more akin to a prison cell than a bedroom: a powerful image of sacrifice and scholarly dedication. How easily we can envision Padre Serra limping around California on swollen limbs only to arrive at the missions to live out his austere existence (for another view see Fogel 1988:31; O'Brien 1955; Serra 1984).

As I was recording the details of the Padre's cell exhibit another onlooker told his family to take notice of the bed, a severe wooden platform with no mattress. The family members commented upon how difficult life must have been for the Padres. The loaded message, that the Padres were living under Spartan conditions, hit home for these museum visitors.

Neither here nor anywhere in the museum, however, is there a hint of the rich array of wine bottles, jars, decorative ceramics, and other personal and group items that one finds associated with the Padres' living quarters in the archaeological record (a few of the restoration projects, such as Mission Carmel, are more accurate in this regard).
The housing terminology is instructive as well. The Padres' living areas are called "cells" in the museum tour, as if the priests were imprisoned. Conversely, while the Indian living quarters go unmentioned in the Mission San Jose Museum, in most "new mission system" literature and archaeological writings the imprisoned Indians are said to have occupied "dormitories," like students off to college. Archaeologist Robert Hoover, the most influential mission archaeologist, often combines both elements of the rhetorical code discussed thus far, repeatedly referring to the "neophyte dormitory" of Mission San Antonio (Hoover and Costello 1985:1). Under the watchful eyes of the modern day Franciscans who continue to live and work at Mission San Antonio, Hoover has perhaps confused the playful reality of his yearly field school (archaeological "neophytes" living in "dormitories") with the historical reality of the conscripted Indians (interned adults, sexually segregated into narrow, cramped, disease-inducing confines).

The tour concludes in the museum gift shop, a large room filled with an array of religious relics and lined with shelves of literature faithful to the new mission story. Surprisingly, the gift shop also houses a coloring book, the content of which subverts the basic ideological tenets of the "new mission system". In reference to Mission San Jose it reads, "This inland mission, fourteenth in the chain, served as a major military base throughout most of its existence...the Indians were anything but eager to give up their way of life" (Spizzirri 1984:23; for a brief documentation of certain battles see Wright 1950). The coloring book, The California Missions, includes important aspects of mission history which the curators of the mission museum and "popular" historians conspicuously neglect in their accounts.

Omission and Commission

To summarize, the glaring omissions in the new mission history include accounts of Indian labor conscription, resistance, escape attempts, punishment, rape, and death on a grand scale (Cook 1976; Costo and Costo 1987; Fogel 1988).

Furthermore, the presence of soldiers is completely omitted from the presentation, soldiers who Junipero Serra himself claimed were so vital to the existence of the missions; who outnumbered the Padres several times over; and, who earned a reputation for rape and various other forms of brutality (Fogel 1988:58, 69).

In the new mission story, non-antagonistic role definitions like teacher/student replace others, such as master/conscript, which would connote relations of conflict. Religious aspects are emphasized and done so in such a way that the strict Franciscan methods appear more consistent with current, more benevolent religious practices and beliefs.

Conclusion

If, in this way, "our heritage" does not include the capture, imprisonment, and killing of Native Americans, perhaps "we" can be lead to believe that our present does not involve such domination either. We can walk away from the museum absolved of past crimes, cleansed of present conflict.

As is the case with most American museums, a visitor to the mission museums is not educated or challenged (or even entertained), but is simply presented with another dose of remedial history. The "new mission system" speaks in one authoritative voice, virtually
unchallenged by the dead, the powerless, or the archaeologist (Domínguez 1986; Leone 1981a, b; Leone et al. 1987; Meltzer 1981; Wallace 1981; Wylie 1985).

It is my hope that through focusing on these powerful, multi-million dollar reconstructions and museum projects, mission archaeologists will reexamine the public effects of their work. Though we have a tendency as academics to behave like cloistered monks, keeping our precious knowledge and research away from the polluting effects of the "popular" world, we nevertheless manage to have a significant effect upon that world (Fagan 1984). While few read our scholarly publications, millions are indirectly touched by our activities within more powerful systems of ideological reproduction, such as the "new mission system". Our unreflexive praxis has thus far provided artifacts, prestige, and a scientific veneer to socially irresponsible restoration projects like the one detailed above (most, if not all, mission archaeology has been dependent upon such projects: Bennyhoff and Elsasser 1954; Deetz 1963; Gibson 1976; Greenwood 1978; Hageman and Ewing 1980; Hoover 1985; Hoover and Costello 1985; Langenwalter and McKee 1980).

There are alternatives, however, to the current practice of subordinating archaeological research to the interests of power. Archaeologists could provide time and effort in the service of Californian Indian groups as well, offering academic support and solidarity (e.g. in the struggle against the sanctification of Serra), receiving their input, and inviting their participation in the archaeological process, from excavation to publication. Likewise, archaeologists can urge the museum owners to allow the presentation of more complete and pluralistic historical accounts. In this way, history and the process by which it is created can become the intellectual property of many, not just those who own and control the major historical resources.

For archaeology to have a more positive effect upon society, however, the current emphasis upon reflexive analysis must be expanded beyond problems which merely concern our theoretical toolkit. Our reflexive analyses must include a critical understanding of the larger structure of power and ideology as well; that which surrounds, supports, and penetrates our entire practice (Blakey 1983; Keene 1984; Schrire 1984). Method, theory, writing, funding sources, museums, and all other components of archaeological work must be understood in integrated terms, as individual parts of a complete professional praxis, not as separate propositions in and of themselves (Leone 1981, 1987; Blakey 1983). A humanistic science requires nothing less.

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