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The Ruins of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera (18th and 19th Centuries) in Baja California, Mexico

Ir a la versión en español

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ABSTRACT

This text is part of the results of the thesis F*iesta en La Misión, Baja California (1970-2022). Tradiciones y sentido de pertenencia en torno a vestigios misionales y practices culturales.* During the field work, semi-structured interviews were carried out during the years 2020-2021 and the observation of the Fiesta in La Misión on May 28 and 29, 2022. The results of the research allow us to identify that the vestiges of the missionary foundation of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera, are relevant to the population as a narrative resource that helps to locate the origin of the traditions and cowboy identity of the community that inhabits La Misión.

KEYWORDS,

dominican missions, heritage, identity, traditions, Baja California, vestiges of missions, cultural practices

INTRODUCTION

During the 60's and 90's of last century, the Mexican State was interested in directly influencing the strength of nationalism —believed to be inexistent at the time— throughout the northern Mexican border. Thus, in 1980, a National Instituto of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, INAH) center was established in Baja California with the intent of generating, promoting, and preserving historical and archeological knowledge related to regional heritage. In this context, the

remnants of the founding-mission complexes represent the testimony of a mixed heritage —one that is shared across the country—, which, at the same time, shall be preserved and fostered with the objective of strengthening Mexican identity within the region.

Current La Misión, northern Baja California, México, is one of the sites where the founding missions were established. Funded at the end of the 18th century, this site experienced different periods of abandonment, secularization and colonization decrees, and agrarian reforms: the land of San Miguel de Arcángel de la Frontera, which belonged to Dominican missionaries, turned into a ranch halfway through the 19th century.

Afterwards, in 1937, the missionary remnants that were used as a yard stayed within the perimeter of the newly formed *ejido*[1] of La Misión. In 1938, south of the foundations, the *ejidatarios*[2] erected the first academic construction: a classroom that, during its first years, was called *Escuela Ejidal La Misión* (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. The primary school and the ruins (Photography: Ofelia Borja, 2021; courtesy: author's personal archive).

[1] Land expropriated from large private landowners and redistributed for use as communal farmland, particularly to marginal populations.
[2] Temporary tenants of the *ejidos*; i. e., people who borrow land from the community to work temporarily.

Meanwhile, standing before the criticizing gaze of the intellectuals due to the supposed lack of national identity in Baja California, in 1979 university professor Mario Reyes compiled testimonial and historiographical sources to organize the first edition of *Fiesta en La Misión*, product of diverse and combined efforts between the academy and the civil society to identify the traditional Mexican elements of the region.

Conservation projects in the missionary ruins

The lack of materiality of the Jesuit and Dominican foundational missions in Baja California is a response to several factors: the initial abandonment by the missionaries, soldiers and native communities; the lootings during the secularization process; deterioration over time; and the unfavorable environmental conditions.

From the academic discourse, what was left of the missionary foundation of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera was classified as lost heritage. However, during the 1990s and 2000s, the projects of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) restricted the archeological site, enabled another site with historiographical information, and preserved the adobe walls (Hernández, 2022, p. 128) (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. Security measures (Photography: Ofelia Borja, 2021; courtesy: author's personal archive).

As part of the research for my doctoral thesis[3] developed during the years 2020 and 2021, a group of people living in La Misión was interviewed with the intent of asking about the importance of the missionary vestiges for the community. In one of the narrations the interviewee remembers that "we didn't destroy them, but we did hide inside of them, in the little door, in the window; but as far as to destroy them, I would say we didn't because the teacher would get mad at us, because that there was history" (Hernández, 2022, p. 149).

One of the consequences of implementing ruins conservation measures was that the locals perceived them negatively: one testimony pointed out that "before there were more, walls that were kind of bigger when they were complete [...] but they were prettier, now they're only a fraction of the wall. They aren't like before. They were natural, sort of made of adobe, and now they aren't, they are kind of plastered with a special material to keep them preserved" (Hernández, 2022, p. 131). For example, the walls of adobe were covered with a special mixture —lime, sand, and goat dung— that decays when the archeological material is wet by rain (Hernández, 2022, p. 129) (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Sacrificial cloak on top of the ruins of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera (Photography: Ofelia Borja, 2021; courtesy: author's personal archive).

La Fiesta en La Misión: an exercise in transmitting knowledge

It is important to highlight that a positive assessment of the vestiges for the local population is related to the organization of the *Fiesta en La Misión* in 1979. The testimony of one of the interviewees is evidence of this fact: "before the parties neither the *ejido* nor the

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municipal authorities paid attention to all that [...], everything else was bigger, but since nobody conserved it, it was destroyed until there was very little left" (Hernández, 2022, p. 149).

Furthermore, during the development of my doctoral thesis I observed the celebration that took place in May, 2022. *La Fiesta* is, in first place, a communal proposal in which the phases of the history of La Misión are represented: the presence of the native *Kumiai*, the establishment of the foundational Dominican mission, and the creation of ranches and *ejidos*.

In second place, it is an annual —takes place during May's last weekend— *mis-en-place* of simultaneous artistic, civic, and sportive activities highlighting the cowboy affiliation of the locals. During these days, the inhabitants of different municipalities of Baja California and southern California (USA) can visit the archeological site free of any charge.

In the context of the *Fiesta*, the missionary ruins turn into a mnemonic resource embodying the emergence of La Misión actual settlement. One of the activities that recreates that period is *cabalgata histórica* (historic ride), whose leader is dressed in garments specially made for the occasion. On the other hand, a group of cowboys enters the rodeo arena carrying banners representative of the community cowboy families. At the same time, the master of ceremonies narrates historical events regarding the evangelization of the Californias during the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the coming of the indigenous, missionary, and militant communities for the founding of the San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera mission (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. Historic ride (Photography: Alexa Macías, 2022; courtesy: author's personal archive).

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The vestiges also help to trace back to New Spain the origin of the cowboy traditions in today's community. One of the testimonies says that "all the history, tradition, memories; everything is based on that. The cowboy tradition as a whole, everything starts there; all the cowboy-things, the food, the dance" (Hernández, 2022, p. 141).

CONCLUSIONS

Those living in La Misión have a relationship with Dominican ruins through their use as a mnemonic resource in the construction of a chronological narrative of the space they live in. These vestiges have acquired importance as their historical and cultural values have been progressively integrated in a wider margin of knowledge construction, transmission, and appropriation exercises; all within the context of a shared past, which is important to understand the present.

REFERENCES

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