

**INTRODUCTORY ESSAY****Native American Resilience and Colonial Missions in California**

**Tsim D. Schneider**  
Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria  
University of California, Santa Cruz

I am a tribal citizen of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, a federally recognized tribe composed of Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok people from Sonoma and Marin Counties in Northern California. Our ancestors survived consecutive periods of colonial intrusion, including violence and threats to our culture from soldiers, settlers, and missionaries from Spain between 1769 and the 1830s. My community also carries the weight of these past violations as we revitalize our cultural traditions, two distinct languages, and relationships to our homelands and watersheds. Our complex experiences of struggle and survival are absent from the romantic view of California missions—consisting of white-washed adobe walls, gardens, fountains, bell towers, and a tile-roofed chapel—reinforced by public art (murals and statues), mission-bell highway markers, mission-inspired architecture, and places and streets named after mission padres and other prominent colonizers.

Native Americans are sometimes featured in this simplistic portrayal of mission history, but usually as a docile workforce or victims of colonial power never to be seen or heard from again. In truth, Spain's claim to California depended on the recruitment of Native children and adults whom padres sought to control through religious conversion and restrictive work routines. Native peoples built the missions. They also sustained the missions by toiling daily in workshops, kitchens, mills, fields, and ranches. In return, missions threatened traditional work routines organized around the seasons and skilled cultural knowledge. They also tore Native families and communities apart as scores of elders, parents, and children died from exposure to infectious diseases that circulated widely and quickly within the cramped confines of mission buildings. In a matter of six decades, malnutrition, high rates of infant mortality, forced confinement, brutal punishments, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse fractured lifeways in existence for at least 14,000 years.



The decimation of tribal cultures can be gleaned from the reports, letters, and lists of Native baptisms and deaths created by missionaries. Tribes throughout California buckled as upwards of 70,000 people lost their lives during the mission era. Approximately 2,800 of our Coast Miwok ancestors were baptized at four San Francisco Bay area missions. Three-quarters of them died from diseases and harmful living and working conditions. Grim statistics like this have led some anthropologists and historians to falsely conclude that many tribes, including my own, vanished. This type of focus on the total number of deaths can fail to capture the depth of despair California Native Americans experienced, as well as their survival and resilience in spite of this horrific loss of life.

As you'll see in this lesson, tribal cultural knowledge, new information from archaeology, and archival research are helping to retell the story of missions from a Native point of view. For instance, information collected during interviews with a Coast Miwok woman named Maria Copa in the 1930s helps us understand her family's experiences at three different missions, each of them with cemeteries that, to this day, contain the bodies of an unknown number of Coast Miwok ancestors. Indigenous cultural knowledge shared with Maria Copa survived the missions despite the efforts of missionaries to erase it, and the traditional tribal knowledge of Maria Copa and others is helping tribal citizens today with our ongoing cultural preservation and revitalization efforts. What I find especially compelling is Maria Copa's extensive knowledge of the Coast Miwok language, vocabulary, mythology, cuisine, dances, songs, societal norms and taboos, craft production, politics, and more.<sup>1</sup>

As an archaeologist and Graton Rancheria citizen, I combine cultural knowledge and archaeological evidence to further reveal how California Native Americans persevered. Mission padres and soldiers demanded through force that tribes abandon their homes, languages, and cultural traditions, but my research allows me to see how Native people, including my own ancestors, adjusted to new circumstances while continuing to practice their culture. For example, Native people continued to collect and consume traditional foods. In doing so, they maintained a connection to the land despite attempts by the church and military to make them dependent on nontraditional foods, such as beef and wheat. Native people at missions attended mass, but they organized sacred dances and remained connected to home, including the plants, animals, and other resources, as seen in the continued use

---

1. Mary E.T. Collier and Sylvia B. Thalman, eds., *Interviews with Tom Smith and Maria Copa: Isabel Kelly's Ethnographic Notes on the Coast Miwok Indians of Marin and Southern Sonoma Counties, California*, Miwok Archaeological Preserve of Marin Occasional Paper, no. 6 (San Rafael, CA: Miwok Archaeological Preserve of Marin, 1996).



of ceremonial feather regalia, bone and wood instruments, and shell ornaments. Metal tools, bottle glass, and pottery could be accessed at missions; yet Native peoples also made and used finely woven baskets and stone tools for particular jobs. California Indians resisted the assault on their existence in multiple ways, including organized revolts. Thousands fled the missions. Others were granted permission periodically to leave them, and time spent away from missions presented opportunities to hunt, gather, mourn, host dances, give birth, and heal. Archaeological evidence reflects these and other forms of resilient tribal cultural and ecological knowledge that was still valued and accessed beyond mission walls. Unlike the version of mission history that concludes with the violent destruction of California Native Americans, a more truthful history told by the survivors balances loss against powerful examples of populated homelands and survival.

For years, one perspective dominated how we know and understand California missions. That perspective prioritized brutality, confinement, and cultural loss instead of the active decision-making of Native peoples who survived to share the story of their resilience with their children. Our ancestors made difficult choices, and whether they were forcefully taken to a mission or chose to make the trip, they did not surrender their tribal knowledge when they crossed through the door of a mission. The complexities of Native peoples' experiences during and after the mission period require us to think about life beyond the bells, white-washed walls, tile roofs, and the statues of colonizers that for too long have dominated California history. Moving past this Eurocentric version of history to a more truthful understanding of California missions helps us better appreciate the real experiences of those who lived at that time and the consequences for their descendants today.