“Sexuality in California’s Missions: Cultural Perceptions of Historical Realities”, by Albert Hurtado

Questions to think about:

1. Compare Native Californian and Spanish attitudes towards
   a. men’s and women’s roles in society
   b. marriage
   c. sex
2. What misunderstandings occurred between Native Californians and the Spanish?
3. What aspects of native Californian society did the Spanish missionaries think needed reforming? What happened when the Spanish missionaries tried to reform them?
4. What events led up to the attack on Mission San Diego by the Kumeyaays in 1775?
5. Under what circumstances did Native Americans in Old California convert to Christianity?

(Chapter 1 of Hurtado’s book *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* [Albuquerque, NM, 1999], pp. 1–19 and 145–49.)

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At one of these Indian villages near this mission of San Diego the gentiles therein many times have been on the point of coming here to kill us all, [because] some soldiers went there and raped their women, and other soldiers who were carrying mail to Monterey turned their animals into their fields and they ate up their crops. Three other Indian villages about a league or a league and a half from here have reported the same thing to me several times. For this reason on several occasions when Father Francisco Dumetz or I have gone to see these Indian villages, as soon as they saw us they fled from their villages and fled to the woods or other remote places, and the only ones who remained in the village were some men and some very old women. The Christians here have told me that many of the gentiles of the aforesaid villages leave their haunts and the crops which they gather from the lands around their villages, and go to the woods and experience hunger. They do this so the soldiers will not rape their women as they have already done so many times in the past.¹

_Father Luis JAYME, 1772_

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Before Father Junípero Serra founded California’s Franciscan missions, he led a religious revival in Mexico’s Oaxaca region. Francisco Palóu, Serra’s companion and biographer, approvingly reported that Serra’s religious work produced concrete results. He reformed an adulteress who at the tender age of fourteen had begun to cohabit with a married man whose wife lived in Spain. This sinful arrangement had lasted for fourteen years, but on Serra’s order she left the house of her lover. The man was desolate. He threatened and begged, but to no avail. Then “one night in desperation,” Palóu related, “he got a halter, took it with him to the house where she was
staying, and hung himself on an iron gate, giving over his soul to the
demons.” At the same moment a great earthquake shook the town, whose
inhabitants trembled with fear. Thereafter, the woman donned haircloth
and penitential garb and walked the streets begging forgiveness for her
shameful past. “All were edified and touched at seeing such an unusual
conversion and subsequent penance,” the friar wrote. “Nor were they less
fearful of divine Justice,” he added, “recalling the chastisement of that
unfortunate man.” Thus, Palou believed, the tragedy brought “innumera-
able conversions . . . and great spiritual fruit” to Serra’s Oaxaca mission.

This story was a kind of parable that prefaced Palou’s glowing account of
Serra’s missionary work in California. It demonstrated not only the pres-
ence of sexual sin in Spain’s American colonies—which is not especially
surprising—but that priestly intervention could break perverse habits, and
that public exposure and sincere repentance could save souls. This incident
is especially important because Palou linked Serra’s Mexican missionary
impact with the rectification of sexual behavior on the eve of his expedi-
tion to California. Thus, a discussion of sexuality in the California missions
is not merely a prurient exercise, but goes to the heart of missionaries’
intentions. While errant sexuality was not the only concern of priests, the
reformation of Indian sexual behavior was an important part of their en-
deavor to Christianize and Hispanicize native Californians. Their task was
fraught with difficulty, peril, and tragedy for Indians and Spaniards alike.

Native people, of course, already behaved according to sexual norms
that, from their point of view, worked perfectly well. From north of San
Francisco Bay to the present Mexican border, tribes regulated sexual life so
as to promote productive family relationships that varied by tribe and lo-
ality. Everywhere the conjugal couple and their children formed a basic
household unit, sometimes augmented by aged relatives and unmarried
siblings. Indian families, however, were not merely a series of nuclear units,
but were knit into sets of associations that comprised native society. Kinship
defined the individual’s place within the cultural community, and family
associations suffused every aspect of life.

Indian marriages usually occurred within economic and social ranks and
and tended to stabilize economic and power relationships. Chiefs (who were
occasionally women) were usually from wealthy families and inherited their
positions. Since secure links with other groups provided insurance against
occasional food shortages, chiefs frequently married several elite women
from other ranterias (a Spanish term for small Indian communities). Dip-
lopolynym provided kinship links that maintained prosperity and
limited warfare that could result from poaching or blood feuds. In the event
of war, kinship considerations helped to determine who would be attacked,
as well as the duration and intensity of conflict.

Given the significance and intricacy of kinship, marriage was an ex-
tremely important institution, governed according to strict rules. Parents
or respected ranchera elders often arranged marriages of young people and
even infants. California Indians regarded incest—defined according to
strict consanguinal and affinal rules—as a bar that prohibited marriage if a
couple was related within three to five generations, depending on tribal
affiliation. Consequently, men had to look for eligible wives outside their
tribelet. Since most groups had patrilocal/residence customs, women usu-
ally left their home communities, thus strengthening the system of reci-
procity that girded native California.

The bride price symbolized women’s place in this scheme. The groom
gave his parents-in-law a gift to recognize the status of the bride’s family,
demonstrate the groom’s worth, and compensate her family for the loss of
her labor. The bride price did not signify that the wife was a chattel. No
husband could sell his spouse, and an unhappy wife could divorce her
husband. Even so, men were considered to be family heads, descent was
usually through the male line, and residence in the groom’s rancheria.

California’s native household economy was based on hunting and gather-
ing according to a sexual division of labor. Men hunted and fished, and—
after the advent of white settlement—raided livestock herds. Women gath-
ered the plant foods that comprised the bulk of the Indian diet—acorns,
seeds, roots, pine nuts, berries, and other staples. All California tribes
prized hardworking, productive women. Women’s material and subsis-
tence production was of basic importance to Indian society, but they made
another crucial contribution as well—they bore children, thus creating the
human resources needed to sustain native communities. When populations
suffered significant reductions, the lack of fertile women meant that the
capacity to recover was limited.

Re-creating the sexual behavior of any people is a difficult task, but it is
especially difficult in societies that lacked a written record. Still, modern
anthropology and historical testimony make possible a plausible—if par-
tial—reconstruction of intimate native life. California Indians regulated
sexual behavior in and out of marriage. Premarital sex does not seem to
have been regarded as a matter of great importance, so virginity was not a
precondition in a respectable mate. After marriage spouses expected fidelity
from their husbands and wives, possibly because of the importance of status
inheritance. Consequently, adultery was a legitimate cause for divorce and
husbands could sometimes exact other punishments for the sexual mis-
behavior of their wives. Chumash husbands sometimes whipped errant wives. An Esselin man could repudiate his wandering wife, or turn her over to her new lover who had to pay the cuckold an indemnity, usually the cost of acquiring a new bride. Wronged Gabrieleno husbands could retaliate by claiming the wife of his wife's lover, and could even go so far as to kill an adulterous spouse, but such executions were probably rare.

Women were not altogether at the mercy of jealous and sadistic spouses, for they could divorce husbands who mistreated them, a circumstance that probably meant they could leave if their husband committed a sexual indiscretion. In Chumash oral narratives, women often initiated sex and ridiculed inadequate partners. Some women even killed their husbands. It is impossible to know how frequently adulterous liaisons and subsequent divorces took place, but anthropologists characterize the common Gabrieleno marital pattern as serial monogamy with occasional polygyny, indicating that separations were common. It is not unreasonable to suppose that because so many marriages were arranged in youth some California Indians subsequently took lovers after meeting someone who struck deeper emotional chords than their initial partners had. Nor is it implausible to speculate that some grievances were overlooked completely in the interest of maintaining family harmony and keeping intact the economic and diplomatic advantages that marriage ties were meant to bind. Prostitution was extremely rare in California, and was noted only among the Salinan Indians before the arrival of the Spanish. The lack of a flesh trade may indicate that such outlets were simply not needed because marital, premarital, and extramarital associations provided sufficient sexual opportunities.

There was one other sexual practice common among California Indians — male homosexual transvestism, or the so-called berdache tradition which was evident in many North American tribes. The berdache dressed and acted like women, but they were not thought of as homosexuals. Instead, Indians believed that they belonged to a third gender that combined both male and female aspects. In sex they took the female role, and they were married men who were regarded as perfectly ordinary heterosexual males. Sometimes a chief took a berdache for a second wife because it was believed that they worked harder. Moreover, the berdache were thought to have special spiritual gifts that made them especially attractive spouses.

Serra and the secular colonizers of Spain's northern frontier based their familial concepts on a narrower Spanish model that was in some respects contradictory. The state regarded marriage as a contract that — among other things — transferred property and guaranteed rights to sexual service.

On the other hand, the church regarded marriage as a sacrament before God and sought to regulate alliances according to religious principles.

In theory, although not always in practice, Spanish society forbade premarital sex and required marital fidelity. Marriages were monogamous and lasted for life; the church granted divorces only in the most extraordinary cases, although remarriage of widows and widowers was permitted. The church regarded all sexual transgressions with a jaundiced eye, but held some acts in special horror. By medieval times Christian theologians had worked out a scheme of acceptable sexual behavior that also reflected their abhorrence of certain practices. Of course, fornication, adultery, incest, seduction, rape, and polygamy were sins, but far worse than any of these were the execrable sins “against nature,” which included masturbation, bestiality, and homosexual copulation. The church allowed marital intercourse only in the missionary position; other postures were unnatural because they made the woman superior to her husband, thus thwarting God's universal plan. Procreation, not pleasure, was God's purpose in creating the human sexual apparatus in the first place. Therefore, to misuse the instruments of man’s procreative destiny was to subvert the will of God. Medieval constraints on intimate behavior began to erode in the early modern period, but Catholic proscriptions against what the church defined as unnatural sexual behavior remained a part of canon law when Spain occupied California.

This was the formal sexual ideology that Franciscans, soldiers, and pobladores brought to California. They also brought sinful lust. Maintaining sexual orthodoxy in the remotest reaches of the empire proved to be a greater task than Franciscan missionaries and secular officials could accomplish. Spaniards also brought to California an informal sexual ideology rooted in Mediterranean folkways that often ran counter to the teachings of the church. In this informal scheme, honor was an important element in determining family and individual social ranking and male status was linked to sexual prowess. To seduce a woman was to shame her and to dishonor her family while her consort acquired honor and asserted his dominant place in the social hierarchy. Women were thought to be sexually powerful creatures who could lead men astray, and more importantly, dishonor their own families. Society controlled female sexual power by segregating women, sometimes going so far as to sequester them behind locked doors to assure that they would not sully the family escutcheon with lewd conduct. Catholic priests labored to restrict sexual activity in a world of philanders, concubines, prostitutes, and lovers.
Thus California’s Spanish colonizers brought with them formal and informal ideas about sexuality that were riven with contradictions. The conquest of the New World and its alien sexual conventions made the situation even more complicated, but did not keep Spaniards from intimate encounters with native people. From the time of Cortés the crown and the church encouraged intermarriage with native people, and informal sexual amalgamation occurred with great regularity. Throughout the empire inter racial sex resulted in a large mixed-race, mestizo population. Ordinarily, the progeny of these meetings attached themselves firmly to the religion and society of their Spanish fathers. Thus, sexual amalgamation was an integral part of the Spanish colonial experience that served to disable native society and strengthen the Hispanic population as it drew Indians and their children into the colonial orbit. This was the world that Serra had tried to reform in Oaxaca; it was a world that he and fellow Spaniards would unwittingly replicate in California.

In 1775 Father Serra wrote thoughtfully to the viceroy of New Spain about interracial marriages in California. Three Catalán soldiers had already married neophyte women and three more were “making up their minds to marry soon.” Serra approved of new Spanish regulations that subsidized such marriages with a seaman’s salary for two years, and provided rations for the mixed-race couple for five years. Such families should be attached permanently to the wife’s mission and receive some livestock and a piece of land from the royal patrimony, provided the husband had “nothing else to fall back upon.” To Father Serra, these marriages symbolized the foundation of Spanish society. The new families formed “the beginnings of a town” because all the families lived in “houses so placed as to form two streets.”

The little town of Monterey, Serra observed, also included the mission buildings and “all together make up a square of their own, in front of our little residence and church.” Happily, children were already beginning to appear in Monterey, thus assuring that the community would have a future.

Serra’s idealistic vision of colonization incorporated Spanish town building and Catholic marriages that tamed the sinful natures of Spaniards and Indians and harnessed them to Spanish imperial goals. If he could have had his way, the only sexual activity in California would have occurred in the few sanctified marriage beds that were under the watchful eye of the friars. But that was not to be.

Serra recognized that Spanish and Indian sexual transgressions occurred, and they troubled him. Common Indian sexual behavior amounted to serious sins that merited the friars’ solemn condemnation. Perhaps the worst cases were the berdache, who seemed ubiquitous in California. Their so-called sins against nature challenged religious and military leaders alike. While Serra extolled the virtues of marriages, Captain Pedro Fages, in 1775, reported that Chumash Indians were “addicted to the unspeakable vice of sinning against nature,” and that each ranchería had a transvestite “for common use.” Fages, reflecting Spanish and Catholic values, apologized for even mentioning homosexuality because it was “an excess so criminal that it seems even forbidden to speak its name.” The missionary Pedro Font observed “sodomites addicted to nefarious practices” among the Yuma and concluded that “there will be much to do when the Holy Faith and the Christian religion are established among them.”

Civil and church officials agreed on the need to eradicate homosexuality as an affront to God and Spanish men alike. At the Mission Santa Clara the fathers noticed an unconverted Indian who, though dressed like a woman and working among women, seemed to have undeveloped breasts, an observation that was made easier because Indian women traditionally wore only necklaces above the waist. The curious friars conspired with the corporal of the guard to take this questionable person into custody, where he was completely disrobed confirming that he was indeed a man. The poor fellow was “more embarrassed than if he had been a woman,” said one friar. For three days the soldiers kept him nude — stripped of his sexual identity — and made him sweep the plaza near the guardhouse. He remained “sad and ashamed” until he was released under orders to abjure feminine clothes and stay out of women’s company. Instead, he fled from the mission and reestablished a berdache identity among gentiles.

The Spanish soldiers thoroughly misconstrued what they were seeing and what they had done. The soldiers no doubt thought they had exposed an impostor who was embarrassed because his ruse had been discovered. They did not realize that their captive — and his people — regarded himself as a woman and reacted accordingly when stripped and tormented by men.

Humiliated beyond endurance and required to renounce a sexual orientation that had never raised an eyebrow in Indian society, the Santa Clara transvestite was forced to flee, but perhaps he was more fortunate than he knew. Father Francisco Palou reported a similar incident at the Mission San Antonio, where a berdache and another man were discovered “in an unspeakably sinful act.” A priest, a corporal, and a soldier “punished them,” Palou revealed, “although not as much as they deserved.” When the horrified priest tried to explain how terrible this sin was, the puzzled Indians told him that it was all right because they were married. Palou’s reaction to this news was not recorded, but it is doubtful that he accepted it.
probably produce more children than her older counterpart, work longer, and be able to care for her husband in his old age.²⁵

Franciscans applied these Christian marriage rules to California. Records from seven missions in northern California show that between 1879 and 1834 the church remarried 2,374 Indian couples.²⁶ This practice was wise, for it permitted thousands of native couples to retain family and emotional attachments while taking up Catholic and Spanish life. The retention of conjugal connections eased the Indian transition to mission authority and no doubt encouraged some Indians to convert.

Not all Indian marriage customs were admissible under Catholic scrutiny, however. Father Francisco Palóú, generally sympathetic to Indian marriage customs, unfortunately found that the Chumash were inclined to wed “their sisters-in-law, and even their mothers-in-law,” thus adding incest to the sin of polygamy.²⁷ Chumash widows and widowers remarried within their deceased spouse’s family, a practice that the church prohibited. Indian spouses with such ties who wished to enter the mission had to abandon established marriages, lie about their relationships, or reject conversion.²⁸

The road to imposing a new sexual orthodoxy in California was a hard one. Christian ceremonies did not automatically eliminate older cultural meanings of Indian marriage, nor did they necessarily engender Catholic values in the Indian participants. Dissident neophyte runaways sometimes abandoned their old wives and took new ones according to tribal custom.²⁹ When the fathers forbade specific neophyte marriages, unhappy Indians found ways to insist on having the relationship that they preferred. In 1816, for example, an Indian man, probably Chumash, left the Mission San Buenaventura to be with the woman he wanted at Santa Barbara. “This happens,” Father José Señan revealed, “every time his shackles are removed.”³⁰ It is not clear if the missionaries had shackled the man for previously running off to his lover or for some other offense, but Señan allowed that it would be best to permit the couple to wed quietly. If, however, the Indian made mischief, “send him back to us.”

All Christian marriages, of course, were not blissful, nor did they all reflect the wifely obedience that Hispanic society celebrated. Sometimes, dissatisfied Indian wives used traditional kinship links to solve domestic problems. The inherent possibilities of such arrangements were revealed in 1795, after a skirmish between unconverted Chumash Indians near Mission San Buenaventura. Almost immediately after the fight—and perhaps related to it—the priests found a dead neophyte in the mission garden. His Christian wife, her neophyte brother, and two other neophytes had decap-
Costanoan neophytes to flee from the mission. Indians who could not “entirely gratify their lust because of the vigilance of the missionaries,” they reckoned, decamped “in order to give full sway to their carnal desires.”

The missionaries simply could not accept that Indians adhered to a different set of sexual rules than did Spanish Catholics. Nor did they understand Indians’ kinship practices. Instead, Franciscans like Father Lasuén thought of California Indians as people utterly without “government, religion, or respect for authority” who “shamelessly pursue without restraint whatever their brutal appetites suggest to them.” They were “people of vicious and ferocious habits who knew no law but force, no superior but their own free will, and no reason but their own caprice.” Father Lasuén evidently believed that sex was high on the list of brutal native appetites for he thought that Indians were inclined to “lewdness.”

What is lewd in one culture, however, is not necessarily lewd in another. Conflicting Indian and missionary attitudes about the human body are a case in point. California Indian men were customarily nude, and the women wore only skirts of bark or skins. Missionaries wondered that nudity did not embarrass the Indians, who “showed not the least trace of shame” even though the natives saw that Spaniards wore clothes. A Spaniard who went about naked would not have been allowed to run loose in Spanish society for very long, and the Franciscans regarded undress as a mark of uncivility and paganism. Consequently, missionaries devoted much time and energy to clothing the neophytes. Indians and missionaries were caught in a classic case of cultural misunderstanding. The missionaries could not accept Indian sexual attitudes and practices because they contravened a sacred sexual ideology and Spanish cultural norms. Indians could not comprehend the need for such strict rules.

Caught in this conflict, missionaries demanded that Christian Indians adopt formal Spanish attitudes about sex and punished them when they did not. Within the mission they tried to achieve this goal by segregating the Indians by sex at night, a policy that—as we shall see—was not altogether successful. Neophytes who failed to live up to Catholic standards ran afoul of the missionaries who imposed corporal punishment. When, for example, Chumash neophytes at Mission Santa Barbara reverted to polygyny—which the friars evidently regarded as concubinage after Christian conversion—Father Esteban Tapis first admonished the offenders. On the second offense Tapis laid on the whip, and when this did not convince the Indians of the error of their ways he put them in shackles.

Franciscans believed they had a right to use corporal punishment to correct unruly Indians. Indeed, the lash was used throughout Spanish society.
2. MONJERIO, MISSION LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN.

Padres locked unmarried women in this barracks-like building at night to keep them from having illicit affairs. The priests were not successful in preventing sexual liaisons, as their frank complaints and mission birth records show. The sequestering of Indian women had an unforeseen effect on the inmates. Deadly communicable diseases spread quickly among the women in the closed, fetid environment. Mission statistics show that Indian women died at higher rates than Indian men, a trend that mission living conditions probably exacerbated. Photograph by Richard Orsi 1992.

_Courtesy of California History._

Eighteenth-century Spanish parents whipped children; teachers whipped pupils; magistrates whipped civil offenders; pious Catholics whipped themselves as penance. Neophytes accepted the lash as a fact of mission life when their sexual transgressions caught the watchful eyes of the friars, but the Spanish and Catholic understanding of the whip as an instrument of correction, teaching, mortification, and purification probably eluded them. In Indian society, corporal punishment as a means of social control was rare. Some tribes permitted husbands to physically punish adulterous wives, but Indians saw punishment as a husband’s right because adultery threatened the economic and diplomatic role of the family, not because sex was wrong or sinful.

Indian sexuality was not the only carnal problem that the fathers had to contend with in California. Civilians and soldiers brought to California sexual attitudes and behavior that were at odds with Catholic and Indian values. Rape was a special concern of friars, who monitored Spanish deviant sexual behavior in California. As early as 1772 Father Luís Jayne complained about some of the soldiers, who deserved to be hanged for “continuous outrages” on the Kumeyaay women near the Mission San Diego. “Many times,” he asserted, the Indians were on the verge of attacking the mission because “some soldiers went there and raped their women.” The situation was so bad that the Indians fled from the priests, even risking hunger “so the soldiers will not rape their women as they have already done so many times in the past.”

Father Jayne thought Spaniards’ assaults were all the worse because the Kumeyaay Indians had become Christians and given up polygyny and incestuous marriages. Married neophytes did not commit adultery and bachelors were celibate. Kumeyaay sexual behavior was not only the result of the mission’s teaching, but a reflection of their traditional belief that adultery was bad. “If a man plays with a woman who is not his wife,” Jayne explained, “he is scolded and punished by his captains.” An unconverted Indian told Jayne, “although we did not know that God would punish us in Hell, [we] considered [adultery] to be very bad, and we did not do it, and even less now that we know that God will punish us if we do so.” When the missionary heard this, he “burst into tears to see how these gentiles were setting an example for us Christians.”

Jayne’s version of the Kumeyaay statement seems to confuse rape and adultery, a problem that may have stemmed from linguistic and cultural misunderstanding. In any case, Jayne described two rapes and their consequences. In one instance, three soldiers had raped an unmarried woman who became pregnant. She was ashamed of her condition and ultimately killed the newborn infant, an act that horrified and saddened Father Jayne. The second incident occurred when four soldiers and a sailor went to a rancheria and dragged off two women. The sailor refused to take part and left the four to complete the assault. Afterward, the soldiers tried to convert the act from rape to prostitution by paying the women with some ribbon and a few tortillas. They also paid a neophyte man who had witnessed the
assault and warned him not to divulge the incident. Insulted and angry, the Indians were not overawed by the rapists’ threats and told Jayme. In retaliation, the soldiers locked the neophyte man in the stocks, an injustice that outraged Jayme who personally released him.43

The situation at San Diego was not unique. “There is not a single mission where all the gentiles have not been scandalized,” Jayme wrote, “and even on the road, so I have been told.” Spaniards’ sexual behavior did not escape the eye of Father Serra, who asserted that “a plague of immorality had broken out.” He had heard the bitter complaints of the friars who wrote to him of disorders at all of the missions. Serra worried especially about the muleteers who traversed the vast distances between missions with their pack trains. Serra feared the consequences of allowing these unbridled characters among the Indians. There were so many Indian women along the road that Serra expected sexual transgressions, for “it would be a great miracle, yes, a whole series of miracles, if it did not provoke so many men of such low character to disorders which we have to lament in all our missions; they occur every day...” Serra came perilously close to blaming the women for the sexual assaults that they suffered. Nevertheless, he believed rapes could imperil the entire mission enterprise by alienating the Indians who would “turn on us like tigers.”44

Serra was right. In 1775, some eight hundred neophyte and non-Christian Kumeeyaays, fed up with sexual assaults and chafing under missionary supervision, attacked Mission San Diego. They burned the mission and killed three Spaniards, including Father Jayme, beating his face beyond recognition.45 Rapes were not the sole cause of the attack, but as Jayme and Serra had predicted, sexual abuse made California a perilous place. Still, the revolt did not dissuade some Spaniards from sexual involvement with Indian women. In 1779, Serra was still criticizing the government for “unconcern in the matter of shameful conduct between the soldiers and Indian women,” a complaint that may have included mutual as well as rapacious liaisons.46

Serra’s argument implied that without supervision some Spaniards acted without sexual restraints. Spaniards believed in a code of honor that rewarded sexual conquests, and soldiers may have asserted their ideas about honor and status by seducing California Indian women. There was no honor in rape. Honorable sexual conquest required a willing partner who was overcome by the man’s sensuality, masculinity, and magnetism, not merely his brute ability to overpower her. Recall the San Diego rapists who tried to mitigate their actions by making a payment to their victims.47 Serra

argued that there were men of bad character who could not control their urges, but rape is a complex act that requires more than opportunity and a supposedly super-heightened state of sexual tension. Recent research shows that rape is an act of domination carried out by men who despise their victims because of their race or gender. Stress, anger, and fear also motivate some rapists.48 It should not be forgotten that Spaniards were fearful of California Indians—outnumbered and surrounded by Indians who seemed capable of overwhelming them at any moment.49 There were frequent minor skirmishes, livestock thefts, and occasional murders that reinforced the Spanish conception of the Indian enemy. As late as 1822 one missionary thought that it was impossible to know how many troops were necessary to defend the Mission San Buenaventura because there were so many un-Christianized Indians in the interior. “May God keep our neophytes peaceful and submissive,” he wrote, “for they would not want for allies if they should rise against our Saint and our charity.”50 It is not difficult to imagine that some men, sent to a dangerous frontier outpost, violently and subconsciously used Indian women as objects to ward off fear and dominate the numerous native population that the Spanish crown and Catholic Church sought to subdue, colonize, and convert.

Sexuality, unsanctioned and perversely construed as a way to control native people, actually threatened Spain’s weak hold on California by angering the Indians and insulting their ideas about sexuality, rectitude, and justice. It is impossible to know how many rapes occurred in Spanish California, but sexual assaults affected Indian society beyond their absolute numbers. Moreover, Indian rape victims likely displayed some of the somatic and emotional symptoms of rape-trauma syndrome, including physical wounds, tension, sleeplessness, gastrointestinal irritations, and genital injuries. In our own time raped women are often stricken with fear, guilt, anger, and humiliation, and some raped women develop a fear of normal sexual activity.51 There is no reason to believe that Indian women did not react to rape in similar ways. Fear of assault may have affected many women who were not themselves victims as they tried to help friends and relatives cope with the consequences of rape. Sexual assaults echoed in the Indian social world even as they frightened friars who feared the consequences of an outraged Indian population.

It is impossible to know how many free-will assignations occurred in California during the mission period, but it is safe to assume that such cross-cultural trysts were fraught with misunderstanding. Indian women, accustomed to looking outside of their communities for husbands, likely...
viewed Spaniards as potential mates who could bring them and their families increased power, wealth, and status. Some women may have hoped that sex would lead to marriage, but it seldom did.\textsuperscript{53}

Indians responded to Spanish sexual importunities in several ways. Physical resistance to missions, as at San Diego in 1775 and on the Colorado River in 1781, was one way to deal with rapists and other unwanted intruders. Marriage to a Spaniard was another strategy that could protect women, but evidently only a few dozen Indians were able to use this tactic. Other Indians, like the transvestites mentioned above, withdrew from Spanish-controlled areas to avoid any infringement on their social life and values. On the other hand, some women might have entered the missions for protection that the mission setting provided from sexual abuse by Spanish soldiers. There is also reason to believe that Indians altered their sexual practices as a result of meeting the Spanish. Prostitution, which had formerly been rare among the Indians, became common. In 1786 Father Serra complained about Nicolas, a neophyte who procured women for the soldiers at San Gabriel.\textsuperscript{54} A few years later a Spanish naturalist observed that the Chumash men had “become pimps, even for their own wives, for any miserable profit.”\textsuperscript{55}

Nicolas and other Indians had several reasons to resort to prostitution. Spanish men seduced and raped the Indians’ female kinfolk but did not marry them. Perhaps Indians were recovering lost bride prices through prostitution. Since there were Hispanic men who were willing to pay for sex, prostitution might have seemed a logical way to enhance the economic value of wives and daughters who were expected to be productive. How women felt about being so used is not known, but the missions would have been one avenue of escape for those who were unhappy with these new conditions. In the early years of colonization, Indian women outnumbered male neophytes, indicating that females found the mission especially attractive in a rapidly changing world.\textsuperscript{56}

Another California Indian reaction to a new sexual world was physiological: they contracted syphilis and other venereal diseases, maladies to which they had not previously been exposed. So rapidly did syphilis spread among Indians that, in 1792, a Spanish naturalist traveling in California believed the disease was endemic among the Chumash.\textsuperscript{57} Twenty years later the friars recorded it as the most prevalent and destructive disease in the missions.\textsuperscript{58} Syphilis was particularly deadly among the Indians because its weakened victims became easy prey for epidemic diseases that periodically swept the missions. In addition, stillbirths increased and infected women died more frequently in childbirth. If they bore live children the infants were likely to have congenital syphilis.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite the intentions of Serra and other friars, mission life did not necessarily provide neophytes with a respite from sexual activity. Friars declared almost unanimously that mission Indians committed a variety of sexual sins. Between 1813 and 1815 missionaries recorded that the neophytes were guilty of “impurity,” “unchastity,” “fornication,” “lust,” “immorality,” “incontinence,” and so forth, indicating that the mission experience had not fully inculcated Catholic sexual values in the neophytes.\textsuperscript{60}

How could the fathers have known about the intimate lives of mission Indians? The Indians confessed their sins at least once a year, and suspicious priests questioned the neophytes closely about their sexual behavior. Franciscan confessionaries with lists of questions in California Indian languages provide some idea of the level of priests’ interest in neophyte sex. Have you ever sinned with a woman, a man, an animal? Do you have carnal dreams? Did you think about the dream later? What is your relationship with the people with whom you sin? Have you given your wife or husband to someone else? Do you become aroused when you watch them or when you see animals having intercourse? What did you think? Do you play with yourself? Have you tried to prevent pregnancy? Have you ever not had sex with your wife when she wanted to? So the questions continued for many pages.\textsuperscript{61} The investigation of Indians’ sexual lives was thorough and relentless. And so missionaries knew that men and women fell short of ideal sexual behavior. The friars’ frank words about Indian sexuality betray disappointment born of the unspoken realization that their best missionary efforts had not reformed Indian sexuality.

The combination of virulent endemic syphilis and sexual promiscuity created a fatal environment that killed thousands of mission Indians and inhibited the ability of survivors to recover population losses through reproduction. Franciscans—and some of their critics—believed that the carnal disintegration of the California missions occurred because the Indians simply continued to observe the sexual customs of native society.\textsuperscript{62} The Indians were unrestrained libertines who had learned nothing of Catholic moral behavior in the missions, and were incapable of realizing that syphilis was killing them. This view is incomplete because it assumes that sexuality was unregulated in native society and that Indian sexual behavior was unchanged during sixty-five years of mission experience.

Perhaps mission Indian sexuality was a response to new conditions. Who would have understood desperate demographic conditions at the missions.
dominance in this new setting. Priests reported that mission women who became pregnant resorted to abortion and infanticide, and these acts may have been based in Indian customs, especially in the case of the Chumash, who believed that unless the first child died the mother would not conceive again. But women had other reasons, too. Unwed mothers would be subjected to close questioning and punishment by priests. What if the father were a soldier who did not want his identity revealed, what then? Thus, Indian women who attempted to apply old norms to assure fertility contributed to the destruction of the Indian population.64

Whatever the causes of mission sexuality, neophytes relied on old ways and new ones to solve difficult problems in a new setting. In the end, efficacious solutions eluded them, but it is not accurate to say that Indians were immoral, amoral, or incapable of assimilating the message that the missionaries brought them. The mission experience demonstrates that Indians were simultaneously resolute and unsure, conservative and radical, forward looking and bound to tradition. They exemplified, in other words, the human condition.

Ultimately, the history of California’s missions is a sad one that elucidates a series of human misunderstandings, failures, and terrible, unintended consequences. That Spaniards and Indians were often incapable of comprehending each other should hardly be surprising, because they came from radically different cultures. As was so often the case in the history of the Western Hemisphere, Indians and newcomers talked past each other, not with each other. This was true even of their most personal contacts in California. Sacred and profane, intimate, carnal, spiritual, ecstatic, bringing life and death—Indian and Spanish sexuality embodied the paradox and identity of their all-too-human encounter.


14. Serra to Bucareli Aug. 24, 1775, in Tibesar, Writings of Junípero Serra, 2:149. While Serra approved of handsome subsidies for marriages of Catalán men and Indian women, he also made it clear that he did not want to apply such liberal

17. Ibid., 33.
20. Ibid., 199.
21. Ibid., 199.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 281.