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Author: Varela Cabral, Leonardo B.

(Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Independent researcher)

Mail: varelacableo@gmail.com

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SUMMARY The Construction of the Sacred in the Jesuit Missions of Antigua California: a Hermeneutical Approach

*Leonardo B. Varela Cabral**

Abstract

As part of an investigation into Antigua California, which covers the presence of the Society of Jesus in that region between 1697 and 1768, it is of interest to address the communicative and expressive processes through which the Jesuit missionaries, on the one hand, and the native population, on the other hand, participated in different dynamics of negotiation and confrontation, focused mainly on the interpretation of objects and images considered sacred, as well as their bearers. Starting from a hermeneutic perspective, I seek to characterize collective subjectivity as a central component of social life and a determining element to understand the behavior of such intercultural relations in the context of said area of northwestern New Spain, where an attempt was made to implement the evangelizing strategy of a globalizing corporate vision promoted by the Jesuits within a singular environment, constituted by the ways of life of pre-existing human groups.

Keywords: California • Jesuits • missions • sacredness • images

* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Independent researcher

Substantially, this work consults letters and reports prepared by some of the main Ignatian missionaries in the Baja California peninsula. Such characters were Juan María de Salvatierra (1648-1717), Francisco María Píccolo (1654-1729) and Juan de Ugarte (1662-1730), among others, who wrote these documents to keep their brothers, benefactors and also superiors informed, as was common among the members of the Society of Jesus. Likewise, various chronicles and news items written by other Jesuits were reviewed, such as Miguel Venegas (1680-1764), Miguel del Barco (1706-1790) and Juan Jacobo Baegert (1717-1772).

From a hermeneutical point of view, interpretation is the most important element for the construction of meaning. In this sense, there is no “correct” or “incorrect” way of assigning meaning to a text or message, but rather different interpretations, all equally valid. Taking the above into account, it is evident that, in the area studied, both missionaries and natives made an interpretative effort in relation to the culture of the “other” that we can characterize as hermeneutical, since they were faced with the implicit need to understand what the concept of the sacred meant to their counterpart. For example, when seeking to evangelize the indigenous people, the missionaries had to understand in one way or another how and from what perspective the first settlers assigned a sacred character to certain practices, objects and even people.

In the same sense, although from a perspective that was in conflict with the missionary perspective, the natives were faced with the dilemma of abandoning or defending their own beliefs and practices of the sacred, based on the understanding they managed to have about what this concept meant for their intended evangelizers and experiencing to what extent their own sacred objects, rituals and characters were judged, sanctioned and censured. In contrast to the above, on many occasions they understood that the identification of what was sacred for the missionaries allowed them to focus their destructive efforts on specific objects and people, expressing in a forceful way, with objective but also symbolic implications, their rejection of the imposition of a foreign religion and culture.

The Jesuit missionaries were characterized, as is well known, by their aptitude and interest in learning native languages. However, in the case of Antigua California, this resource only served limitedly for evangelizing purposes, since the cultural differences between the religious and the local populations were so great that it was impossible to find a common way of understanding concepts such as resurrection, eternal life or sin, which are central to the Christian worldview. In addition, there was already a precedent, not only in New Spain, but throughout the world, regarding the use of objects and images as teaching tools that improved communication and the propagation of faith among different cultures. It is therefore easy to see that Jesuit efforts were concentrated above all on the use of this type of resources, typical of material culture, and that evangelization in this region of the world placed great emphasis on the creation of an imaginary where crosses, churches, altarpieces, sculptures and paintings, as well as the appearance of the priests themselves, transmitted a visual discourse about sacredness.

On the other hand, it is true that, as a whole and due to the symbolic authority they held, the Jesuits identified the Californian shamans as the main enemy to be defeated in order to achieve the evangelization of the inhabitants of the peninsula. One of the main battlefields where this fight against the shamans took place was that of the objects used during the “many superstitious rites and cults” led by them. The Jesuits flatly rejected those utensils that were used for ritual activities, trying to confiscate and destroy them. This ongoing campaign against such objects can be described as a true war of images, as it represented a struggle to impose new beliefs through the violent substitution of some objects with symbolic value for others, even though the Jesuits did not fully understand the meaning of their use, it being enough simply that they had a leading role within the original ritual.

Another important fact to bear in mind is that although the devotional images brought to California by the Jesuits initially caused surprise and admiration among the natives, they were soon identified as reservoirs of the missionaries’ power, where much of their strength and ability to implant a new culture in the environment was deposited. Wherever the Jesuits arrived, the first thing they did was place a cross, a sculpture or a painting. From then on, the site became a temporary chapel from which a process of settlement and penetration into the territory and its inhabitants unfolded. It is not surprising, therefore, that every attack directed against the Fathers’ enterprise involved the intention of annihilating these images.

It was during the Pericú rebellions that occurred between 1734 and 1737 that the interpretation made by both missionaries and natives of the sacred objects of their counterpart as a symbolic territory within which a strong dispute for power could be deployed was expressed in a more forceful way. So much that the destruction of images and sacred objects brought by the priests to Antigua California was part of the tragic episodes in which the missionaries Lorenzo Carranco (1695-1734) and Nicolás Tamaral (1687-1734), responsible for the settlements of Santiago and San José del Cabo, respectively, in the year 1734, lost their lives.

In order to leave no doubt that the sacralization or desacralization of bodies was a central part of this understanding of the sacred in Antigua California, it is important to note that, just as the Pericú rebels did at the time, a group of native Californians who supported the priests in order to subdue the rebels learned from one of their leaders and carried out a similar settling of accounts with him. Consequently, there is no doubt that despite the linguistic difficulties implicit in the Jesuits’ partial knowledge of the Pericú, Guaycura and Cochimí languages, as well as the permanent conflict that must have represented for the natives to understand the intentions and messages of their evangelizers, the use of objects and images within a religious context provided valuable information regarding what each of these cultures considered sacred. This was simultaneously related to the sphere of the symbolic and the physical exercise of power over the territory of the Baja California peninsula and its inhabitants.

In these collective readings put into play on the arena of events, the interpretations of both the missionaries and the natives seem to coincide. From a point of view surely shared by pure intuition or deduction, the goods used in ritual activities acquired a value greater than that of

mere objects, since they were perceived as extensions of the sacralized corporality of their bearers, as well as transmitters of the complex symbolic content deposited in them. Content that, we can venture after a thorough review of the written sources of the time, neither the fathers managed to communicate clearly to their neophytes, nor did the natives make known exactly to the fathers. But the result of this kind of ambivalent interpretation was an attitude that was at the same time fearful and defiant, in the face of the real or fictitious power concentrated in objects and images, which contributed to them being at times coveted and treasured, while at other times they ended up being repudiated and destroyed.



Fig. 1: Unknown author, *Mission of San Luis Gonzaga Chiriyacuí* (1737). Building constructed under the authority of Father Juan Jacobo Baegert in Vieja California. Image from: <https://culturabcs.gob.mx/recinto/56>



Fig. 2: Unknown author, *Mission of Nuestra Señora de Loreto-Conchó* (1697). Building constructed on the place founded by Father Juan María de Salvatierra in Antigua California. Image from: <https://culturabcs.gob.mx/recinto/64>



Fig. 3: Cochimí culture, *Ceremonial stone pipe or chacuaco*, Regional Museum of Anthropology and History of La Paz, Baja California Sur. Photo by: Leonardo B. Varela Cabral, 2024.



Fig. 4: Cochimí culture, *Ceremonial wooden tablets*, Regional Museum of Anthropology and History of La Paz, Baja California Sur. Photo by: Leonardo B. Varela Cabral, 2024.



Fig. 5: Anonymous New Spain artist, *Virgin of Loreto*, 17th-18th centuries, carved and polychromed wood, glass eyes and fabric, Temple of Nuestra Señora de Loreto, Baja California Sur. Photo by: Leonardo B. Varela Cabral, 2025.



Fig. 6: Anonymous New Spain artist, *Virgin of Loreto*, 18th century, Carved, estofada and polychromed wood, glass eyes, gilded metal and gemstones, Temple of Nuestra Señora de Loreto, Baja California Sur. Image from: David Burckhalter, *Baja California Missions. In the Footsteps of the Padres* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003) 40.



Fig. 7: Unknown author, *Map of California, its Gulf, and border provinces on the continent of Nueva España* (illustrated at the bottom the death of missionaries Lorenzo Carranco and Nicolás Tamaral). Image from: Miguel Venegas, *Noticia de la California y de su conquista temporal y espiritual...* s/p.

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