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### **Persistence Beyond Penance:**

The Tongva/ Gabrielino Tribe's Resilience during The Mission Era in California

#### **Introducing the Tongva**

Examining the impact of Spanish invasion on the Tongva people during the Mission Era reveals an important cultural narrative of cultural assimilation, resistance, and the challenges of first encounters that Natives faced. Natives arrived in American lands long before Christopher Columbus sailed on the Mayflower and landed in the Americas. Before the Spanish arrival, Natives thrived in these areas, learning its lands, and using their environment to their advantage. They settled and built large villages and communities. They practiced their own religion, cultural ceremonies, and lifestyles. The Tongva tribe arrived in the California region in around the 1500s in present day Los Angeles. They lived in these areas until the arrival of the Spanish in 1769. This was the beginning of the Mission Era in California. Along the coast there were 21 missions built where the Spanish forcefully took control of Native lands, enslaving the people living in these areas before their arrival.<sup>1</sup> The Tongva people were resilient to Spanish arrival but succumbed to enslavement conducted by Spanish settlers. Following Spanish arrival, the Tongva tribe was stripped of their lands and identity. Despite these struggles, they stayed resilient to cultural assimilation, allowing their language, culture, and identity to persist to this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, Aurelie. "The Tongva People." In *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte*, 17-24. 2020.

## Who were the Tongva People?

Arriving around 7,000 years ago the Tongva people, a semi-nomadic group, migrated from the Mojave Desert to present day Los Angeles. The Tongva people displaced some of the Chumash tribe who resided in these areas before the Tongva arrived. They began taking over land spanning from present day Los Angeles County and Orange County, including Santa Catalina and San Clemente from 1520 to 1769.<sup>2</sup> These hunter-gatherers occupied the Sonoran life zone in which they relied on a diet of berries, pine nuts, fish, deer, and quail.<sup>3</sup> They also spoke the Shoshonean Uto-Aztecan language. Their language was an extremely important part of their culture relying on specific words related to their diet as well as the importance of nature. They relied on canoes for transportation across rivers and bodies of water that allowed them to gather sea resources and engage in trade with neighboring tribes. This use of canoes and transportation showed their adaptability to this new environment.<sup>4</sup>

From a little before the 1500s until the Spanish arrived in 1769, there were 25 Tongva villages with 300 to 500 Tongva peoples living on the California coast.<sup>5</sup> Within their social structure Chiefs ruled their villages and marriage was an important part of strengthening their communities. Marriage was seen as a diplomatic arrangement that offered security and increased trade with other tribal nations. In these communities' women contributed immensely through

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<sup>2</sup> Roy, Aurelie. "The Tongva People." In *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte*, 17-24. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Welch, Rosanne. "A Brief History of the Tongva Tribe: The Native Inhabitants of the Lands of the Puente Hills Preserve." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, Rosanne. "A Brief History of the Tongva Tribe: The Native Inhabitants of the Lands of the Puente Hills Preserve." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2006.

<sup>5</sup>Roy, Aurelie. "The Tongva People." In *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte*, 17-24. 2020.

horticulturist work (tending to plants) and food production. Their religious beliefs were based upon the idea to act as wise custodians of the earth, its living things, and its sacred places. They believed in one God and their creation story, like Christians, involved a first man and woman. Two religious leaders or shamans offered separate responsibilities of work for the Tongva. The Ahhoovaredoot practiced astrology, casted potions, and magic, interpreted dreams, and created medicines with grown herbs. They were to focus on medicinal practices and the overall health of their community. The Yovaarekam practiced sacred songs and dances as well as engaging with ceremonial activities. They emphasized spirituality contributing to the religious and cultural importance of their tribe.<sup>6</sup>

### **Spanish Arrival: New Name**

The Spanish arrived in 1769 with a plan to conquer the west and take control. Upon their arrival to the coastal California region, they quickly built twenty missions that spread along the Californian Camino Real until around 1823.<sup>7</sup> Junípero Serra, a Spanish friar of the Catholic Church led the Spanish into the lands of the Tongva people and they built San Gabriel Arcángel in September of 1771. Forty-three years later it was claimed that there were 5,474 baptisms given and around 1,678 Indians inhabited the San Gabriel Mission.<sup>8</sup> The Spanish built this mission across fifteen miles in the San Gabriel Valley in the El Monte and South El Monte communities that were in the heart of the Tongva land.

Immediately when the Spanish arrived, they received resistance from surrounding villages. San Gabriel Mission was built in 1771 and nearly 10 years later a Tongva shaman,

<sup>6</sup> Welch, Rosanne. "A Brief History of the Tongva Tribe: The Native Inhabitants of the Lands of the Puente Hills Preserve." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Roy, Aurelie. "The Tongva People." In *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte*, 17-24. 2020.

<sup>8</sup> "The Americas." *The Americas* 12, no. 1 (July 1955): 77-84.

Toypurina, began resisting control.<sup>9</sup> The Tongva were extremely resistant to the Spanish arrival and building of missions, they made this very clear to the missionaries. Their goal was to remove the Spaniards from their land; however, they failed causing the arrests of many Tongva people, including Toupurina.<sup>10</sup> She became a symbol of native resistance and fought against colonial oppression like many other Tongva and native peoples.

The first sign of invasion of the Spanish began with the name change of the Tongva people. They changed their name from Tongva to Gabrielino in an effort to Westernize their culture. The Spanish ripped families apart; removing children from their homes, forced them to convert to Christianity and forbid them from speaking their native tongue. The Tongva people were forced to help build these missions and live there as well under the control of the Spanish. The spread of disease brought by the Spanish as well as extreme mistreatment causes a significant increase in Native deaths on these missions.<sup>11</sup> The colonization of the Tongva people stripped and destroyed the culture and identity of many Tongva people.

Beyond 1850 to around 1928, after the missions were built, the U.S. government largely ignored the history of the Tongva people. Most of their history ended around 1850 which made following the Gabrielino/Tongva people history extremely difficult. In 1824 Mexico gained control of California and converted the missions but the Gabrielinos continued to struggle because of the unethical land transactions and push back of the Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> Many of the

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<sup>9</sup> Welch, Rosanne. "A Brief History of the Tongva Tribe: The Native Inhabitants of the Lands of the Puente Hills Preserve." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Welch, Rosanne. "A Brief History of the Tongva Tribe: The Native Inhabitants of the Lands of the Puente Hills Preserve." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Roy, Aurelie. "The Tongva People." In *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte*, 17-24. 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, Charles Franklin. *Stories of the Old Missions of California*. San Francisco: Paul Elder, 1917.

Gabrielinos moved to Los Angeles, leaving their homelands, but faced extreme discrimination. They often hid their identity and claim to be Mexican to disguise themselves. Due to ethnic cleansing the Tongva/ Gabrielino people struggled to keep their identity and continue their culture. Although stripped of their Native tongue and religion surprising to many, the Tongva culture seemed to be extremely resilient.<sup>13</sup>

### **Native Resistance and Survival**

Despite numerous efforts of the Spanish to wipe out the Natives in the California region, many, including the Tongva people were resilient to the ethnic cleansing. This effort of ethnic cleansing included indigenous enslavement, displacement of children, and land grabs. Facing extreme efforts to destroy their culture included lack of recognition by anyone in California. Many participated in cross-cultural collaborations and intermarriages with Mexican families. Mixing cultures elevated the Tongva ethnic diversity as well protected them from judgments and prejudice because of their indigeneity. Land is extremely important to many Native Americans. When their original lands were threatened and stripped from the Tongva people, it also threatened their culture. Many projects, including one done by the Whittier Narrows Nature Center, disconnected these people from their natural world and their homeland history. Due to lack of recognition by the Spanish as well as the Mexican government, who later gained California, caused cultural assimilation. Natives began identifying as something other than their Tongva culture for their own protection.

They faced many other assimilation efforts including religious conversion to Catholicism and cultural assimilation through schooling. They were forced to not only change their culture but their appearance. In many of the mission schools they were forced to wear Anglo-American

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<sup>13</sup> Singleton, Heather Valdez. "Surviving Urbanization: The Gabrielino, 1850-1928." *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2004): 49–59. JSTOR, Accessed November 21, 2023.

clothing, button ups and long pants, as well as cut their hair extremely short. Changing their entire appearance Natives no longer looked native but now assimilated into white culture. Natives were taught to hate themselves, their culture, religion. Anything defined as nativeness was deemed as horrible in the eyes of the Spanish, and through conversion, through the eyes of many Natives as well. When people are forced to completely change their sense of identity it can cause extreme self-identity dysphoria and completely change the community of a culture. These Native peoples were forced to convert to Catholicism, abandoning their Native religion and forced to believe in a new ideology. Stripped of their Native tongue they were forced to learn Spanish and many completely lost their form of communication within their communities. Language is an extremely important part of one's culture. It allows for communication, inclusion, and community.



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This photo is of an Indian School in San Gabriel. These schools were extremely common during the mission era. As shown in the picture there are many wearing long dresses which are

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<sup>14</sup> California, State of. "Gabrieleño/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians – NAHC Digital Atlas." NAHC Digital Atlas, Accessed November 21, 2023.

very different from their native common clothing during the time. Their hair is either cut short or pinned back. Many of these schools can be seen as indoctrination camps where children were abused and extremely mistreated to help conversion.

### **The Missions: Storytelling**

On many missions the Spanish and Natives lived, oppressor and oppressed. The Natives were forced to do work and live on these missions without a choice. Living in Mission San Gabriel, in 1824, was a woman named Juana. She became aware that a young Indian or “neophyte,” as referred to by the Spanish, had gone missing. Juana noticed hostility from the Natives, building tensions. She notices these “untamed Indians” with bows and arrows near her home and feels threatened. She tells Father Zalvidea, a friar on the mission, her concerns about the Indians and her safety. Her husband, Diego is killed by one of the untamed Indians leaving her devastated. Diego’s death is a pivotal part of the story that causes an uprising at many of the missions including San Gabriel.<sup>15</sup>

This story shows more than just an eye for an eye. Providing a broader historical context of the struggles faced by the Natives on these missions. The violence and tension show the challenges between the Spanish and Native peoples and prove as central themes in this story. Natives were forced out of their land to live on missions, this does not mean they gave into these changes and decisions. The Tongva people were extremely resistant in trying to protect their land and culture, as were many other Native tribes. Although trying to keep their culture and community it was extremely difficult. At these missions they were stripped of their land and human rights, the Spanish attempted to completely control the Tongva people. The Spanish had a contrasting lifestyle compared to the natives and saw them as childlike, savage, and less than.

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<sup>15</sup> Carter, Charles Franklin. *Stories of the Old Missions of California*. San Francisco: Paul Elder, 1917.

In another story an elderly indigenous woman reveals a vision she has of her future descendants and their interactions with white settlers. She foresees that the settlers plan to displace indigenous people and are coming to bring a great change including cultural assimilation, forced labor, land grabs, and the disappearance of Natives. She urges her descendants to peacefully coexist with the settlers and warns them of the consequences to come if they do not listen to her. Later her prophecy comes true, many indigenous people disappear from their lands, leaving behind only small parts of their culture and existence.<sup>16</sup>

This story reveals many truths of the Mission era in California regarding many Native and Spanish interactions. Due to assimilation and conversion many native tribes dissipated because of lost culture, community, and language. Many survived this assimilation but leaving a significantly smaller number of natives in certain tribes. The Tongva people were one that was extremely resilient to the Spanish but also lost a lot of their culture due to the Missions and Spanish conquerors.

At Mission San Gabriel lived an Indian man named Juan Antonio who was an artist trying to recreate what is called the Stations of the Cross. Juan Antonio would have probably been his Spanish name given to him when he lived in San Gabriel. He struggled with his art because there was a European prototype he had to follow to represent a religion that was not his.<sup>17</sup> A change of religion deemed it difficult for him to create art because he had to change his

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<sup>16</sup> Carter, Charles Franklin. *Stories of the Old Missions of California*. San Francisco: Paul Elder, 1917.

<sup>17</sup> Pelzel, T. O. "The San Gabriel Stations of the Cross From an Art-Historical Perspective." *The Journal of California Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1976): Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0dq1p0z2>.



perspectives and beliefs. These stories show the cultural and historical significance of the struggles of many natives not only in California but all throughout America.

### **Native Resistance: Photos**

This drawing is called *stop the dance*, by L Frank is a symbol of the ghost dance, which is a native ceremony praying to the Gods that the white man would be wiped out. During the Mission era the ghost dance was prohibited. Many natives continued to participate in the ghost dance showing Native resistance against the Spanish. The Spanish were threatened by this religious ceremony, they were unfamiliar and unaccepting of any Native practices. Instead of understanding their religious and cultural background they wanted to get rid of it and did this by prohibiting this practice. This was very common during the Mission era. Many religious practices were banished to convert and assimilate Natives into the Spanish lifestyle. They wanted control and power over the land, and to do this they needed control of the Natives.



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*stop the dance* - L. Frank: A drawing of a Tongva/Gabrielino participating in the ceremonial ghost dance practice with a Mission in the back, possibly the San Gabriel Mission.

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<sup>18</sup> Chavez, Yve. "Indigenous Artists, Ingenuity, and Resistance at the California Missions after 1769." PhD diss., UCLA, 2017.



Presentacion Lopez Morales, full blooded San Gabriel Band of Mission Indian ~ Gabrieleno/Tongva. Last known Morales family member to be fluent in our language. Modesta Valenzuela Morales on the far right.

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This photo shows the last known family to fluently speak the Tongva/ Gabrielino language, they are full blooded San Gabriel Mission Indians. This photo shows that although still living in the San Gabriel Mission the Tongva people continued to speak their native tongue. Having family and community even in small numbers can continue the use of Native language to preserve their culture.

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<sup>19</sup> California, State of. "Gabrieleño/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians – NAHC Digital Atlas." NAHC Digital Atlas, Accessed November 21, 2023.



In 1994 the Tongva/ Gabrielino Tribe was recognized by the state and received the SGMII California State Recognition Certificate. Chief Anthony Morales was the one to accept the certificate on behalf of the tribe. Again, showing Native resistance past the Mission Era showing how this tribe survived the Mission Era and cultural assimilation. (Gabrieleño/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians)

**Discovered Language: Tongva Tongue**

<sup>20</sup> California, State of. "Gabrieleño/Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians – NAHC Digital Atlas." NAHC Digital Atlas, Accessed November 21, 2023.

Language is extremely important to the Tongva culture and continuing their language was extremely important to many Tongva natives left. When Spanish arrived, there were around 100 Tongva villages, but after the Spanish invasion after years of struggling to survive the Tongva language was lost. Although it seemed as though the Tongva language disappeared, it resurfaced from a classroom in San Pedro on Facebook.

Pam Munro, a historian studying the Tongva people, received a box filled with information about the Tongva people and felt that she needed to learn the Tongva language and teach it to Tongva descendants. Munro recognized the cultural significance of language beyond linguistic puzzles. She worked to create a dictionary for a conference that connected linguists with Native Californians interested in praying and expressing thoughts in Tongva. Many Tongva Natives took her class to connect to their cultural roots and heritage that was once lost. Munro's goal was to allow a shared connection across generations. She found that the Tongva language is not just a means of communication but a tool to build a relationship with nature, holistic approach to language preservation and cultural understanding.<sup>21</sup>

Her students find a deep connection with their Tongva culture when learning in Munro's class. They learn about native plants and animals in the Tongva language that were important to their ancestors. Tina Caldron is a student of Munros who identifies as Gabrielino-Tongva and Chumash, she believes that learning the language has connected her to her Native heritage. Her grandfather identified himself as Mexican to get work. This was common for many natives when Mexico gained control of California. Tina, like many Native Americans today, are now proudly claiming their culture and finding ways to connect to their heritage.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Curwen, Thomas. "Tongva, Los Angeles' First Language, Opens the Door to a Forgotten Time and Place." *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2019. Accessed November 21, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> IBID



Munro writes on the board teaching the Tongva language as well as her class.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bowing Out: The Tongva Tribe of Resilience**

After the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they first encountered Native Americans living in these lands. Along the California coast lived the Tongva people. Immediately upon arrival the Spanish began building, in what will end up being, 21 Missions along the California coast: San Gabriel directly in the middle of the Tongva lands. These Natives were stripped of their lands and forced to assimilate to the Spanish ways. Their religion, ceremonial activities, native tongue, and cultural lifestyle was prohibited by the Spanish.

Although it may seem that immediately the Tongva were enslaved they were extremely resilient to this change and fought the white settlers. But eventually, the Spanish dominated and enslaved the Tongva people. Put into boarding schools, the Tongva people, now referred to by the Spanish as the Gabrielinos, were taught to hate their identity and assume whiteness. After years of torture and assimilation it had been assumed that the Tongva people and their entire culture dissipated. Later a small classroom in San Bernardino is discovered to be learning the Tongva Native tongue. Due to new breakthroughs in studying Native American history many past tribes that are assumed to have disappeared are now coming forward.

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<sup>23</sup> Curwen, Thomas. "Tongva, Los Angeles' First Language, Opens the Door to a Forgotten Time and Place." *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2019. Accessed November 21, 2023.

Many historians overtime learned about Native Americans through white settlers and their encounters with Natives from a biased and racist lens. In these types of documents until around 1955, white settlers believed that Natives lacked organization and power.<sup>24</sup> They were portrayed as savage, animalistic, uncivilized, and uneducated. In the past decade historians began relying on alternative sources such as oral histories, pictographic evidence, native writing, and archaeological evidence. More recent scholars were determined to study the Euro-American and Native relationship, studying their dialogue with each other, trying to understand not just the white settlers but the Natives as well.<sup>25</sup>

Understanding Native history from a white person's lens versus a Native lens is extremely different. Although most of Native history is still written by white historians, there is now a use for Native work and other types of histories being shared and used. Oral histories are extremely important when studying Natives and historians are now understanding its importance and relevance. The Mission Era was an extremely important time in history, marking the first European discovery of the Americas, but also the drastic change of lifestyle for the Natives. The Tongva people and their struggles during the Mission Era is extremely important to their culture's history as well as the history of other Natives. These people occupied American lands before European arrival, and although faced with extreme challenges, their culture and heritage remain resilient and persistent today.

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<sup>24</sup> Blanchard, Corey D. "I. Digging through the Old and Unearthing the New." *Southern California Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2019): 7–21. doi:10.1525/scq.2019.101.1.7.

<sup>25</sup> IBID