

Estanislao's Revolt

By John Curl



The resistance of the California Indians to European invasion and colonization began with the earliest contacts. California remained virtually untouched by colonialism until 1769, when the Spanish empire's long arms finally reached the region, nearly 300 years after the European invasion began. One of the most extraordinary episodes took place in the Bay Area, the revolt at Mission San José in 1828-1829, led by the man known as Estanislao.

“Estanislao” was the baptized name of Cucunuchi, a member of the Lakisamni Yokuts tribe, from the area around the river that now bears his name, the Stanislaus river, near where it flows into the San Joaquin. At that time the river was called the Lacquisamne; its lower reaches were Yokuts territory, and its upper branches were Miwok. Culturally the Yokuts and the Miwok lived an extremely similar way of life. They hunted, fished, gathered acorns, following the seasons as did their ancestors far into the hazes of the past.

There are few hard facts concerning Cucunuchi’s early life. Mission records are inconclusive, and testimony contradictory. It appears that he and other members of his

family moved to the mission in 1821, after padres visited his village. His younger brother Canocee, baptized as "Orencio", had come to the mission the previous year.

Traditional Indian California

The native population of California was about 300,000, making it the most densely populated area north of the Valley of México.

The California Indian people lived a traditional and stable life-cycle as far back as is tracable. Indigenous California was a society so well balanced that it evolved very slowly and peacefully over many centuries. The Indigenous people's way of life followed the seasonal harvests from place to place. They would go to the mountains for the piñon harvest, then back to the rivers for the seasonal runs of salmon and other fish. Foods and manufactured articles were peacefully exchanged among villages and tribes in a trading network stretching hundreds of miles.

The entire way of life was based on respect for the environment, peaceful adaptation and living in harmony with the natural world.

The typical Native Californian political unit was a village of about 50 to 500 people. The authority of traditional leaders was largely ceremonial, by persuasion and not by coercion. Some villages had local feuds, but these only resulted in occasional raids or border clashes with few serious casualties. California Indian society was egalitarian, almost entirely without the concept of domination and exploitation of other people, so basic to the fabric of European society. Wars of conquest were unknown in California until the coming of the Europeans.

They never developed agriculture, and never had to, since their needs were fully provided for by harvesting the land's natural bounty. Villages were near streams, rivers, marshes, and of course the bay. In different areas, dwellings were variously constructed of tule rushes, bark, or brush. Some were earth-covered. Large partly-underground assembly lodges fifty feet in diameter were used by villages in the Central Valley.

The women harvested seeds, berries, nuts, roots and natural greens. Acorns were the primary breadstuff, but also pine nuts, hazelnuts, walnuts, laurel nuts, and buckeyes. In the Winter they harvested mushrooms; in the Spring at least eight species of greens, and a half dozen different roots and bulbs. Summer was the time to gather at least ten varieties of berries and grapes.

Then of course the harvest had to be stored, using a highly developed technology of drying, leaching, and cooking. Huge baskets were used for storage of the year's crop of acorns.

Fishing was part of the men's daily routine, with nets and traps, using tule rush boats. Near village sites in hundreds of locations around the Bay there grew huge shell mounds, now mostly destroyed. One of the largest stood in Emeryville, with a diameter of 270 feet and a center depth 30 feet.

Estanislao

It was in this Indigenous environment that Estanislao must have passed his earliest years.

Estanislao first appears on the record of history as alcalde or "mayor" of Mission San José. The alcalde was the most powerful position that a native person could achieve in the mission system. It was almost invariably filled by someone raised in the system. The alcalde did not wear the ordinary Mission Indian costume of wool pants, shirt and blanket, but dressed like a Spaniard, in clothes supplied by the missionaries. The only contemporary description of Estanislao, by a man who fought him, says his age was between 33 to 40 years at the time of the revolt, which would place his birth between 1788-95. He was "about six feet tall, his skin paler than bronze, slender, with a heavy head of hair and a heavy beard... (He was) employed as a vaquero, or breaker of mules." Unlike most Indian groups, beards are common on indigenous Californians.

Mission San José

Mission San José was founded in the East Bay on a site the Indians called Oroysom, in 1797, two decades after nearby Mission Santa Clara and San Francisco's Mission Dolores. It was placed there, at the gateway of Mission and Altamont Passes, in order to be closer to the source of new recruits, at first the East Bay, but ultimately the Central Valley and the Sierras. There were about 4,000 native people living in the East Bay at the time, and a far greater population inland. The coastal tribes were being quickly decimated by missionization, with many villages abandoning their homes and relocating in the safer interior, usually across the San Joaquin river and into the Sierras, where to some degree they could return to the traditional life.

Mission San José was built of adobes on a structure of 500 redwood timbers each 24 feet long and ten inches square, sadly cut from the magnificent stand that once graced the top of the East Oakland hills.

If Estanislao was raised at Mission San José, he must have been brought there in its first years, as he was probably a toddler when it was founded. His early life must have been typical of mission children.

A common method of getting recruits was by the missionaries visiting villages and baptizing small children. They would then require the children to move to the mission at the age of 5. If the parents did not deliver them at the proper time, soldiers would kidnap the children; typically the parents would soon follow to be near them.

Once baptized, an Indian person was no longer free to leave. The missions recognized no way back; any baptized Indian who renounced Christianity was an outlaw. Soldiers toured the villages in search of runaways.

The "mission" of the missions was to control the Indigenous population, to remove their culture from them and Hispanicize them. Once at a mission, an Indian was under complete control of the missionaries and soldiers, who had no qualms about the use of force. To the Spaniards, Indians were not gente de razón, people of reason, but perpetual

children who needed control. Traditional family structures were split apart; all unmarried girls and women over seven years were locked away each night in a "convent" and the boys in a separate dormitory. These conditions were extremely unsanitary and prone to epidemic diseases. Mission food provided inadequate nourishment, and the native diet was largely forbidden. Indian ceremonies and religion were outlawed. Among the coercions used were beatings, whipping, stocks and hobbles, branding, mutilation, solitary confinement, torture by thirst and starvation.

The forced and exploited labor of the mission Indians provided the total support for the colonial economy. As some of the military posts grew into adjoining pueblos, like Pueblo San José, entire towns depended on Indian servants and laborers. Indian women were habitually sexually abused by the soldiers.

Padre Durán

At the time of Estanislao's rise to alcalde, Padre Narciso Durán was head of the mission. Durán had been a fixture there for two decades, and Estanislao was his protegé.

Like almost all the Franciscan missionaries, Durán had been born in Spain.

Yet he was not a Castellano, but a Catalán, a sometimes-oppressed minority. He and his partner Fortuni, also from Catalonia, had taken over Mission San José in 1806. At that time it was in disastrous straits.

Very few East Bay Ohlone had voluntarily joined the mission. In its first year, 1797, there were only 33 recruits, most of them children. By 1800 there were still only 286. In 1805 a measles epidemic hit the mission hard, killing 117.

It was in these circumstances that Durán and Fortuni took over Mission San José. Under their management at first it still did not thrive. Between epidemics and escapes, in 1810 the population was still only 545.

But Durán and Fortuni persisted, and San José ultimately became the most prosperous mission in California. By 1825 the population reached 1,806, with 650 horses, 9,000 cattle, and 1,500 sheep. That year they harvested 4,000 bushels of wheat, 240 of barley. At the same time, Mission San José became the hub of the entire system. Padre Durán was chosen Father President of the Missions, the most powerful ecclesiastical office in California. So the position of Estanislao as Durán's alcalde placed him as probably the most powerful Indian in the mission system.

Ironically, even as Mission San José seemed on the surface to be thriving, forces were already in motion to disband the entire system.

The Mission System

The California mission system was first begun in Baja by Jesuits in 1696. Over the next 70 years they founded a chain of 20 missions there. Then, caught in a struggle between Church and State, in 1767 they were expelled from Mexico. The missions were taken over by the Franciscan order. In a new wave of energy, the Franciscans built a second mission chain up into Alta California.

The Spanish started the mission system in California in order to establish control over the territory before the Russians or English might. Spanish galleons laden with booty from the Philippines, bound for Mexico by way of Hawaii, needed protection as they passed along the California coast.

The regime was essentially a military one, with presidios (forts) or garrisons at every mission. Power was shared between the military commanders and the missionaries, who were employed in their work directly by the King of Spain.

In the parts of the Spanish Empire where the indigenous people lived in larger population centers, such as México, Guatemala or Perú, churches were established in the pre-existing pueblo, often on top of a razed Indian temple or ceremonial center. In California, where the indigenous groupings were small, a different model was followed. The mission was placed so as to be able to gather recruits from a number of villages.

The missions needed a constant supply of new neophytes, baptized native people, because of the huge death tolls at the missions and mass desertions. In a report of 1818, of the 64,000 Indian people baptized in the first fifty years of the Alta California missions, 41,000 had died. The "cause of death" was largely attributed to rampant epidemic diseases. But, as many visitors noted, the Indian people at the missions seemed to have fallen into a deep despondency and depression. Most of the survivors seemed to have little will to live. They lost everything when their culture was forcibly stripped from them.

Meanwhile, the tribes in the interior began to better prepare themselves against the aggressions. They acquired horses and learned the skills of warfare for self-defense.

Early Mission Revolts

The first serious California mission revolt occurred at California's first mission, San Diego, on November 4, 1775, six years after its founding.

Six months later San Francisco's Mission Dolores was founded, and the very first group of local Ohlone Indians at the mission quickly made a mass escape across the bay in their tule canoes. They returned several months later and attacked the mission. The first prolonged armed resistance on the San Francisco peninsula began in 1793, with raids led by a former neophyte named Charquin. The history of San Francisco's Mission Dolores was one of constant escape; the missionaries found it impossible to hold onto a stable population, except in the cemetery.

At first the East Bay Ohlone villages were refuges to which runaways escaped. The villages of the Sacalanes and Cuchillones, who lived near the Carquinez strait, provided sanctuary to escapees. In 1795, 1805, 1813 and again in 1819, contingents of soldiers were sent against villages hiding escapees. As nearby villages were decimated one by one, runaways had to find sanctuary further inland, in the Central Valley and the Sierras.

There were similar revolts at every mission in the system.

Mexican Independence

In 1821, after a decade of civil war, with Mexican Indians engaged in virtually every battle, México won independence from Spain. Despite the promise of new rights for Indians, it was business as usual at the missions. California became a Criollo colony instead of a Spanish one, still dominated by people of Spanish descent, but now México-born. A power struggle ensued between the Franciscan missionaries, still loyal to the Spanish king, and the new rising class of rich rancho owners, imbued with republican ideas and ideals. Debate raged over a proposal to secularize and abolish the missions, freeing the Indians and dividing mission property among them. This was not new. It had been first ordered by the Spanish Cortés (parliament) in 1813, but the law was not even published in California until 1821, and then it was ignored.

The Indian people could not miss the chaos and changes in the air. Indian revolts escalated in frequency and intensity. In Southern California in 1824 there was a joint uprising at Missions La Purísima, Santa Inés and Santa Barbara.

Broken relations between Mexico and Spain created a missionary shortage, as the Spanish King could no longer send over replacements or pay salaries. At Mission San José in 1826 Padre Durán transferred his 19-year partner Fortuni to northernmost Mission Solano, and thereafter ran San José alone.

During this solitary period Durán must have turned to his protegé Estanislao in ways he never did when his partner Fortuni was there.

That Fall, thirty San José neophytes never returned from a visit to the Cosumne river. Durán sent a military expedition against them, which burned the Cosumne village to the ground, and returned with 44 prisoners, mostly women. A British sea captain visited Mission San José at this time, on the eve of Estanislao's revolt, and witnessed a mass:

"After the bell had done tolling, several alguazils (policemen) went round to the huts, to see if all the Indians were in church, and if they found any loitering within them, they exercised with tolerable freedom a long lash with a broad thong at the end of it...The Indian women who had been captured in the affair with the Cosumnes were placed in a spot where they could see the costly images, and vessels of burning incense, and everything that was going on. The congregation was arranged on both sides of the building, separated by a wide aisle passing along the center, in which were stationed several alguazils with whips, canes and goads to preserve silence and maintain order, and, what seemed more difficult than either, to keep the congregation in the kneeling posture. The goads were better adopted to this purpose than the whips, as they would reach a long way, and inflict a sharp puncture without making any noise. The end of the church was occupied by a guard of soldiers under arms, with fixed bayonets, a precaution which I suppose experience had taught them the necessity of observing."

At about this same time, in November, 1826, Jedediah Smith, a trapper, became the first Anglo-American to reach California overland, by the southern route. On his way back north he passed through Mission San José. He then continued on to the Lacquisamne River, where he camped between January and May, 1827. Just as Smith left

the Lacquisamne, 400 neophytes fled Mission San José and scattered in that area. Durán blamed Smith, claiming that he had offered runaways Anglo-American protection.

The stage was finally set for the culmination of decades of resistance, Estanislao's rebellion, which would shatter the last remnants of confidence of the California mission system.

Estanislao's Rebellion

In October, 1828, like every October at the end of the harvest season, Padre Durán granted permission to one half of the Indian community to return to their traditional homes for four weeks. He permitted this to alternate halves of the community each year. There they would visit relatives and take part in the forest harvest of acorns, pine nuts, seeds and roots. On November 8, 1828, a group of returning neophytes brought Durán a message from Estanislao, saying that the Laquisamnes would not be back. He added a mocking challenge: "We are not afraid of the soldiers, who are just a few boys and can't shoot." The many Laquisamnes living at nearby Mission Santa Clara also did not come back, as well as the few who were at Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista. Co-leaders with Estanislao were Cipriano, who had organized the Santa Clara Laquisamnes, and Estanislao's brother Sabulon.

Durán saw Estanislao as threatening a general uprising, and in panic shot off a letter to Comandante Martinez of the San Francisco Presidio: "Everything depends upon capturing dead or alive a certain Estanislao from this mission and a person from Santa Clara called Cipriano."

A force of 20 soldiers was sent against them the following month, and located them near a river bank. "The village was located in the middle of a willow thicket. These bushes, interlaced one with the other by the great quantity of runners and stems of grapevines, made the area inaccessible even to the rays of the sun, not to speak of affording entry for fighting." Of the 20 soldiers, 18 came quickly running back. "The Indians accomplished their first triumph over our troops and solemnized it with great celebrations and dances"

Over the next months, Estanislao waged a campaign of guerrilla harassment against the missions and ranchos.

It was not until the next May, 1829, that the soldiers tried again, this time with a larger force of 40, equipped with an artillery piece, under the direction of Sargeant José Sanchez. They fought their way into the thicket until they encountered "a stockade of thick, strong timbers."

Estanislao appeared and cried, "We will defend ourselves and die here."

Sanchez shot a mortar at the stockade, but the gun carriage broke. In the fighting, two soldiers were killed and eight badly wounded; the Laquisamnes captured six muskets. Sanchez and his men beat a hasty retreat. As they did, Estanislao came out, holding a captured gun. He fired a shot at the soldiers, then threw his hat in the air.

Over the next months Estanislao consolidated his position. To the Spanish, it seemed like a dire threat. Commander Martinez wrote to Sargeant Mariano Vallejo:

"The Indian rebels from Missions San José and Santa Clara have gathered together at the rivers, resolved to die rather than surrender. They are extremely insolent, committing murders and stealing horses, stripping bare the unwary, seducing the other Christians to accompany them in their evil and diabolical schemes, openly insulting our troops and ridiculing them and their weapons. They are relying on the manpower of the wild Indians, on the terrain and positions which they are occupying..., and on the losses which we have suffered."

Finally Vallejo returned to Estanislao's fortress, with another cannon and almost every non-Indian male in northern California, 107 armed soldiers and civilians, as well as 50 neophyte "auxiliaries". Vallejo had the thicket surrounded on three sides, with the cannon and more troops on the opposite river bank. His men set the woods on fire, while Sgt. Sanchez led a frontal attack. Despite an afternoon of bombardment, the Indians fought the army to a stand-still. The next day Vallejo entered the thicket. The fire had burned away much of the dense underbrush, exposing a network of "innumerable well-dug ditches communicating internally with each other, such that troops could inflict no damage on the defenders." The fortress was empty. The Indian force had disappeared during the night.

Vallejo went after them, and the next morning he reached a similar site ten miles away, where they found Estanislao's force barracaded in "a system of pits and trenches constructed even better than in the preceding thicket." They set the brush on fire and attacked with the artillery. But again the Laquisamnes fought the army to a stand-still, and, again, most of the Indians were gone under darkness. Unfortunately Vallejo's search turned up "three old Indian women... They were pulled out of the bushes and shot on the spot." The soldiers went on to commit other atrocities against several captives.

Vallejo followed Estanislao no further. He returned with "a harvest of children," whom he captured somewhere on the way back. These were "distributed" to colonists.

Not long afterward, Estanislao suddenly appeared at Mission San José and offered peace to Padre Durán. To his credit, Durán had been horrified at Vallejo's atrocities, and had filed a complaint against him. So Estanislao and Durán made their peace. Durán procured a pardon for the Laquisamnes from the governor.

The rebellion had shaken the mission system to its core. No one could any longer ignore its devastating failure. The friars had begun by dreaming a Christian Utopia, and ended by creating an earthly Hell. Never again would the army be sent after runaways. This was the last major offensive against the California Indians. The disbanding of the mission system was near.

For Vallejo the affair was only a steppingstone in his rise to General, and the ultimate honor of giving his name to a city.

After that, Estanislao divided his time between the mission and his village. The very next summer a report states, "Estanislao, the Christian chief who rebelled last year and

was pardoned, is now in the tulares (by the river) by permission of the Father, and has 100 horses."

Padre Durán left Mission San José in 1833, for a position further south.

The mission system was disbanded the following year. While mission property was supposed to be divided among the Indians, it almost all wound up in the hands of Spanish-Criollos. But the Indian people were finally allowed to live where and how they chose, at least according to law. Many returned to their traditional villages, to the land.

A report a few years later states, "There were two tribes or villages of Indians who made frequent raids to rob horses... One of these was captained by the famous Estanislao, from whom the river took its name, and the other by his brother Saulon, little less renowned than he."

Estanislao—Cucunuchi— is said to have died in a smallpox epidemic in 1839.

Seventy years of resistance by the California Indians seemed finally to be ending in a moment of victory. But victory was to be cut short by the Anglo-American invasion of the next decade.

The Anglo Invasion

The Anglo-American invasion of 1848 brought even greater devastation than had the missions. While the Spanish oppressed the native people, the Anglo-Americans simply wanted the land, and wanted the Indians removed from it by any means necessary. Anglo society was even more racist than Spanish-Criollo, and there was hardly a place in it at all for Indians and people of mixed blood. Over the next several years, a horrible slaughter of California Indians occurred, combined with a wanton destruction of the land and natural environment. The Indians' ability to survive in the old ways was blocked, and a law was passed in 1850 making Indian "vagrancy" a crime punishable by forced servitude to Anglos. Kidnapping and sale of Indian children and young women was rampant.

Treaties were negotiated between the U.S. government and 18 California tribes in 1851-52. Seven million acres of reservation land were promised. But Anglo settlers blocked ratification by Congress. Every one of the 18 treaties were unilaterally scrapped by the U.S. government. The direct result of this was that the Indians had no refuge from the genocide by the Anglo-Americans. Between 1850 and 1870, about 70,000 California Indians died, bringing the population to a low of about 30,000. California Indian population declined 90% in the first 100 years of European colonialism.

Indian Survival

Yet the California Indian people survived and have come back. Little by little over many decades some of the California tribes did manage to establish some land claims. Those lacking land were devastated far worse than the few who had a land base. Land has always been the key to cultural and physical survival for Indian people, providing a sacred place where communal sustenance can happen.

California Indians were among the first victims of "termination" in the 1950s. This was the BIA policy to disband, to de-tribalize all Indians, to sell off their land and to repudiate all Government responsibility toward native people. Terminated land was divided among registered tribe members, and most of it ultimately sold to Anglos. Before this policy was stopped by Indian activism, 36 California tribes and rancherías were terminated.

Over time, the problems of the Indians of California became increasingly similar to the problems of all Indigenous people in what is now the United States.

The 1960s issued in a new era of activism for Indian people, not only in California but throughout the Americas. The struggle was re-engaged to protect Indian burial sites and for educational reform, including radically changing school texts dealing with Indians. One early leading organization was the American Indian Historical Society, founded by Rupert Costo, Cahuilla tribal chair. An ultimate result of decades of struggle by numerous people and groups, has been the formation of Native American Studies departments at various California universities and colleges, as well as the establishment of DQ University near Davis, the first Indian-run college in the state.

The modern era of Indian activism can be said to date from November, 1969, when a group calling itself Indians of All Tribes seized Alcatraz Island. Their acts were premised on a broken treaty calling for the return of Alcatraz to the Indigenous people when it was no longer being used by the State. For two years they held onto the island, under the close watch of the international media, inspiring innumerable others to resist.

Resistance to oppression has continued in many forms. Native Californians today are struggling with more weapons than ever before, to preserve what land-base they have left, and for cultural survival. The issues continue to be land reform, environmental quality, cultural rejuvenation, land and mineral rights, education, health care.

Another factor coming increasingly into play has been the enormous influx into California of Indian people of all tribes and nations, not only from North America, but from Latin America as well.

In today's Caswell State Park, by the grapevine-tangled bank of the Stanislaus River, near to where it joins the San Joaquin, you can find a small metal plaque commemorating the site of the battle fought between Cucunuchi-Estanislao and Vallejo, between the California Indians, fighting for their lives and freedom, and the invaders, fighting for conquest.

Go there, walk in the footsteps of Cucunuchi, and commemorate the centuries of Indian resistance.

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