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Feeding family and ancestors: Persistence of traditional Native American lifeways during the Mission Period in coastal Southern California

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Highlights

- Native American lifeways during the Spanish Mission Period.
- Persistence of traditional subsistence practices in southern California.
- Prominence of wild plant remains in mortuary, mourning, and feasting ceremonies.
- Minor selective addition of domesticates into ritual events.

Abstract

This study examines the role of plant foods in domestic and ceremonial contexts at a Native American Gabrieliño/Tongva village occupied during the Spanish Mission Period in coastal southern California and highlights the remarkable persistence of traditional practices. Prior perspectives of the Mission Period have stressed that Native lifeways were quickly and profoundly disrupted in areas near newly established Spanish missions in California. This study reveals that despite the unprecedented changes associated with Spanish colonization, Native Americans within the Los Angeles Basin continued to emphasize native plant foods during mortuary events, mourning ceremonies, and feasting. Food, especially during ritual events, is a medium that cements the community together and reinforces social networks. By continuing the traditional emphasis on local wild plants, along with selective use of new introduced domesticated plants, food remained an important agency of cultural identity that helped the Gabrieliño/Tongva to maintain and reinforce social relationships during a period of dramatic culture change.

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Keywords

Food; Ritual; Colonial; Mission; Mortuary; Mourning; Feasting; Grasses; Domesticated plants

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