THE CULTURE OF CALIFORNIA ARCHAEOLOGY AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE TO SYNTHESIS

Joseph L. Chartkoff
Department of Anthropology
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824

ABSTRACT

Anthropology teaches that all communities develop cultural patterns and traditions; anthropology and its subdisciplines, like other intellectual communities, are not immune from this dynamic. The community of California archaeologists has evolved over the past century from Boasian-Kroeberian roots. More than most archaeological communities in North America, California archaeology has maintained a high degree of internal enculturation, so that distinctive features of its cultural tradition have endured. One element noted here has been a persistent pattern of synthesis avoidance. While many notable achievements of California archaeologists have emerged despite this characteristic, this paper argues that avoidance of synthesis is a maladaptive trait both intellectually and politically in terms of the position of California archaeology in the larger communities of North American and world archaeology. It further argues that change in this cultural feature would be adaptively beneficial for both California's archaeological community as a whole and its individual members.

Introduction

As one of the relatively few California archaeologists based elsewhere in North America, I have a somewhat unique position from which to view my field. On the one hand, my professional career takes place mainly in another region where that region's local archaeology dominates. I have been fortunate to be able to participate in that community to some extent, giving me a comparative perspective I never had when I lived in California, participated in California archaeology, and worked at campuses where California archaeology dominated field activity. On the other hand, my very distance from California makes me something of an outsider to my chosen research area, far more so than for a practitioner who lives and works there. It gives me a position somewhat akin to that of an ethnographic participant observer, rather than a community member, when I return to California for meetings or research.

In addition, my continuing involvement with teaching general anthropology keeps fresh in my perspective an awareness of the dynamics of culture at the community level, including those communities in which I participate, such as California archaeology. This awareness becomes part of my perception when I read the literature on the area's archaeological research. Distance makes me particularly reliant on literature as a means to keep abreast of the field, perhaps making me more conscious than might otherwise be the case of patterning in the conceptual orientations of my colleagues. One result has been an appreciation of some characteristics shared among members of the community of California archaeologists that tend to make it distinctive among the communities of archaeologists in North America. One aspect of that pattern of characteristics concerns what may be called avoidance of synthesis.

California Archaeologists as a Cultural Group

Before considering the concept of synthesis, it is necessary to discuss the concept of regarding California archaeologists as sharers of a body of culture. Without belaboring the point too much, one can turn to any introductory textbook in Anthropology to find definitions for such elementary anthropological concepts as culture, community, ethnic group or ethnicity (see, for example, Kottak 1994, or Schultz and Lavenda 1995). If the group of specialists who do research on California archaeology are considered from such perspectives, it is obvious that California archaeologists do not constitute an ethnic community in the sense of a self-sustaining biological population which shares a cultural tradition. It can be seen, however, from the perspective of a voluntary association, perhaps like a sodality, but certainly like any of thousands of such associations to be found within modern complex societies.

Such an association is formed by a group of individuals with shared interests, values, attitudes, beliefs, traditions, knowledge and practices. This shared body of content is certainly learned, because archaeologists all go through undergraduate and graduate education to acquire it, through both formal and informal means. Its members form numbers of social networks that sustain and reinforce the shared content. A variety of mechanisms work to insure continuity and conformity and to define allowable limits to ranges of variation. The primary means of population replacement is through recruitment from the larger population. Most recruitment is done in college and university programs, where enculturation is highly organized and institutionalized. Whether on campuses or in other arenas, the workplace functions something like a household as a setting for local interaction and adaptation. When fieldwork is conducted many other aspects of household living also occur as shared experiences.

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Cultural patterns shared within this organization transcend the participation of individuals. The cultural patterns acquired by individuals already exist before the individuals enter the community and continue to exist after the individual leaves the community. On this basis it may be said that such a body of culture is truly superorganic.

Leaving aside the specific example of fieldwork, such may be said of any persisting voluntary associations, including groups of archaeologists in any region. California archaeologists may be said to share cultural patterns, some of which are shared among archaeologists generally, and others of which are distinctive of its particular group. This discussion draws attention to some features of culture that are especially distinctive of the community of California archaeologists.

Cultural Distinctiveness of California Archaeologists

Among North America's states and provinces, California maintains an unusually large community, with more than 800 practicing archaeologists in the field. This size reflects in part the state's own large population, the largest in the U.S. It also reflects the large number of campuses at which archaeology is taught. California's size and location have given it a particularly large number of local, state and federal offices which employ archaeologists. More than anything else, though, California's unique legislation, the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (CEQA), gives the state an absolutely, uniquely high level of archaeological activity at the university, government and private-sector levels. As Charles E. Cleland recently advised me, fully one-quarter of all the members of the Society of Professional Archaeologists in the United States are from California (Cleland 1995). This large population size, combined with high energy or activity levels and California's relatively isolated geographical position, give archaeologists in the state a significant degree of isolation from archaeological communities elsewhere. Location is part, but only part, of the reason. California archaeologists have never interacted with archaeologists in other regions to the level found elsewhere. In a physics sense, however, the high energy level of the California system give it a distinctive trajectory with a relative degree of impermeability not found elsewhere, even allowing for isolation. Its internal mass gives its system a measure of inertia on its trajectory that makes deviation from the trajectory particularly costly to achieve. An example of this dynamic may be the cultural pattern characteristic of California archaeologists which here is called resistance to synthesis.

Patterns of Synthesis in North American Archaeology

The concept of synthesis will be developed more fully in the following discussion. At this point, however, synthesis will be termed an intellectual activity in which ideas about data observations are conceived at a more abstract level of generalization than a summary or comprehensive compilation of the data itself provides. Although Webster's Dictionary includes a summary as one meaning of synthesis, it also notes that, from the perspective of chemistry, a synthesis involves the creation of a new compound from elements, each of which is simpler than the resulting compound. In philosophy, synthesis involves the use of deductive reasoning as well as induction from data patterns, implying that a synthesis involves derivations from more general laws or law-like principles of nature (*Webster's New World Dictionary* 1986:1445). The term synthesis is used here in these latter two senses.

The development of synthetic overviews of prehistory in archaeology can be traced back at least to the 19th century. Denis de Peyrony's organization of France's Stone Age archaeology for the 1867 Paris World's Fair is an example (Daniel 1975). Movements to develop syntheses of North American prehistory emerged later because archaeology did not become widely practiced until more recently. Archaeologists in the eastern 2/3 of the continent, however, starting more than a half century ago, had begun to develop a regional system for synthesizing the course of prehistory (a good example, not quite that old, is Caldwell 1958).

That model conceives of the course of prehistory as forming four successive phases: Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland and Mississippian. Whether or not one agrees with the validity of the model or its utility for California is not at question here. What is significant is that the model achieves a level of generality which incorporates all the ranges of archaeological variability over time and space across most of a continent. By finding broader-level regularities than are reflected in local chronologies, the model reflects a degree of synthesis previously unachieved.

It is useful to appreciate the obstacles that had to be overcome to do so. There was no unified community of archaeologists at that time in any cultural sense. Universities were as varied as Harvard, the University of Mississippi and Beloit College. The archaeology to be synthesized was extremely varied, ranging from ancient hunting camps such as Clovis to massive urban and monument centers with chiefdom or greater-level organizations such as Cahokia. The environments to be incorporated were also extremely diverse, ranging from the tropics to the Arctic and from ocean coast and the Great Lakes to the Great Plains and high mountains. And yet, practitioners were able to perceive, and to develop to a workable degree, understandings of general patterning and dynamics through the course of prehistory that transcended both all the local variations in data and all the intellectual diversity among the archaeologists.

This integration, it should be emphasized, constitutes not just a synthetic model of culture history. It also implies theoretical assumptions about significant variables in shaping culture change, of causation and patterning. Even while many processual archaeologists derided it, the model represented a level of nomic synthesis more substantial than often appreciated.

It also is important to appreciate that the synthetic model of North American prehistory which was developed incorporated a much greater range of diversity in space, ecology, data and intellectual orientation than can be found in California. An often-heard position among Californianists is that the range of archaeological diversity in that state is too broad to be easily

integrated. Although California data are, indeed, quite varied, they simply do not possess the range of variation that has been integrated elsewhere. It also is true that California possesses an astonishing range of ecological variability in a relatively moderate space, but the ecological diversity in eastern North America is at least as great.

If those obstacles could be overcome by archaeologists elsewhere in North America, when faced with challenges at least as great as those facing Californianists, the lack of synthetic integration cannot be explained by the existence of the obstacles. The lack of synthetic perspectives in California archaeology exists because its scholars have not undertaken to develop them. One might argue that California archaeologists have avoided participating in the continental model because it is not especially applicable to California data, a position which may or may not have some merit. At the same time, however, Californianists have not developed alternative models of comparable synthetic integration. One result is that California archaeologists have much less participation in the continental community of scholarship than they might otherwise have. To try to understand why this cultural divergence has developed is a challenging anthropological problem.

Several possible factors may be suggested, including some not discussed here. Some of the explanation, I think, may be found in a perception that research orientations among California archeologists reflect the workings of larger cultural processes. This viewpoint begins with an assumption that California archaeologists participate in a relatively cohesive cultural tradition which has historical roots, which has a generally consistent means of transformation, which has relative separation from rival traditions, and which has a content that is partly divergent from that followed elsewhere where integration is more developed. That such a tradition exists within California archaeology is an assertion here that I believe is plainly evident. The historical development of California's archaeological scholarly tradition, I believe, explains at least in part how and why these conditions exist.

Some aspects of this history have already been noted, such as large population in a distinctive territory with a high level of energetics. A review of the AAA *Guide to Departments* suggests that California archaeology also has a disproportionately high tendency to place into its archaeological practice professionals who were trained in California. Although there is some tendency everywhere for local institutions to train local archaeologists, the degree to which such large numbers come from institutions in the same state seems unique among the states and provinces of North America.

If this is the case, it establishes a system of internal cultural transmission rather like endogamy in genetics. The effects of intellectual inbreeding would be manifested more strongly in California than anywhere else. If one compared California with, say, the Southwest, one could see in the Southwest that regional specialists were employed in the several Southwestern states with a good deal of movement from one state's university, government and private cultural resource management systems to others. It also can be seen that specialists who do research in that region are to be found in institutions in many other parts of the continent. This diversity is far less characteristic of California than for any other part of the continent.

It also can be noted that the intellectual foundations of California archaeology had a quite narrow base until fairly recently. As reported by Moratto (1984) and others, the main training ground for California archaeologists in the first half of the 20th century was the University of California at Berkeley. There, Kroeber's orientation of cultural historical particularism was especially strongly felt. When teaching and research programs opened at other campuses in the 1940s and 1950s, the key figures were mainly scholars trained at Berkeley, such as Meighan at UCLA, Heizer, Bennyhoff and Elsasser at Berkeley, Treganza at San Francisco State, Baumhoff at Davis, and Wallace at USC. The significance of Riddell, who was trained at Berkeley and served as the state's archaeologist and contract officer for a generation, also is worth noting.

When the next generation of researchers was developed, the influence of the Berkeley-trained faculty was strongly continued. A few examples include James O'Connell, David Fredrickson, Jerald Johnson, Makoto Kowta, Delbert True, Michael Moratto, Michael Glassow, Philip Wilke, Keith Johnson, Chester King, Claude Warren, Margaret Lyneis, James West, Eric Ritter, Frank Rackerby, William Pritchard, William Olson, Robert Bettinger and Emma Lou Davis, though many others could and should also be listed, the present writer included.

It cannot and should not be argued that these scholars were so strongly shaped by Berkeley's influence that they never developed new ideas, perspectives or innovations. To the contrary, it has been an extremely stimulating, creative and dynamic community. Yet some significant threads of continuity from the Berkeley influence of Kroeber still may be traced over time in this community, precisely because it has been more insular and self-replicating than archaeological communities elsewhere.

At a more general level, the coherence of Californianists and their distinction from archaeological communities elsewhere in North America may also reflect larger cultural dynamics of California's society as a whole. A reasonable argument may be made that, among the American states, California has a particularly pronounced cultural differentiation from the cultural patterns seen in other states. If so, this sense of distinctiveness may have some effect on the enculturation of California archaeologists, given their already-existing isolation from other archaeological traditions. But whatever factors may eventually be shown responsible, California archaeology can be distinguished by its internal lack of synthetic overview and its external lack of integration with important orientations found among archaeological communities elsewhere in North America. This divergence is reflected in the way California has been treated in books about North American prehistory, among other things.

The Continuity of Particularism

While archaeologists in most parts of the continent have interacted strongly for several generations, California has gone its own way, and the treatment California prehistory receives in studies of continental prehistory are one indication. A good example may be seen in the work of Jesse D. Jennings (1968, 1974, 1989), whose *Prehistory of North America* arguably has been the dominant continental book-length interpretation for more than a generation. In his books, Jennings invariably treats California as a unique phenomenon whose course of prehistory stands apart from that of most of the continent. His general pattern has been to regard the whole range of prehistoric cultures in California as the equivalents of the Archaic cultures of eastern North America. He sees no parallels between the climax cultures of California and those of the east. He is not even able to present California cultures in any unified perspective, but rather gives summaries of the local sequences in the southern California coast, the central Valley, and northwestern California (for example, Jennings 1989: 173-177). It would be one thing if this presentation were a peculiarity of Jennings, but that does not seem to be the case. One can review works as diverse as Fiedel (1987:136-7), Cressman (1977), Kopper (1986), Willey (1966) or Aikens (1983) and find similar presentations.

To no small extent this pattern must be seen as a reflection of the noninvolvement of California archaeologists in the general models used for most of the continent. Even more, it most likely reflects the lack of a synthetic, unified vision of California's prehistoric cultural evolution among the practitioners of California archaeology themselves. The synthesizers of North American prehistory inevitably are not California archaeologists and must depend on the work of Californianists for their understanding of the state's prehistory. Their inability to integrate California into continental syntheses is, more than anything else, a reflection on the state of synthetic thinking among Californianists—which is to say the comparative lack of it.

To illustrate, the most important general work on California archaeology for many decades has been Moratto's *California Archaeology* (1984). Reflecting an astonishing mastery of research literature, schools of thought and history of literature, this book presents the most comprehensive overview of California archaeological research yet achieved. Yet, as great a *tour de force* as the book has been, it does not at all achieve a synthesis of the development of prehistoric culture within this single state. It subdivides the state into seven discrete regions, each of which is thoroughly reviewed but by four different authors, and separates the earlier phases of state prehistory even from these regional treatments. It lacks any concluding chapter which offers any more general perspectives. Its only integrating mechanism in the concluding chapter is the use of a linguistic model to explain cultural change and variability. Even so, it is far more comprehensive than any previous work, such as Heizer (1964, 1978) or Meighan (1959).

This is not to say that the Moratto book reflects no synthesis at all. In it, major regions are discussed in relatively unified terms, some for the first time at even that level. It should also be noted that other publications have achieved some degree of regional synthesis. Some writers, such as Fredrickson (1974) and Warren and Crabtree (1972) had achieved earlier overviews of portions of the state. Others have done so more recently (e.g. Breschini and Haversat 1989, 1991).

The much more common pattern among California archaeologists, however, has been the emphasis on local sequences and their replacement by re-defined local sequences when new data have allowed. The historic evolution of the Delta sequence from Lillard, Heizer and Fenenga (1939) to Beardsley (1954) to Ragir (1972) is probably the best-known example. The now-widespread use of Chester King's sequence for the Santa Barbara coast (1981, 1990) as a replacement for the Rogers sequence (1929) is another, and many others might be named.

Meaning and Utility of Synthesis

These comments do not suggest that refinements of models of local prehistoric sequences are unworthy objectives. Part of the central purpose of archaeology is the study of culture over time. Growing knowledge definitely should be reflected in models that are modified or replaced. Yet time is only one of the dimensions that archaeologists must consider (in Spaulding's [1960] terms). Lack of emphasis on synthesis reflects in part a lack of emphasis on another dimension of archaeology as significant as time: that of space. The documentation of variation and stability, of continuity and change, across space is as legitimate and essential to archaeological thought as is concern for change over time. Comparison of the southern California coast with the northern California coast, of the Colorado Desert with the Central Valley, of the Sierra Nevada with the Southern Cascades or the Coast Ranges or the Klamath Range, and indeed all of them together, is as fundamental to an understanding of past California culture as is mastery of the sequence of prehistoric developments in any one area. Yet this dimension of spatial comparison is very nearly entirely missing from the California literature, while studies of local sequences abound.

This consuming emphasis on local sequences, I would argue, is a cultural heritage from Boas, Kroeber and Heizer themselves. The lack of equal emphasis on spatial comparison represents a major lack in California archaeology that does not characterize archaeology east of the Rockies to anything approaching the same extent.

But a one-sided emphasis on change over time is only part of the pattern. As used here, the term synthesis refers to more than just equal emphasis on time and space. Synthesis involves more than just summary and generalization. To assert a continental pattern for cultural evolution, whatever that pattern may be, is to move to a higher order of abstraction than simply a summary of specific data as an inductive generalization. It involves the implementation of nomic assumptions about general patterns which transcend local variations in detail. It

asserts lawlike concepts about causal principles which are felt to have governed or shaped the course of history. It indicates more general trends which may be expressed in a variety of ways by local manifestations, going beyond simply grouping similar manifestations in a mechanical taxonomy.

It is at this level of synthesis that archaeology functions as a form of science. It is at this level of synthesis that the use of general processes, principles or laws can be applied to cases varied in detail, to account for different situations through common explanation. It is at this level of synthesis that archaeologists can both make use of, and contribute to, a body of lawlike principles reflecting understandings of the nature of culture and cultural evolution. It is at this level of synthesis that general theory becomes truly applied to our subject. In failing to be engaged in the task of synthesis, California archaeologists are failing to contribute to some of the most important and profound intellectual activities which distinguish archaeology from antiquarianism, much less pot hunting.

Other consequences of the resistance to synthesis may be suggested. For example, California has some of the finest training programs in the nation, as well as a host of outstanding practitioners and extremely talented students. One might think that programs elsewhere would be eager to hire away California's talent, but such is not often the case. One of the reasons, I suggest, is because California archeologists have not had all that much to say that is perceived by scholars elsewhere as having much bearing on research elsewhere at a general or comparative level.

There is no good reason why things should not be very different. One way to respond, I suggest, is for those of us engaged in California archaeology to devote more energy to thinking about the archaeology of California as such, and to try to understand California's archaeological record more from the perspective of American archaeology as a whole.

Notes

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