PROBLEMS IN PARADIGMS: CULTURAL "COMPLEXITY" IN COASTAL CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of California's maritime peoples is well established in historical and ethnographic accounts, as well as Late Holocene archaeological records. Tracing the emergence of such complexity, however, one of the primary goals of California archaeologists for the last 20 years, is fraught with difficulties. In this paper, I discuss some problems related to defining and identifying "complexity" in the archaeology of the California coast. I conclude that the anthropological concept of complexity, as well as some of the processual paradigms used in its identification, is problematic.

The chronicles of early European visitors to the Pacific Coast of North America, recorded during the 16th to 19th centuries AD, indicate that much of the coast was thickly populated by people who lived in large and relatively permanent settlements. Historic and ethnographic accounts indicate that California's coastal peoples were characterized by diverse and intensive economies in which aquatic and terrestrial resources both played important and complementary roles. Sociopolitically complex, they also had relatively elaborate material cultures to facilitate a wide range of hunting, fishing, collecting, manufacturing, and ceremonial pursuits. They actively participated in extensive social and commercial networks, exchanging goods and ideas over a region that ultimately encompassed much of western North America.

Archaeologically, California has one of the most thoroughly studied coastlines on earth, though the intensity of such research still varies up and down the coast (see Jones 1991). It is also clear that California's maritime peoples have great time depth, at least along the south and central coasts, where they settled the mainland and at least two of the Channel Islands by at least 10,000 years ago (Erlandson 1994; Erlandson and Moss 1996). In these circumscribed coastal environments, Native Californian societies grew and prospered for millennia, leaving a rich record of their cultural history. Listed in Breschini et al. (1996), in fact, are over 1000 14C dated coastal sites. These include a handful of sites dated to the terminal Pleistocene (10,000-12,000 RYBP), about 100 dated to the Early Holocene (10,000-6750 RYBP), well over 200 to the Middle Holocene (6750-3350 RYBP), and roughly 700 to the Late Holocene (3350-0 RYBP). These sites, as well as numerous others that have never been radiocarbon dated, represent a vast reservoir of information with which to study the development of California's maritime societies and adaptations.

The search for complexity and explanations for its development have structured much of what Pacific coast archaeologists have done for the past 20 years. Complexity is unquestionably a "hot topic" in American archaeology and a buzz word widely used by California archaeologists, myself included. In this short paper, I want to pose a few questions and briefly explore some issues related to complexity and the scales at which we seek to understand the archaeology of the California coast. Why did Native peoples of the California coast become complex? How complex were they? How did such complexity develop and how did it vary through space and time? What changes in demography, subsistence economies, technology, and sociopolitical organization are evident in the archaeological record? What forces influenced these changes and how did transitions from early egalitarian societies to the stratified and elaborated Late Holocene societies occur? Some of these are relatively simple questions and, with such a vast data base available, the answers...
should be decidedly knowable. Why then should
the search for answers be so problematic, so
contentious at times, and subject to such varied
explanations? The fact that such questions
continue to generate considerable debate
suggests that the root of the problem is not a lack
of data but the very nature of anthropological and
archaeological paradigms related to complexity, its
identification, and its interpretation.

COMPLEXITY: A SIMPLISTIC PARADIGM

The problem lies largely in the nature of
human knowledge, in our urge to classify things
into dichotomous frameworks - artificial polarities -
or bounded boxes like bands, tribes, chiefdoms,
and states. In an excellent 1996 volume called
Debating Complexity, Tainter (1996:14) made
several important points about the study of human
cultural complexity. These include: (1) there is no
point at which societies become complex, all
human societies are complex to greater or lesser
degrees; (2) it is meaningless to debate whether
particular societies were or were not complex; (3)
the proper focus of study is the processes by
which societies change or maintain their
organizational structure; and (4) all kinds of
societies can collapse, changing their social
structure to less complex forms. In other words,
the levels of complexity humans devise to
organize their societies occur in a bewildering
array of continuous variation, through both space
and time. It should also be pointed out that such
organizing structures can be extremely fluid,
varying by season or circumstance, due to
changes in natural or social environments,
including variations in group size or makeup, the
nature of external threats, and the charisma of
individual leaders. It is this diversity and fluidity,
along with the difficulty of translating a flawed
concept of complexity into tangible material
correlates, that makes it so hard to agree on the
nature and causes of complexity along the
California coast.

The fact is that modern archaeological
paradigms, models, and theories are full of such
artificial polarities: simple vs. complex, tribes vs.
chiefdoms, foragers vs. collectors, agriculturalists
vs. hunter-gatherers, commoners vs. elites,
gradual vs. punctuated change, core vs. periphery, peace vs. war, Gabrielino vs. Chumash,
culture history vs. processual archaeology vs.
post-processual archaeology, maritime vs.
terrestrial, or my own "Gardens of Eden vs. Gates
of Hell" (Erlandson 1994). Each of these polarities
is a simplification of the diversity evident in the
Californias at the time of European contact, or in
the techniques that we use to classify various
phenomena we observe in the archaeological
record. As McGuire (1996:24) recently noted,
such "oppositional thinking creates debates over
false choices that do not advance our
understanding of human experience." The
problems associated with such oppositional
schemes are clearly evident in recent debates
about whether cultural evolution along the
California coast was gradual or punctuated.
Common sense tells us that the cultural evolution
evident in any society over time will occur through
a combination of gradual change punctuated by
periods of more rapid change. Arguing over which
process is most important to cultural evolution
hardly seems productive to me, since the answer
will vary depending on what time period we look at,
which traits we choose to measure, and the
resolution of the archaeological record itself.

Classifying cultures, both archaeological and
historical, has a long history in anthropology,
developing out of antiquated cultural evolutionary
paradigms formulated by 19th century scholars
such as Herbert Spencer and Lewis Henry
Morgan. Morgan (1877) and others believed that
human societies evolved through various stages
of complexity, from savagery, to barbarism, to
civilization. No detailed knowledge of the history
of science is required to guess where European
peoples were placed in these classification
systems and where Native Americans fell. This
problematic paradigm was rejuvenated by White
(1959), Fried (1967), Service (1975), and others
who defined more objective criteria for classifying
cultures into evolutionary stages such as bands,
tribes, chiefdoms, and states. These stages, each
representing an increase in the organizational
complexity of human society, were enshrined in
the concept of progressive evolution that has
been central to processual archaeology for the
past 35 years. Today we all know, of course, that
cultural evolution operates on continuous scales
and that "complex" societies can fall as well as rise.
However, an examination of the incredibly
nuanced diversity with which various social groups (families, ethnic groups, religious groups, craft guilds or unions, sports groups, fraternal organizations, corporations, political groups, etc.) organize themselves within our own society renders our anthropological classification systems hopelessly simplistic. In recent years, I have become increasingly convinced that continuing to shoehorn such cultural variation and dynamism into arbitrary classification schemes is not just fruitless but counterproductive.

For archaeologists, the problem of classifying variation that operates on continuous scales is compounded by the fact that securely identifying many of the traits cultural anthropologists use to classify historical cultures is extremely difficult in the archaeological record. This problem seems evident in a recent debate about when inherited (ascribed) status, one hallmark of chiefdom-level societies, developed among the Chumash, in which different authors come to different conclusions based (in part) on the analysis of different cultural traits and data sets. In my opinion, it is time to ask the heretical question of whether the anthropological notion of a chiefdom continues to have any archaeological utility.

In asking this question, and critiquing the concept of cultural complexity, I do not mean to imply that such debates or classification schemes have not played a useful role in archaeology. One of the central tenets of processual archaeology was that we needed to build and test an explicit body of theory and models to help us interpret the archaeological record and reconstruct human history. Let us not forget, however, that the vast majority of our models are simplified abstractions of reality that are only as good as the data we put in them—garbage in, garbage out as they say.

McGuire (1996:24) noted that the archaeological concept of cultural complexity:

springs from the observation that societies consist of a myriad of interconnected social roles, and that the number and connectedness of these roles varies. Paradoxically, complexity reduces this richness to a single dimension . . . . Thus, we try to understand something that is incredibly complex by making it simple.

Simplified schemes or models hold little utility in the search for understanding the behavioral and organizational complexity inherent in human societies and human history.

I do not accept McGuire's (1996) relatively radical rejections of evolutionary and processual paradigms, although I find much worth pondering in reading his arguments. I do share his call to return archaeology to the more explicitly historical foundations on which it was built. For me this means less emphasis on theorizing and modeling, with fewer but more sophisticated models that more closely approximate the complexity of human societies and ecosystems. It also means more emphasis on the relatively straightforward reconstruction of chronologies, environments, technologies, other lifeways, events, and environments, with comparison of the reconstructed patterns through space and time. For me, it also means ecology and evolution with a more human face, with an emphasis on people, not populations, and on actors, not automatons. Finally, it means less emphasis on such elusive archaeological concepts as "complexity" and simplistic classificatory schemes such as "chiefdom."

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