

**Fiesta en La Misión: Representing Nation
and Community in Baja California****Fiesta en La Misión: representar la nación
y la comunidad en Baja California**Alexandra Hernández Borja¹ & Ana Lilia Nieto Camacho²

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the origins and consolidation of the Fiesta en La Misión, Baja California, founded in 1979, as a process that articulates cultural memory and identity on the northern border of Mexico. The objective is to examine how this celebration operates as an “invented tradition” that integrates local history into a broader national narrative. The methodology combines the theoretical framework of Eric Hobsbawm and Jan Assmann with ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2024, including interviews, participant observation, and audiovisual documentation. The findings show that specialists and community actors selected and reorganized historical milestones into a chronology aligned with post-revolutionary historiography, strengthening senses of territorial and national belonging. As a limitation, the study focuses on a specific community and predominant cultural actors. The article concludes that the festival constitutes a dynamic device for the institutionalization of memory, where state cultural policies and community agency converge.

Keywords: 1. national identity, 2. collective memory, 3. intangible cultural heritage, 4. festival, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analizan los orígenes y la consolidación de la Fiesta en La Misión, Baja California, fundada en 1979, como un proceso que articula memoria cultural e identidad en la frontera norte de México. El objetivo es examinar cómo esta celebración opera como una «tradición inventada» que integra pasado local y narrativa nacional. La metodología combina el marco teórico de Eric Hobsbawm y Jan Assmann con trabajo de campo etnográfico realizado entre 2020 y 2024, incluyendo entrevistas, observación participante y registro audiovisual. Los resultados muestran que especialistas y actores comunitarios seleccionaron y reorganizaron hitos históricos en una cronología alineada con la historiografía posrevolucionaria, fortaleciendo sentidos de pertenencia territorial y nacional. Como limitación, el estudio se centra en una comunidad específica y en actores culturales predominantes. Se concluye que la fiesta constituye un dispositivo dinámico de institucionalización de la memoria, donde convergen políticas culturales estatales y agencia comunitaria.

Palabras clave: 1. identidad nacional, 2. memoria colectiva, 3. patrimonio cultural inmaterial, 4. festividad, 5. México.

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INTRODUCTION

Jan Assmann argues that commemorative practices often take the form of festivals through which social groups engage with the past and articulate the foundations of collective identity. This identity, however, is not part of everyday life, since “collective identity depends on ceremony, something that sets it apart from daily routines,” by establishing a specific time for the community to come together and enabling the enactment and reinterpretation of historically significant elements (Assmann, 2011, p. 38). Similarly, Lisa Lewis (2018), in her analysis of cultural performances in Wales, notes that festivals are moments of structured social relations that “serve as portals to the experience of what it means to be from a place at a particular moment [...] and shape our ability to make meaningful claims about our identity” (pp. 21, 27).

This article examines the annual event known as Fiesta en La Misión, held in the municipality of Ensenada, Baja California, as an “invented tradition” through which collective cultural memory can be accessed. The repetition of a shared ritual renews interpretations of the past and contributes to the consolidation of a sense of unity by fostering the circulation of knowledge about national and local history, as well as the lived experience of collective remembrance. The analysis is based on fieldwork that included the conduction of semi-structured interviews with residents of the town of La Misión during 2020, 2021, and 2024. Some of these interviews were conducted virtually due to the public health contingency caused by COVID-19. In addition, participant observation and audiovisual documentation were carried out of the different components of Fiesta en La Misión, drawing on the program of civic, artistic, and sporting activities held on May 28 and 29, 2022.

Festivities function as a means of transmitting cultural memory. Cultural memory refers to that dimension of collective memory that becomes visible through material forms and is oriented toward a distant past, toward events situated in the “absolute past.” From this past, elements are deliberately selected and preserved, a process that requires specialized institutions to ensure both their conservation and the transmission of meanings that allow them to remain relevant in the present. This selective process reaches into the past only to the extent that the chosen elements are able to convey knowledge about a shared “we” (Assmann, 2008, p. 113), thus forming a corpus of “texts, images, and rituals specific to each society at a given historical moment, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and transmit the self-image of that society,” which each generation reuses and reinterprets (Assmann, 1995, p. 132). Such processes constitute a form of institutionalization of commemorative practices that transform “factual history into remembered history” (Assmann, 2011, p. 38).

Jan Assmann also defines communicative memory as the form of memory through which individual and collective identity is shaped in everyday life. It is characterized by a temporal horizon of approximately 80 to 100 years, is tied to the lifespan of its social carriers, and centers on the transmission of personal and shared experiences (Assmann, 2008). Both cultural memory and communicative memory involve specific uses of the past and are closely interconnected in social practice. For an element of the past to remain actively present within cultural memory, it must convey a form of truth that is meaningful for the group and take shape as a “figure of memory.” Such figures

are composed of an idea and an image that refer to an event, a person, or a place, and they transmit a narrative that provides the group with temporal and spatial coordinates (Assmann, 2011, p. 24).

The work of selecting, interpreting, preserving, and transmitting events, figures and traces of the past is entrusted to specialists, such as academics, priests, poets, and teachers, and is carried out in accordance with the values of the group, particularly those of political and cultural elites (Assmann, 2008). Thus, the past is constructed and remembered in relation to the motivations, objectives, and expectations of the present, and these representations sustain the notion of continuity and unity within the group. Such continuity depends on the means used for the preservation, retrieval, and transmission of the elements of the past that shape processes of remembrance, as well as on the repetition and interpretation of those elements and their meanings (Assmann, 2011). Maintaining meaning through interpretation entails an ongoing process of value formation and reinforcement, as well as the hierarchical ordering of the relevance of the elements that make up the repertoire of memories. This relationship enables the construction of formative and normative narratives about the past that transmit knowledge, define the boundaries of a shared “we,” and indicate the range of possible forms of collective action (Assmann, 1995, p. 132).

In the case of Fiesta en La Misión, a dense network of practices and figures of memory conveys the historical trajectory of the town and its inhabitants within the broader framework of national history and in dialogue with the official nationalism of the 20th century. This festival enables the representation of both the nation and the locality on two levels: a normative level of temporal continuity that transmits knowledge of the past and narrates an “immemorial” nation, and a performative level that expresses local identity and binds the community through embodied practices that refer to a specific time and place (Lewis, 2018).

The cyclical repetition of the festival gives rise to the shared experience of remembering as a community, and this remembrance is situated within a territory understood as “a surface marked [...] by an infinity of traces of past group activities,” which function as “points of reference for memory” (Giménez, 2009, p. 21). The festival itself has played an important role in the organization of an “identity-based territory,” shaped through shared experiences during the cultural performance within the Baja Californian scenery (Giménez, 1999; Giménez, 2005). A distinctive feature of the festival is that the residents of La Misión recognize it as an effort to recover “tradition” and history, in which many of them participated, while also acknowledging the role of the “expert” who helped create it and the “figures of memory” that constitute it.

Fiesta en La Misión represents a process of cultural memory formation that can be described as an “invented tradition.” This concept, proposed by Eric Hobsbawm in 1980, is closely related to cultural memory, as both refer to the recovery of elements from a distant past and their use in symbolizing group identity. The emphasis of Eric Hobsbawm on the formation of national identity, based on the analysis of practices that mobilize the historical past in order to establish a sense of continuity with the present, is especially useful for understanding Fiesta en La Misión.

In the introduction to their classic work *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) define tradition as ritualized practices characterized by stability and invariability. In this

collection of essays, the authors focus on a particular dimension of cultural memory and the historical moment of its formation, namely nationalism and the nation-states of the 19th century. As Assmann notes, cultural memory has been largely shaped by elites, who are responsible for selecting, preserving, and transmitting meanings of the past, since power requires the narration of its origins in order to secure legitimacy (Assmann, 2011).

The consolidation of modern nation-states created especially favorable conditions for selecting and organizing elements of the past into politically oriented narratives and figures of memory. These “invented traditions” comprise sets of practices that “seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1), and were “invented, constructed and formally instituted” in order to produce a version of the historical past aligned with the political and cultural objectives of ruling elites. (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1).

Assmann and Hobsbawm converge in emphasizing the central role of the past in the legitimation of power in the present (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). According to Hobsbawm, traditions may be “invented” within official or political spheres, as well as within nonofficial or social contexts. Within the social sphere are those groups “whose objects were not specifically or consciously political” when they appeal to the past in forming practices that express identity and seek social cohesion (Hobsbawm y Ranger, 1983, p. 263). Nevertheless, he argues that the state provides the broader framework within which such non-official initiatives develop, maintaining the connection between official and non-official traditions. The case of Fiesta en La Misión offers an opportunity to examine the interaction between “invented traditions” emerging from the political sphere and those arising within the social arena, as well as the articulation and transmission of collective memory through the repetition of an “invented tradition” during a period marked by the decline of official nationalism in Mexico.

PROMOTING “MEXICANIDAD” ON THE NORTHERN BORDER THROUGH CULTURAL POLICY

By the late 19th century, following the political transformations associated with the decline of monarchical regimes in the Western world, new narratives promoted the nation-state as the foundation of political organization, grounded in the presumed linguistic, racial, and religious homogeneity of social groups inhabiting a defined territory (Blancarte, 2007). From this model emerged the idea of national identity, aimed at shaping “a community of belonging that offers its members a shared space and time” (López Caballero, 2011, p. 137). In Mexico, various intellectual and political elites sought to articulate interpretations of a common past in order to assert Mexico as a distinct historical entity and to establish that distinctiveness as the basis for national identity. This endeavor can be traced to the currents of Creole patriotism in the 19th century and to the Mexican nationalism that developed after the revolutionary movement of the early 20th century (Brading, 1988).

Since Mexico Independence, the pre-Hispanic past as a foundation of the Mexican nation was promoted through the creation of museums, archaeological excavations, and the production of historiographical works that celebrated the grandeur of Indigenous civilizations. However, this interpretation clashed with another that traced the nation's origins to its Hispanic heritage. Each of these genealogies formed part of the political and ideological struggles that accompanied the consolidation of Mexico as a state throughout the 19th century.

In the 1880s, several intellectuals argued that the antagonistic interpretations of the pre-Hispanic and colonial past posed an obstacle to strengthening the idea of a unified nation. In 1884, Vicente Riva Palacio published the collective work *México a través de los siglos*, the first written work to articulate a progressive narrative linking the successive stages that defined the distinct character of the Mexican nation: the pre-Hispanic past as a civilizing foundation; the viceroyalty as the decisive juncture that gave rise to a mestizo nation; and Independence and the Reform as the foundational periods of the modern nation and the consolidation of the national territory (Florescano, 2005). This conciliatory interpretation of the historical development of Mexico codified the political unity forged after protracted disputes among competing national projects in the decades following independence, establishing key events of national foundation and formation and consolidating itself as the Mexican historical canon.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the governments that arose from the Mexican Revolution renewed efforts to define what constituted “national identity.” Because the “people,” understood mainly as peasants and Indigenous communities, had participated extensively in the armed struggle, the political elite acknowledged the necessity of incorporating them as recognized actors within the new political project. Consequently, “popular culture gradually acquired the status of national culture” (Pérez Montfort, 2005, p. 73). Although artists and intellectuals devoted their attention to studying “the multiple cultural expressions of the majorities,” they emphasized the Indigenous root as the “defining element of *mexicanidad* and of the popular” (Pérez Montfort, 2005, pp. 73–74).

This cultural nationalism reached its most dynamic phase during the 1920s and 1930s and, according to Ricardo Pérez Montfort, was shaped by an elite that approached popular culture from central Mexico. The wide range of cultural expressions present across the national territory encouraged the mass media, with the acquiescence of the state, to produce stereotypes aimed at fostering unity and consensus. In this context, national gender stereotypes became consolidated in figures such as the *charro*, the *china poblana*, and the women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. At the local level, repertoires of “typical” elements were also established, including dress, cuisine, handicrafts, and festivals (Pérez Montfort, 2007, p. 121).

These traditions were successfully diffused among the Mexican population through the mass media, providing support for the idea that its members constituted a nation (Taylor Hansen, 1995). At the same time, with the support of government agencies and private institutions, scientific research, artistic initiatives, and a wide range of commemorative programs and activities were actively promoted. As a result, national imaginaries, understood as shared symbolic representations

of the nation, appeared in newspapers, prints, calendars, films, and civic events, serving as popular vehicles for disseminating the idea of the nation and a common sense of national belonging (Florescano, 2005; Ruiz Mendoza, 2020).

Mexican traditions and stereotypes promoted in the interest of fostering a national identity were largely associated with the cultural expressions, styles, and rhythms of life practiced in central and southern regions of the country. However, northern Mexico did not remain outside this broader effort to identify its “distinct cultural expressions” (Pérez Montfort, 2005, p. 73). Northern identity formation developed at the margins of official nationalism, and the consolidation of specifically northern Mexican traditions and stereotypes can be traced to the 1950s, driven in part by the production and circulation of popular music performers and ensembles from the state of Nuevo León. This musical genre was characterized primarily by the sounds of the accordion, the *bajo sexto*, and *huapango* rhythms. Although the initial aim of promoting this music and its associated dress was to highlight the cultural and economic dynamism of the city of Monterrey, it ultimately became a broader reference point for the northern region within the postrevolutionary cultural imagination (Valdovinos García, 2015).

Cultural nationalism, however, also began to decline during the 1950s. By that time, what was considered “typically Mexican,” along with the identification of national culture with popular culture, had become consolidated as the symbolic link between the state, the nation, and “the people.” As a result, the governing elite increasingly delegated the reproduction of *mexicanidad* to the educational system and the cultural industries. Carlos Monsiváis observes that “national concerns become burdensome to capitalist development” (Monsiváis, 2015, p. 159) in the context of economic expansion that fostered the growth of an urban middle class with more cosmopolitan interests and aspirations (Monsiváis, 2015). This gradual distancing of the state from an explicit commitment to “the national” became more evident as the twentieth century progressed, culminating in a turning point in the mid-1980s with the adoption of a neoliberal economic model. This shift marked the end of the interventionist state and the explicit abandonment of the economic and social frameworks derived from the Revolution (Salazar, 2004).

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, “the national largely shifts from the political sphere to the cultural industry” (Monsiváis, 2015, p. 168). Yet one space remained in which the state continued to play a direct role in reinforcing nationalism and national culture, at least until the 1990s: the border with the United States. The relationship with its northern neighbor has been a central component of Mexican nationalism since the 19th century. For this reason, the Mexican state sought to preserve its influence over the shaping of “*mexicanidad*” in this region, under the premise that national culture is something that “has always existed and that it is our obligation to protect from external contamination and aggression” (Monsiváis, 2015, p. 166). This stance functioned as a defense of sovereignty in the face of the perceived threat of U.S. cultural colonialism among the inhabitants of the northern borderlands.

Since the colonial period of New Spain, the geographic north of the country had been portrayed as a hostile space, largely due to its arid landscape and to its inhabitants, whose nomadic ways of life did not align with the sedentary ideal of civilization associated with central and southern Mexico (Valenzuela Arce, 2003; Rajchenberg & Héau-Lambert, 2007). During the first half of the 19th century, and again toward the end of the 20th century, northern Mexico was also associated with a recurring loss of sovereign control as a result of invasions, wars, alliances, political upheavals, and economic transformations (Vizcarra, 2005). Most notably, the defeat in the war with the United States (1846–1848), which resulted in the loss of more than half of the national territory, triggered a profound crisis in Mexican political and intellectual thought, prompting reflection on how to address the consequences of these events and prevent further territorial losses (Suárez Argüello, 2007).

By the 20th century, in an effort to accelerate economic development in Mexico, substantial investments were directed toward the northern region by foreign companies engaged in the exploitation of agricultural, livestock, and mining resources. As a consequence, northern residents had greater contact with the United States than with their own country, due to the distance and geographic barriers that isolated them, making the region increasingly economically dependent on its neighboring nation. This situation also contributed to border societies being regarded for a long time as distinct from those in other regions of Mexico, and to their inhabitants being criticized for an alleged preference for learning English and a tendency to adopt United States consumption patterns (Taylor Hansen, 2000).

However, as Giménez notes, drawing on Barth, social groups can define their limits and maintain their identity boundaries in the face of social, political, and economic changes, as well as in everyday interaction with other groups; in fact, it is the capacity to maintain boundaries “in interaction with other groups that defines identity” (Giménez, 2009, p. 19). Some of the elements that mark identity boundaries are territory and history, understood as the expression of a “sense of cultural continuity” (Giménez, 2009, p. 20), both of which are put into performance during the festival.

The conditions of economic and demographic development promoted by the presidential administrations from 1934 to 1952 led to Baja California becoming a federal entity in 1952. The articulation of a regional history as part of a growing nation, or the identification of cultural traditions specific to the population, had not been a significant issue in Baja California. Thus, after its elevation to the status of a “free and sovereign” state, the need arose to search for the “traditions” of Baja California—as other states had done in the post-revolutionary period—in order to create a distinct identity that would support the newly acquired political autonomy. As a full member of the federation, the political and economic elite of Baja California showed interest in writing the history of its own development, while also seeking to demonstrate loyalty to the Mexican Republic and to eradicate negative conceptions about this border region, aims that were shared by part of the educational sector of the entity (Ruiz Mendoza, 2020).

Accordingly, between 1963 and 1968 efforts were made to establish a branch of the Sociedad Mexicana de Cultura in Tijuana, with the aim of reinforcing Mexican culture through art, literature, theater, and dance, and thereby strengthening national identity along the northern border (Ruiz Mendoza, 2020). Later, during the 1970s, a broader process unfolded in Baja California marked by the creation of new institutions devoted to cultural promotion, cultural policy, and scientific and academic research, all pursuing the same objective (Ochoa Tinoco, 2009; Ruiz Mendoza, 2020).

During the administration of Milton Castellanos Everardo (1971–1976), the state government established the Dirección de Difusión Cultural del Gobierno del Estado, which identified research on the history of Baja California as one of its principal activities. Through this initiative, the government of Baja California called on academic researchers to deepen scholarly work on the historical and cultural foundations of the region and to provide younger generations with “the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of historical and cultural roots” (Franco Martín, 2012). In an initial phase, historical interpretation in Baja California focused on the viceregal period. Unlike other regions of Mexico, the peninsula does not contain monumental pre-Hispanic settlements that materially anchor representations of an Indigenous past. Instead, the most visible historical remains correspond to the architectural complexes of the mission foundations established in Baja California in the late 17th century, a missionary presence that formally concluded in the mid-19th century.

Local policies were aligned with federal government concerns. Border regions, and particularly the northern border, became key settings for the final phase in which the Mexican state acted as a central agent in shaping national identity and promoting *mexicanidad* through cultural policies that included the invention of traditions and the explicit participation of specialists dedicated to recovering and interpreting the past. Among the civic and cultural initiatives promoted during the 1970s and 1980s to strengthen Mexican identity in border communities were flag ceremonies and regional folk dances (Ruiz Mendoza, 2020). These activities were largely encouraged by members of the teaching profession, who within the social, cultural, and ideological fabric of the population operated in close alignment with state policies, serving as community leaders and as mediators of the nationalist discourse advanced by the federal administration of the period (Martínez, 1977).

In the mid-1980s, the federal government of Mexico, through the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), introduced the Border Cultural Program to preserve and promote expressions of Mexican culture in border areas, with the aim of strengthening awareness of national sovereignty and identity (Agreement of 1985). The program supported the development of cultural infrastructure, particularly the creation of museums and libraries, as well as publications focused on northern Mexico (Ochoa Tinoco, 2009). It also prioritized the organization of a national corps of cultural promoters who would encourage community participation, promote Mexican literature and theater, and especially foster dance and folkloric performances, ensuring that residents in the northern border region had access to the promotion and dissemination of national culture (Martínez, 1977).

*Figures of Memory and the Creation
of Traditions in La Misión*

La Misión is a small semi-arid community in northern Baja California, situated in a valley of the same name. The area is characterized by nearby waterways, low rolling hills dotted with shrubs, and vegetation typical of the coastal scrub. Settlement in this area traces back to the late 18th century, when the Dominican mission of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera was established. The wider zone where the Dominican order carried out missionary work between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries became known as La Frontera. Beyond its religious function, it operated as a military outpost and strategic hub charged with safeguarding mission settlements through armed escorts (León, 2006).

Following a period of abandonment, and amid a series of secularization decrees, colonization policies, and agrarian reforms, the site was transformed into a ranch by the mid-19th century. With the implementation of agrarian reform, the population grew significantly as a result of migration flows to Baja California encouraged by the Mexican state, which sought to “give the ‘Mexico of the south’ a place in the ‘Mexico of the north’” (Samaniego & Antonio, 1999, p. 681). The region was portrayed as a “land of promise,” a place to “build the nation” (Ruiz Mendoza, 2020, p. 7). People arrived carrying cultural backgrounds from different parts of the country, drawn by employment opportunities offered by foreign companies, as well as by commerce, real estate transactions, mining, and political activity (Piñera, 2003).

One of the issues intertwined with the construction of national identity is the role of cultural memory and the creative capacity of social groups to generate their own cultural practices, often expressed through innovative strategies that foster a sense of community. While federal and state governments designed initiatives to counter recurring criticism and negative stereotypes that portrayed Baja California as somehow detached from the nation, members of civil society also became involved in efforts to promote a Mexican identity in the region.

It was in this context that the teachers Mario Reyes Meléndez and Juan Gil Martínez Tadeo came to prominence. Seeking to produce knowledge that would challenge claims of overwhelming U.S. cultural influence in Baja California, Reyes drew on federal initiatives centered on education and culture as tools for fostering national identity. His efforts focused on constructing a shared past, grounding it in tangible historical references, and organizing commemorative events.

Mario Reyes first developed ties with the community of La Misión during the 1960s and 1970s, when he taught in the Facultad de Turismo at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. At the time, the program included field trips across the region to identify sites with tourism potential. Such initiatives were promoted as key strategies for publicizing the history, culture, and traditions of Baja California and, by extension, of Mexico, targeting both local residents and foreign visitors. Beyond his university teaching, Reyes was a cofounder of the Sociedad de Historia de Tijuana, Rosarito, and Loreto, and a member of the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana. He argued that civil society bore responsibility for organizing and taking action to learn about, appreciate, and promote

regional history. In his view, these efforts could cultivate a sense of belonging to Baja California, a land he, like many other migrants, had come to call home (BC Online TV, 2021).

In turn, Professor Martínez Tadeo, after earning a degree in Tourism from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, specialized in the study of folkloric performance traditions. Since the late 1980s, he has been recognized as the principal advocate of the *Calabaceado* dance as a traditional cultural expression of Baja California, both nationally and internationally. Martínez Tadeo explains that “many dance instructors believed it was an invention, but that skepticism led them to visit the communities and see that it is a phenomenon that originated in La Misión” (J. G. Martínez Tadeo, personal communication, November 16, 2024).

Drawing on the values promoted by the Mexican state in the early 1920s, during the formulation of a “national culture,” Reyes and Martínez Tadeo directed their search for *lo bajacaliforniano*—understood as the cultural markers and symbolic repertoire defining Baja Californian identity—toward popular culture. In this process of searching and shaping, what Eric Hobsbawm conceptualized as the “invention of tradition” becomes visible. Festivals and dances function to establish or symbolize social cohesion and group belonging, while also serving as mechanisms of socialization that transmit beliefs, value systems, and behavioral conventions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). At the Fiesta en La Misión, each component conveys shared values: respect for community and nation, the preservation of history and tradition, and the importance of collective participation.

The symbolization of belonging to Baja California and to Mexico, along with the values to be transmitted among residents of La Misión, rested on a process of shaping cultural memory through the recovery of national history and local cultural expressions, giving rise to the “invention” of new traditions. Mario Reyes organized a series of memory figures around a celebration that became the principal vehicle for conveying knowledge about the past of the community. By selecting particular moments as defining stages in the history of La Misión, Reyes constructed a framework of remembrance that linked community, Baja California, and nation. The celebration recounts the origin and development of La Misión and takes on the character of a foundational narrative, as a factual past is transformed into remembered history (Assmann, 2011).

The celebration functions as a bridge between the present and the absolute past of a history that residents of La Misión describe as “millenary.” Each memory figure points to a narrative about the past transmitted through a clearly structured ceremony that establishes temporal reference points for the community and becomes part of a broader “invented tradition” that stabilizes cultural memory within the group. The festival serves as a space for recalling origins, but also as a designated moment for community participation and for the exchange of relevant knowledge about both the distant and the recent past, as well as shared experiences. The practices that shape the celebration convey formative and normative versions of the past that underpin collective identity.

Thus, as part of an effort to renew and reinterpret Mexican cultural memory, Mario Reyes developed a revised local narrative that interconnected a shared past for the residents of La Misión. The pre-Hispanic era was framed through the presence of the Kumiai (or Kumeyaay) people, one

of the Indigenous communities of Baja California. The colonial period was anchored in the remaining structures of the San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera mission, while independent Mexico was represented through the establishment of the Misión Vieja de San Miguel ranch and the development of ranching traditions. Finally, the postrevolutionary and contemporary nation was reflected in the creation of Ejido La Misión.

Given academic training and close ties to intellectual circles and the agendas of political elites, Mario Reyes and Martínez Tadeo acted as the specialists responsible for selecting, interpreting, and disseminating the cultural memory of the national state. At the same time, during this period, efforts to safeguard the transmission of “national culture” and to consolidate a shared sense of national identity extended beyond political and cultural elites, becoming a broader state-driven project.

By the late 20th century, amid growing democratic demands in Mexico, citizen participation was considered necessary in order to reinforce *mexicanidad* and to identify and designate the traditions deemed worthy of preservation. Mario Reyes and Martínez Tadeo were educators with experience in research, cultural promotion, and cultural management. Yet the festival developed through sustained dialogue with the community. Residents had been educated within a framework of state-sponsored nationalism, widely disseminated through basic schooling, in which national history was presented as foundational knowledge in constant interaction with local “traditions.”

As a result, the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión, together with descendants of the Crosthwaite family, became interested in collaborating on an initiative designed to generate and share knowledge about the origins and sociocultural practices of the population of Baja California, thereby contributing to the strengthening of national identity along the northern border. The normative account of the past of La Misión established through the ritual of the festival accompanies the new frameworks of meaning that emerge during the days of celebration. The festival is not merely a narrative that conveys knowledge about an “immemorial” past linking the locality to the nation; it also functions as a performance. Through the lived experience of remembrance, it rearticulates cultural and communicative memory within the community, projecting both once again toward an “unbounded future” (Lewis, 2018, p. 44).

The festivity as performance makes it possible to observe how both individual and collective memory are anchored in territory. As Edward Casey argues, “as embodied existence opens onto place, indeed *takes place in place* and nowhere else, so our memory of what we experience in place is likewise place-specific: it is bound to place as to its own basis”, thereby grounding a strong territorial identity (cited in Lewis, 2018, p. 57). In this regard, the current president of the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión states:

What the teacher wanted was for people to develop a sense of belonging to this community, through all the events celebrated during the festival. I see it clearly in my son Jorge. When announcements were made at rodeos, he would say, ‘Jorge Valdiviezo from La Misión,’ not from Baja California, not from Mexico, but from La Misión. For me, that is the legacy of the festival. Children should be taught to feel proud of the community where they live, even if it is

a small town, to cultivate a sense of identity rooted in that place. (J. Valdiviezo, personal communication, November 16, 2024)

In this way, the festivity highlights the quality of territory as landscape, one that conveys both personal and collective history and functions as an “object of affective attachment” (Giménez, 1999, p. 29). Under the premise of integrating a young region into the rhythms of national life, the Fiesta en La Misión was held for the first time in 1979. During this event, each activity provides members of the community with a shared understanding of the past, while also elevating a locally grounded vision of how national identity is experienced along the northern border of Mexico.

As a community, residents of La Misión seek ways to participate in one form or another, whether by cleaning, setting up decorations, donating materials, collecting trash, repairing corrals, cutting grass, arranging hay bales, or assisting with the logistical planning of each stage that shapes the festival. Likewise, in order to visually convey elements associated with Mexican culture, food stalls are set up during the festival weekend and decorated with natural materials gathered from the surrounding area of La Misión, including logs, palm leaves, and river grasses. The use of such materials operates as a general rule for anyone wishing to take part in food sales.

The event, which began as a relatively small gathering where community members attended rodeo activities and ejido dances, has gradually evolved into a large-scale celebration that now draws approximately 10 000 attendees, among which local residents, relatives living in the United States, and visitors or friends from various municipalities across Baja California. During the last weekend of May, the festival takes place in two specific locations within the town: the rodeo arena and the facilities of the La Misión elementary school. The current president of the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión offers the following testimony:

The festival can be understood in three stages. The first stage began in 1979, with a small turnout limited to members of the community for many years. The second stage began in 2006, when the Grupo de Vaqueros became involved and took on responsibility for organizing roughly half of the celebration. At that point, the goal was to build a rodeo arena. Work began on constructing the ring, with the intention of gradually replacing it with a metal, more professional structure, while also preparing a proposal for government funding to support construction of a permanent arena. The proposal remained pending until 2016. Construction of the arena that now stands began after removal of the original ring and was partially completed in 2017. Since then, attendance has continued to grow, and the space is becoming increasingly limited. (J. Valdiviezo, personal communication, November 16, 2024)

The Components of the Festival: Commemorating the Origins of the Inhabited Space

The first dimension commemorated by the Fiesta en La Misión is the space in which the celebration takes place, formerly a settlement of the Kumiai population (Reyes, 2019, cited in Hernández Borja, 2022). With the restructuring of land tenure regimes and the imposition of a sedentary model of community life, Indigenous territoriality was confined to specific legal entities identified as

ejidos or *comunidades* (Ruiz Mendoza, 2020). During the festival weekend, members of the Kumiai community are invited to participate through the sale of handicrafts and the performance of traditional dances and songs within the facilities of the local elementary school. This participation is significant, as it marks the second point in the chronology of the town: the arrival of Castilians, criollos, mestizos, and Indigenous people from other missions who took part in the founding of the Dominican mission of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera, signaling recognition of a colonial New Spain past (Reyes, 2019, cited in Hernández Borja, 2022).

This event is regarded as the foundational moment of the present-day town of La Misión. However, unlike other localities in Baja California where material remains of mission foundations are still visible, La Misión has no descendants of those who inhabited the mission of San Miguel Arcángel de la Frontera during its active period. Despite this absence, the historical and cultural values associated with the mission past are represented through two distinct initiatives.

The first consists of the use of an illustration on posters promoting the event and in the decoration of certain spaces during the celebration, a resource that allows for an imagined reconstruction of what the architectural complex of San Miguel Arcángel may have looked like during its period of operation. The second initiative is the Cabalgata Histórica, which involves participation by members of the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión. From a hill overlooking the valley of La Misión “participants ride down carrying two flags: one red and white representing the Kumiai people, and another yellow and red representing the *ejido* of La Misión. Each brand displayed symbolizes a ranching family within the community” (Hernández Borja, 2022, p. 151).

The vaqueros are led by the Captain of the Cabalgata, who wears a leather outfit complete with hat and chaps. This attire has been passed down across generations since the ranching era and evokes the clothing worn by vaqueros from Baja California Sur to protect themselves while traveling through rugged terrain filled with thorns and brush. The descent of the cabalgata toward the rodeo arena is accompanied by a master of ceremonies who recounts the evangelizing enterprise carried out in the 18th century by the Franciscan missionary Junípero Serra. Finally, the third aspect represented during the Fiesta en La Misión is the 1862 land purchase by Felipe Crosthwaite Armstrong, involving 7 500 hectares that had formed part of former mission lands and that later became known as Rancho Misión Vieja de San Miguel (Reyes, 2019, cited in Hernández Borja, 2022).

The residents of the town have appropriated the idea that cowboy practices constitute a heritage, resulting from the dynamics developed during the mission period and from the forms of coexistence in the region following the establishment of ranches. As reflected in the testimony of L. Lara: “from there comes all the history, customs, memories, everything. Everything goes together, because the cowboy tradition all comes from there [...] the food, the way people dance, it is as if everything comes from here” (personal communication cited in Hernández Borja, 2022, p. 147). In this context, the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión has exalted cowboy identity and promoted its practices through the rodeo, understood as a sport with established rules and forms.

It is important to note that these activities have been transmitted across generations as a means of livelihood within the community, that is, through communicative memory. As a recreational practice, rodeo as a sport takes place periodically in La Misión. Some vaqueros also travel to compete in other towns and even in other countries. During the festival weekend, the rodeo arena hosts exhibitions featuring children, professional riders, and non-professional participants, presented both as competition and as public spectacle.

Another tradition elevated as a marker of community identity is Calabaceado dance. The principal steps, including jumps, spins, and kicks, reference various ranching activities. Although this style of dance has been present in the community since the arrival of the Crosthwaite family, originally performed after daily ranch work, it was not until 1998 that, with the support of Professor Juan Gil Martínez Tadeo, the Festival de Bailes Calabaceados was established as part of the festival:

It is tradition, it is identity, it is everyday life. There is no doubt that this is the cradle of the practice; no one continues to perform it the way it is done here in the community. Based on what can be observed, the goal is for dance groups to reflect the community. (J. G. Martínez Tadeo, personal communication, November 16, 2024)

The festival takes place at the La Misión elementary school, next to the rodeo arena. A stage is set up and decorated in the school courtyard, where dance groups from across the state perform. Calabaceado routines are the centerpiece of the celebration, though folkloric dances from other regions of Mexico are also featured, reflecting broader cultural connections beyond the local community. Research conducted by Professor Martínez Tadeo has helped formalize the elements of the representative attire. Men typically wear denim jeans, while women wear skirts made of the same material. Both pair them with snap-button plaid shirts, cowboy hats, leather vests, neckerchiefs or scarves, wide leather belts with large buckles, cowboy boots, and, at times, a charm keychain worn as an amulet (Valdovinos García, 2015):

Calabaceado dance has been performed on all five continents by major companies [...] there was a need to make known that Baja California has an identity. Perhaps not in cities, but in communities such as this one, where traditions have been safeguarded with great care. (J. G. Martínez Tadeo, personal communication, November 16, 2024)

In addition to the performances carried out by professionals, a popular dance contest takes place at night behind the rodeo arena. This is no longer a staged dance performance like the numbers presented on the main stage; rather, people dance while keeping in mind the steps and attire regarded as traditional. Finally, to conclude the activities scheduled for Saturday, the lighting of the monumental bonfire is carried out by the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión:

Everyone takes part in the well-known *lunada*, gathered here at the foot of the bonfire. People from the north grill meat, eat, roast marshmallows [...]. The bonfire represents the soul of the town, so to speak. What began as continuing a tradition has become something monumental. The bonfire now reaches about 10 to 15 meters, depending [...]. The vaqueros light it, and

people remain gathered, enjoying the warmth, as if positive energy emerged from it. People come together and later go dancing with the bonfire beside them. The bonfire becomes the center of the gathering. (J. G. Martínez Tadeo, personal communication cited in Valdovinos García, 2015, p. 62)

The festival, through community participation as both performers and spectators, and through the range of activities unfolding over two days, fosters the formation of individual and generational memories. It also enables the reinvention of tradition by reaffirming the value of transmitted knowledge while sustaining a connection to the past (Lewis, 2018).

As the concluding point of the chronological narrative, Sunday commemorates the consolidation, in 1937, under the provisions of the Agrarian Law, of the group of *ejidatarios* who founded La Misión on the former property of the Crosthwaite family (Reyes, 2019, cited in Hernández Borja, 2022). To this end, a series of civic ceremonies take place in front of the entrance to the facilities of the Escuela Primaria Rural Federal: flag honors, the singing of the Mexican national anthem, and the anthem of Baja California. It should be noted that, in addition to commemorating the stages that articulate the history of the community, another objective of the festival is to celebrate the gathering of families and friends:

The sense of belonging in this community lies in seeing one another with joy on that day. It is a day of celebration, but even more, a day of coming together. These are shared roots, the legacy of earlier generations who began this tradition, and it should not be allowed to fade. (J. Arellano, personal communication cited in Hernández Borja, 2022, p. 178)

During the weekend of the Fiesta en La Misión, traditions such as *jaripeo*, regional cuisine, civic ceremonies, and ranching activities become staged practices that operate as cultural resources. At once presented as a spectacle of how *mexicanidad* is lived along the northern border of Mexico, these elements highlight activities selected as representative of local and regional belonging within the historical trajectory of La Misión. In this sense, the festival fulfills the role of celebration within cultural memory: it interrupts the ordinary flow of daily activities and social relations and becomes a site of interaction between knowledge of the past and shared experience. In the days that follow, or during preparation for the next celebration, that experience becomes part of communicative memory within the community.

CONCLUSIONS

The creation of the festival resulted from two complementary processes. At a first creative level, the Fiesta en La Misión constitutes a proposal that articulates a chronology of events associated with the present-day settlement: the presence of Kumiai Indigenous communities, the establishment of a Dominican mission foundation, and the formation of ranches and *ejidos*. This systematization of events follows the historiographical stages promoted by postrevolutionary cultural policies, which sequence national history into pre-Hispanic, colonial, modern, and post-Mexican Revolution periods.

Since the 1920s, popular festivities were regarded as central components of “national culture,” and the promotion of “typical” celebrations became a constant during the period of cultural nationalism. The Fiesta en La Misión exemplifies a process of cultural memory formation encouraged by the state and led by a professional trained in tourism studies and cultural management, who was also deeply engaged with local and national history. As Assmann argues, the endurance of efforts to articulate elements of the past depends on the transmission of knowledge considered meaningful for the group (Assmann, 2008). The festival is regarded by residents of La Misión as a “recovery” of tradition, even though the integration of these figures of memory into a single festivity did not exist prior to 1979.

At a second creative level, the Fiesta en La Misión represents an exercise in the creation of cultural practices, in which residents of the town form a horizontally organized participatory community. These practices, also shaped by traditions promoted through national discourse—such as regional dances, attire, and music—are part of an ongoing process of recreation and transmission of knowledge. Such processes contribute to fostering a sense of belonging at the community level while engaging with shared ideas about *mexicanidad* along the border, that is, with a national and mestizo identity.

This ceremony transmits knowledge of a distant past as well as of a more recent past that, for some, still forms part of communicative memory. Within that temporal link, group identity has been reinforced. As in any process of identity and memory formation, mechanisms of selection are carried out by a specific group of individuals responsible for defining the predominant narrative. Thus, although the creation of the Fiesta en La Misión is described among residents as a collective effort to generate a sense of belonging, it is evident that, even if other identities likely coexist within the community, leadership in organizing the celebration rests with the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión.

Professor Reyes and Professor Martínez Tadeo participate from an academic perspective that reinforces the predominance of ranching identity and traditions in La Misión. Even so, the enthusiasm with which the festival has been embraced indicates broad participation within the town and suggests that selected elements of the past convey values and practices considered meaningful across the population: history, tradition, family, rodeo, education, and celebration.

The death of Professor Mario Reyes in 2021 generated uncertainty regarding organizational aspects of the festival, as he had been responsible for securing sponsors to ensure that the event was held. As a result, questions remain about whether traditions and forms of knowledge established three decades ago can endure without that leadership, or whether they will gradually transform in order to adapt to changing needs within La Misión.

It is worth noting that one strategy aimed at preserving the knowledge generated around the celebration has been the initiative of the Grupo de Vaqueros de La Misión to propose the festival and the practice of rodeo in La Misión for inclusion on the Cultural Heritage list of the State of Baja California. Currently, the required documentation has been prepared; however, the deliberation process by state authorities remains on hold.

In 2022, Professor Martínez Tadeo secured official recognition of Calabaceado dance as part of the Cultural Heritage of the State of Baja California. In front of the La Misión elementary school facilities stand large metal letters identifying the community as “Cuna del Baile Calabaceado,” marking an initial step in the institutionalization of this network of “figures of memory” as components of cultural memory in Baja California and La Misión.

The Mexican state proved successful in its effort to construct a “national culture” during the first half of the 20th century, and the reach of nationalist transmission through education remains visible among those who continue to organize the festival. The elementary school remains not only an academic space, but also a site of social gathering and of transmission of national values and cultural practices. The Fiesta en La Misión, as an “invented tradition” that each year takes the form of a cultural performance, demonstrates how lived experience of place, narrated history, and shared memory express both community and nation.

Translation: Evelyne Rosales Cortes.

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