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Review Essay

THOMAS E. SHERIDAN, ED., *EMPIRE OF SAND: THE SERI INDIANS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SPANISH SONORA, 1645–1803* AND THOMAS BOWEN, *UNKNOWN ISLAND: SERI INDIANS, EUROPEANS, AND THE SAN ESTEBAN ISLANDS IN THE GULF OF CALIFORNIA*

Cynthia Radding

The Comcáac (people) or Seri Indians of the arid desert coastal plains of Sonora, Mexico, have been the subjects of a rich corpus of ethnohistorical, ethnobotanical, and archaeological literatures on northwestern Mexico published during the last quarter century. The Seris figure prominently in the colonial and modern histories of Sonora, despite their relatively marginal status vis-à-vis the settled colony and their frequent hostilities with military officers, governors, and missionaries. The two works reviewed here

Thomas E. Sheridan, ed., *Empire of Sand: The Seri Indians and the Struggle for Spanish Sonora, 1645–1803*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999. vii + 493 pp. Halftones, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$70.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8165-1858-0), and Thomas Bowen, *Unknown Island: Seri Indians, Europeans, and San Esteban Island in the Gulf of California*, a University of Arizona Southwest Center Book (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. xxxii + 548 pp. 112 halftones, maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2083-x.) Cynthia Radding is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she specializes in the History of Latin America. Professor Radding is the author of *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700–1850* (1997). *Wandering Peoples* won the American Society for Ethnohistory Wheeler Prize in 1998. Radding is completing a comparative cultural and environmental history, *Landscapes of Power and Identity in the Shadow of Empire: Northwestern Mexico and Eastern Bolivia from Colony to Republic*. Radding has published articles and book reviews in the *American Historical Review*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *The Americas*, *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*, *Latin American Research Review*, and in collaborative volumes published in Latin America and Europe.

contribute substantially to this literature, using interdisciplinary approaches of history and anthropology and combining the dual geographic perspectives of the Sonoran mainland and the islands of the Gulf of California.

Empire of Sand joins a distinguished list of published collections of historical documents. The volume was carefully edited by the Documentary Relations of the Southwest (DRSW) housed in the Arizona State Museum. Thomas Sheridan's editorial office represents the collective effort of a number of scholars to select the documents and contribute to their transcription, translation, and annotation. The numerous footnotes are admirably informative of place-names, persons, and contextual references, and the reader is doubly appreciative of the DRSW policy to include the Spanish text following the annotated English translation of each document.

Sheridan has grouped the documents in five major thematic and chronological sections: "Early Spanish Contacts and the Foundation of the Seri Mission Program (1645–1700)"; "Missions and Skirmishes (1725–1740)"; "Breakdown of Seri-Spanish Relations and the Expedition to Tiburón Island (1748–1750)"; "Fire and Blood (1751–1771)"; and "Late-Eighteenth-Century Missionization, Resettlement, and Warfare (1772–1803)." The third section, the longest, represents an event rather than a period—the Seri uprisings beginning in 1748 and occasioned by Spanish incursions on mission lands and harsh repression against Christian Seris who had settled in the western missions of the San Miguel valley. The section titles and the organization of the material illustrate Sheridan's dominant theme of Seri resistance to the Spaniard's repeated efforts to displace, relocate, and transform them into peasant cultivators under mission tutelage. That the Comcáac resisted often through open defiance is well documented in Sonoran history, and Sheridan's careful reading of the documents included in this volume is evident in his general introduction to the published collection that combines important insights from both history and anthropology. This reader finds, in addition, that a nuanced "middle ground" approach to the material (following Richard White's well-known treatment of French-British-American-Iroquois-Algonquian relations in the Great Lakes region) shows different degrees of posturing, manipulating, and compromising among diverse groups of Spanish settlers and officials and indigenous peoples in their multilateral struggles for territory, influence, and a modicum of autonomy. Reference matter includes a well-researched glossary, bibliography, and maps. Perhaps the only oversight worth noting is that the footnotes and bibliography regrettably exclude a number of scholarly works published recently

in Mexico on the Seris and related themes of Sonoran ethnoarchaeology and history.

Unknown Island by Thomas Bowen takes us from the Sonoran mainland to the Gulf of California. Bowen and Sheridan join a distinguished group of scholars, including ethnobotanists Richard Felger and Gary Nabhan, linguists Edward (d. 1976) and Mary Beck Moser, and ethnoarchaeologist Elisa Villalpando Canchola, who have demonstrated the cultural endurance of the Comcáac peoples. Their resilience is born largely of their territorial mobility and the multiple habitats that comprise the deserts and coastlands of both Baja California and Sonora along with the Gulf of California islands of Tiburón, San Esteban, San Lorenzo, and Angel de la Guarda. Bowen's study focuses on an "ethnohistorical puzzle of San Esteban Island" (p. xxxi): Did a separate band of Seri Indians live on San Esteban until their demise at the hands of Mexican military at the end of the nineteenth century as modern Seri oral tradition states, or was the island merely a resource base for Seris who traveled there from Tiburón Island and the Sonoran mainland? According to Bowen, the mystery arises because there is no firm evidence in the documentary record for a distinct indigenous group that lived on San Esteban. Bowen's lengthy six-part work, beautifully illustrated and buttressed with four appendixes, illustrates the methodological problems of confronting oral testimony with archaeological, ethnographic, and historical records that are fragmentary in themselves.

Part 1 is a summary of Seri oral traditions concerning San Esteban and gleaned from mid-twentieth-century taped interviews with a few key informants. Parts 2–4, the longest sections of the book, cover the principal known events of Seri-European contacts from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. These events are based on primary documents (including the texts selected for *Empire of Sand*) and an ample bibliography of secondary sources. Part 5 turns to the archaeological record and part 6 revisits the opening question: Did the San Esteban people really exist? Bowen's answer, arrived at by reading the archaeological and historical records in tandem, is a qualified affirmation of Seri oral traditions. His lengthy review of the archaeological evidence, compiled over ten years of surveying and photographing surface structures and artifacts but with minimal collection and excavation, leads him to the conclusion that a resident Seri population did live on San Esteban during the recent past and followed regular migratory patterns to and from the southwestern shore of the much larger and better-watered Tiburón Island. This particular Seri population was not entirely unknown to European

(and later North American and Mexican) observers, but it was identified as “Tiburones” and considered distinct from the mainland Tepocas and Salineros, who were the object of so many colonial reprisals for their raiding and warfare. Bowen hypothesizes (following the oral histories) that hostility among the different Seri bands and between the Seris and the Spanish pushed mainland Comcáac to take refuge on Tiburón Island where, in turn, they displaced the resident bands, who fled to San Esteban.

Bowen’s contribution, in his own words, is a narrative not an engagement with theories dealing with historical memory, invented traditions, or the construction of cultural texts. His discussion of Seri oral traditions in chapter 16 comes tantalizingly close to posing a question that might have honed his presentation of the puzzle: What need did the modern Seris have to construct a usable past, that is, an ethnic identity of “primitive” people associated with San Esteban, a people at once innocent and fierce, to whom they were linked but who were emphatically distinct from themselves? The crucial interviews used by Bowen were conducted with Seri informants beginning in 1958 during a time of cultural and economic change punctuated by a measles epidemic, the founding of a Protestant mission, and expanding market relations of production. In the midst of processes that were both profound and troubling, mainland Seris crystallized their bitter memories of repression at the hands of Mexican military and their wealth of cultural knowledge in stories of a separate “band” of San Esteban kinsmen who metaphorically and historically bound together the environments of the Sonoran coast and the Gulf islands. This interpretation is not meant to deny the “veracity” of historical memory but to enrich the empirical evidence that Bowen has so painstakingly compiled and contribute further to a theoretical discussion of ethnohistorical methods.