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# Problems of Ethnohistorical Research in Baja California

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**F**OR a relatively small, isolated, and arid geographical area, sparsely populated by some of the reportedly most marginal peoples in the Americas prior to extinction, and lacking in great part historical continuity, Baja California is extraordinarily rich in historical documentation in the form of diaries, descriptive texts, reports, and correspondence. The famous Mexican historian, Miguel León-Portilla, has often remarked that "probably there are more historical documents relating to Baja California than there are Baja Californians." This documentation has been put to good use by ethnologists and historians for some years. Nevertheless, most of these writers have relied solely upon eighteenth century documentation, primarily the writings of Jesuit missionaries, while earlier documentation has been overlooked. My purpose here is to call attention to some of these overlooked sources and a few of the evident enigmas and contradictions in these documents.

Fathers Eusebio Francisco Kino (1664), Juan María de Salvatierra (1711), Francisco María Pícolo (1662), Johan Jakob Baegert (1742), Segismundo Taraval (1731), Miguel del Barco (1773), Ignacio Tirsch (1772), and Wenceslaus Linck (1766) may be considered

to be the principal Jesuit Missionary-observer-recorders of Baja California ethnography in the eighteenth century. Because these men were highly educated and astute observers, as well as rugged, hard-working missionaries, their works are invaluable for the study of Cochimí and Guaycura, and, to a lesser degree, Pericú, culture. Notwithstanding the long contact of these authors with the indigenous peoples of the peninsula, and the great detail particularly evident in the writings of Barco, Baegert, and Taraval, these works, and thus those studies based upon them, are subject to many limitations in that indigenous culture had been previously modified.

Prior to the establishment of the first Jesuit mission in Baja California by Eusebio Francisco Kino in 1683 at San Bruno, the peninsular peoples, particularly those living along the coast from 29° North Latitude south to Cabo San Lucas, had been in contact with Spanish explorers and pearl fishermen for a century and a half. Furthermore, some thirty to forty years of contact with the Jesuits had transpired prior to the arrival of the aforementioned three principal Jesuit authors. While pre-mission contact was generally brief, certainly irregular, and highly limited in scope, nevertheless, by the time of the arrival of the Jesuits the Cochimí, Guaycura, and Pericú were familiar with, and had

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become acculturated to, European customs, methods, religion, ships, materiel, and livestock, thereby modifying their way of life to conform in part with Spanish ideals.

The *conquistador* Fernando Cortés, first colonizer of the Californias, arrived at the Bahía de La Paz in May, 1535, with calves, sheep, hogs, and a large number of horses; his men were armed with harquebuses, lances, shields, swords, and daggers, and many were mounted (Mathes 1973). While no documents are extant regarding the native reaction to these strange beings and accoutrements, there is little room to doubt that they became a familiar sight during Cortés' eighteen-month sojourn at Santa Cruz (La Paz). Later expeditions would be equipped in a similar manner. In 1596, Sebastián Vizcaíno carried horses, cattle, and mastiffs to La Paz, and in 1615 Nicolás de Cardona used mastiffs to repel an Indian attack north of La Paz. In 1633 and 1636, Francisco de Ortega carried chickens and lambs to La Paz, and in all probability some horses were also disembarked. Knives, hatchets, axes, pieces of iron, mirrors, and glass beads were exchanged for pearls by Vizcaíno in 1596 and 1602, Cardona in 1615, Ortega in 1632, 1633, 1634, and 1636, and by Lucenilla in 1668. Attempts at evangelization, from the public saying of mass during the Vizcaíno, Cardona, and Lucenilla voyages to actual baptism by the Ortega expedition in 1633-1634, were carried out. By 1636, broken Spanish was spoken by some inhabitants of La Paz as reported by Ortega, and by some inhabitants of Cabo San Lucas in 1644 as reported by González Barriga. It may well be that the report of blondish hair by González Barriga at Cabo San Lucas in 1644 reflected the beginnings of *mestizaje* in Baja California for it would be difficult to believe that over a century of contact with sailors and soldiers by the Pericú did not produce some clandestine relationships.

Although the Cortés expedition of 1535

initiated European contact in Baja California, unfortunately the conquistador apparently did not provide posterity with highly detailed descriptions of the region and its peoples as he had done fifteen years earlier in central Mexico. The first such detailed descriptions of Baja Californians were the result of the expedition of Sebastián Vizcaíno to Cabo San Lucas, La Paz, and the Gulf of California northward to the area of Ligüí in 1596.

The earliest known documentation containing ethnographic references to the people of Baja California are the accounts of the voyage of Cortés' Lieutenant, Francisco de Ulloa, who explored the Gulf of California from Cabo San Lucas to the region of Isla Ángel de la Guarda and the Pacific Coast northward to Isla de Cedros in 1539-1540. Some data relative to *balsas*, housing, and utensils of the Cochimí in the areas of Bahía San Luis Gonzaga and Bahía de Cedros were given, and more detailed information on the Guaycura of Isla Margarita and the Cochimí of Isla de Cedros includes accounts of customs and warfare (Wagner 1929:15-46; Hakluyt 1904:IX, 206-278). Nevertheless, this expedition, like that of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542 (Wagner 1929:79-93) was designed primarily to gain geographical knowledge, and thus accounts of native peoples were the result of observations in passing during a limited time period. This passive observation is evident in the fact that no descriptions were provided of Baja Californians during Rodríguez Cabrillo's long northward voyage. Rather, more detailed observations were made by those explorers whose mission included the establishment of a permanent settlement on the peninsula beginning with Sebastián Vizcaíno who settled La Paz and explored the gulf from Cabo San Lucas to Ligüí in 1596.

From that year until 1668 ethnological observations were recorded in greater or lesser detail by the following explorers in the

following regions:

- Sebastián Vizcaíno, 1596. Cabo San Lucas; La Paz to Ligüí (Mathes 1965:Docs. 29, 34, 36).
- Sebastián Gutiérrez, 1596. With Vizcaíno (Mathes 1970:Doc. 33).
- Lope de Argüelles Quiñones, 1596. With Vizcaíno (Mathes 1965:Doc. 184).
- Gonzalo de Francia, 1596. With Vizcaíno (Mathes 1965:Doc. 181).
- Antonio de la Ascensión, 1602-1603. Cabo San Lucas to Cape Mendocino (Mathes 1965:Docs. 177, 180, 182, 183, 188).
- Nicolás de Cardona, 1615. Cabo San Lucas to Isla Tiburón (Mathes 1970:Docs. 6, 32).
- Francisco de Ortega, 1632, 1633, 1634, 1636. Cabo San Lucas to Isla Angel de la Guarda (Mathes 1970:Doc. 46).
- Diego de la Nava, 1632. With Ortega. Cabo San Lucas; La Paz (Mathes 1970:Docs. 34, 35).
- Esteban Carbonel de Valenzuela, 1632. With Ortega. Cabo San Lucas to Puerto Escondido (Mathes 1970:Doc. 37).
- Alonso González Barriga, 1644. Cabo San Lucas (Mathes 1970:Doc. 94).
- Pedro Porter y Casanate, 1648. Cabo San Lucas to Isla San Ildefonso (Mathes 1970:Doc. 105).
- Francisco de Lucenilla, 1668. Cabo San Lucas to Isla San José (Mathes 1970:Doc. 119).

While some of these accounts are rather vague and pedestrian in nature, and in accord with more detailed Jesuit accounts, others are contradictory and enigmatic as related to accepted Baja California ethnology and archeology. Furthermore, in a few instances these pre-mission accounts provide virtually all known data relative to certain aspects of indigenous culture.

By far the most enigmatic and contradictory reports are those relative to the knowledge and use of maize among the peoples of Cabo San Lucas and La Paz who, according to Jesuit sources, were devoid of any knowledge of agriculture or domestic plants. The first implication of a knowledge of maize appears in the 1596 report of Sebastián Vizcaíno (Mathes 1965: Doc. 29) who, at Cabo San Lucas, stated: "From the ship I had brought corn, hardtack, meat and wine for them to eat, and they were not shocked by it, but only by our speech, arms and dress. . ." This report was expanded by Lope de Argüelles Quiñones with Vizcaíno at La Paz, who wrote:

We did not find any areas where they practiced agriculture nor the raising of fowl nor cattle, however it is a fact that, when showing them kernels of corn, they showed us some cane which is called *otates* in this land, indicating by signs that inland other cane of a similar type which produced the same kernals was cultivated, and from this I infer that nearby corn was harvested. . . [Mathes 1965:Doc. 184].

Although over thirty-five years passed before another mention of maize was made, these later reports were far more precise, and were made by persons who spent a greater period of time ashore. In 1632 at La Paz, the chaplain to Francisco de Ortega, Diego de la Nava (Mathes 1970:Doc. 34), reported: ". . . they also recognize corn and also make it clear that it is plentiful inland from where it is brought in exchange for fish. . ." He later testified that:

. . .the sustenance of these people is mezquite bean, fish, and other types of maize, and the corn which they trade for inland is not cultivated by them along the coast. . . [Mathes 1970:Doc. 34].

Ortega's pilot, Esteban Carbonel de Valenzuela (Mathes 1970:Doc. 34), in the same year wrote that, at Puerto Escondido, "they know corn but they do not have it nor

cultivate it. . . ."

These reports of corn and commerce between the coast and the interior give rise to yet another enigma, the reporting of large, sophisticated settlements inland. The earliest of these reports was by Sebastián Gutiérrez who was with Vizcaíno in 1596 and wrote that, at La Paz:

These Indians showed through signs that inland there were settlements of clothed people who were at war with them. . . [Mathes 1970:Doc. 35].

Although of less credence, the 1615 report of Nicolás de Cardona also attested to numerous inland settlements governed by a king or headman who paid tribute to a tall woman adorned with pearls, silver, and gold, and who presided over a great temple filled with tribute (Mathes 1970).

While the Cardona report was clouded by the legend of Queen Calafia and the Amazons, the later report of Diego de la Nava in 1632 is far more specific as to the settlements to the interior of La Paz with which corn was traded:

These large towns of politically sophisticated people are, as they made it known to us, twelve days' travel from the coast to the west, for they counted with their fingers the sun of each day . . . thus the distance would be over one hundred leagues [300 miles] [Mathes 1970:Doc. 37].

These reports of maize, commerce with the interior and large settlements "inland", while contradictory to Jesuit accounts and contemporary ethnological studies, are, nevertheless, worthy of consideration. Given known data, plus these accounts, it could well be proposed that some trans-peninsular trade with the maize-growing Yumans of the lower Colorado River brought corn as food as well as rumors of the high-culture areas of Arizona and New Mexico to southern Baja California.

Of a less problematical nature are the

accounts that have provided linguistic data not available through Jesuit writings. The Pericú, least known and first decimated of the peoples of Baja California, inhabited the islands of the Gulf of California northward to Carmen and the mainland from La Paz to Cabo San Lucas; however, recent study of pre-mission documentation indicates, through linguistics, that the Pericú may well have occupied the shores of Bahía de La Paz prior to the mission period. As a result of casual mention of some common terms known to be Pericú in the reports of Vizcaíno, Ascensión, Ortega, Nava, Carbonel, Porter y Casanate, and Lucenilla, it appears that a major demographic shift took place in the La Paz area between 1668 and 1720, with the Pericú being replaced by the more northerly and westerly Guaycura (Mathes 1975:180-182).

This demographic change concept has been recently supported by Miguel León-Portilla (1976:87-101) in a study of the Pericú language showing its lack of relationship to Guaycura as previously held (Massey 1949:303), and based substantially upon pre-mission documentation.

While the foregoing has employed as examples several of the more extensive and provocative ethnological problems encountered in pre-mission documentation, it is but a small percentage of the data to be found in such material. Of particular importance are the references to Pericú dress, body decoration, weapons, utensils, foods, *balsas*, fishing methods, and housing reflected in the documents cited above, as well as the excellent description of funerary practices at La Paz by Francisco de Ortega. Certainly, many of these early observers were not well educated nor were they trained ethnologists, however much of their success and the favor of the Crown depended upon detailed reports. Care must be taken to separate legend and rumor from fact, and particularly in dealing with population estimates, for the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries were an era in which the New World was still new, and California was, as its very name implies, still thought to be the medieval kingdom of Calafia, and exaggerated population counts by a small force of Spaniards were beneficial for the support of missions and the exploitation of labor in the area, as well as a reflection upon the bravery of these early explorers.

Baja California, particularly to the south of the 28th parallel, remains an area little known to archeologists and ethnologists. Rugged, inaccessible terrain and a hot, dry climate have restricted much field research. The paucity of great archeological finds also has diverted interest to richer areas. However, the extraordinary volume of documentation with ethno-historical data need not be neglected. Hopefully, future research will include reference to these early accounts and will, thereby, expand and enrich knowledge of the fascinating past of Baja California.

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