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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9dq707wq>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 8(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

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Publication Date

1986-07-01

Peer reviewed

Learning about Baja California Indians: Sources and Problems

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THE inhabitants of the peninsula of Baja California came to the attention of the European world early in the fourth decade of the sixteenth century. Their nakedness and the "primitiveness" of their culture were remarked on by pearl-ers, pirates, and Manila Galleon men who visited sporadically over the next 160 years (Mathes 1965, 1970, 1981). Aside from comments on nakedness and lack of housing, the firm ethnographic tidbit that the atlatl (known to the Spaniards from the Aztecs) was used by the Pericú in the far south comes from these visits (Massey 1961). Mathes (1981) also identified some passages that equivocally suggest that the most southerly groups knew about maize being cultivated by people far to the north, perhaps in the lower Colorado River Valley. His notion (Mathes 1975) that the Pericú were displaced south from the La Paz area by Guaicura speakers between 1668 and 1720 carries less weight than Massey's (1949) careful linguistic assessment.

At the end of the seventeenth century, however, these Indians became famous. The evangelical zeal of the Jesuits to demonstrate that Christianity could be carried to these most isolated and primitive representatives of the human race required missionaries who would give their lives to privation and social isolation. It also required money, as this proved to be an expensive mission. A steady flow of extended letters and reports, describing the place, the Indians, and the mission process, was directed at potential donors that they might vicariously participate in this mission. *Das Neuen Welt-Botts*,

published in Graz and Augsburg from 1726 to 1762, carried many of these letters and exemplifies the extent of the Jesuit solicitation.¹ It worked, and private donors maintained the mission.

Though there was no one to check on the accuracy of their reports, it may be assumed that the Jesuits, as skilled propagandists, recognized that accuracy in detail made the most effective message. On the other hand, the glory of their mission rested on the fact that it was to the most culturally deprived of humans, and little effort would be made to identify cultural subtleties to give a rounded picture of the Indian cultures. Their Franciscan and Dominican successors followed the same pattern, and in general, they were less educated and skilled observers. In any event, within a century after missionization began, the Indians of all but northern, non-peninsular Baja California were culturally extinct, and fifty years later they were physically so. No missionary chose to record much of their oral literature, myths, and legends except as caricatures. There is no Baja Californian equivalent of *Chinigchinich* (Boscana 1846).

For the extinct but by no means forgotten Indians of the southern three-fourths of Baja California, there are three sources of data that can be used to construct a more accurate picture of the cultures that they developed in a difficult arid environment over many millennia. These are: (1) comparative studies of still surviving Indian neighbors to the north and also of hunters and gatherers in dry parts of the greater

Southwest; (2) archaeological investigations, not only in the peninsula but in the wider southwestern region; and (3) reworking the fairly extensive literature from explorers and missionaries who could have observed the Indians when their cultures were still vital and exploiting new bits of this literature that continue to turn up in obscure archives and collections.

NEIGHBORING INDIAN CULTURES THAT SURVIVE

The Pai peoples who survive in some number north of San Quintín are heavily acculturated from both mission and post-mission contacts, and, more significantly, they live in a mediterranean rather than desert environment; their cultural affiliations are definitely with Alta California and the Diegueño. The Cucupa of the lower Colorado Delta are part of the flood-farming complex of that region. Only the remnant Kiliwa at the north end of the Sierra San Pedro Martir seem to have peninsular affinities and traits.

On the basis of fieldwork in 1928 and 1929, when he estimated that 36 Kiliwa survived, Meigs (1939) related their ceremonies and traditions to those of the Pai peoples on into Alta California, though the languages were quite distinct. Certain aspects of their material culture, such as dependence on mescal (*Agave*) for food and use of the shepherd's crook-shaped throwing stick for hunting small game, match missionary data on the Cochimí to the south.

More specific was the finding that mescal fiber nets covered with human hair (*pachugós*) were used as capes in the *ñiwey* mourning ceremony. These were described in detail by the missionaries throughout Cochimí territory and were not reported farther north. These capes were highly sacred to

the Indians and the missionaries were assiduous in collecting and burning them all. The capes Meigs (1939) was shown were similarly highly sacred and were stored carefully wrapped in a dry cave a considerable distance from any settlement. Attempting to collect one or even unwrap it for photographing would have destroyed all rapport with his terrified informant. The location of the cave may well have passed from memory. Also in the cave was a two-foot human figurine (*Ñipumjos*), used in the mourning ceremony but not regarded with the same awe as the capes. Missionaries reported similar figurines among the Cochimí north of San Borja, and as heathen idols they were destroyed enthusiastically.

More recently Ralph Michelsen (personal communications 1965-1982) has obtained from Kiliwa informants a rationale for the bizarre practice identified by the missionaries as *maroma*. This involved tying a cord to a piece of meat, swallowing it, pulling it out, and passing it on to the other members of the group who repeated the procedure until the meat fell apart. The notion was that a proper meal should include both vegetable- and animal-derived foods, and if meat was scarce the *maroma* could eke out the supply. The custom is no longer practiced but the remembered rationale is suggestive.

Meigs (1939) collected a considerable corpus of myths and songs from the Kiliwa. Though clearly containing modern introduced elements, they may provide a rare, though somewhat obstructed, window to the intellectual life of the Cochimí. The Kiliwa are now reduced to perhaps twenty individuals and are further attenuated culturally by intermarriage with Paipai, but we await publication of any crumbs of information by Michelsen who has worked with them for many years.

Gross similarities between the Cochimi and the hunting and gathering Seri across the Gulf of California have long been noted. The groups are related linguistically, though rather distantly. My impression is that these similarities involve an ancient and widespread material technology adapted to similar environments. Although exposed to missionaries in Sonora, there seems to have been much less effort by the missionaries to explore the non-material culture of the Seri. They were peripheral to the main mission to the Pimería Alta.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Farther afield in the Desert Southwest one would expect even fainter cultural correspondences. Here, however, there may be archaeological resonances that may permit correlation of widespread early cultures. Finding a stratified site of long occupancy in central or southern Baja California would help.

The continuing archaeological investigations in Baja California have severe limitations as to what parts of the Indian cultures they illuminate. Most sites are open and contain only lithic materials or shell and very few have been excavated. None that I know of shows stratified records of cultural development. Moderate regional variation does show up in that pottery, except as clay pipes, diffused only as far south as the Kiliwa and Pai peoples. Small projectile points are rare south of the Cochimi area, suggesting recent acquisition of the bow and arrow. It is my impression that both crude and rather fine stone working was carried on by the same peoples throughout the peninsula in both the recent and the distant past.

The government-sponsored break-up and then loss of part of the Castaldi collection is a substantial setback² even though its re-

cords of provenance left much to be desired. It is to be hoped that a Mexican museum will obtain and maintain representative collections from all parts of the peninsula so that they can be compared in one place.

The study of the lithic technology has intrinsic interest and can be extrapolated to somewhat grounded speculations about ecological relationships within regions. This seems to be the most active area of investigation today. It may also be noted that the function of many types of stone artifacts is really uncertain. Some may have been composite with other material now lost.

A somewhat more rewarding prospect for archaeology derives from the fact that most regions in Baja California abound in dry caves, many undoubtedly unvisited in recent times, in which wooden and fibrous artifacts, as well as bone, can be well preserved. Such materials are normally more transparent than stone as to their intended use, and some of the inferred uses relate to the non-economic, non-material side of culture.

Nearly four decades ago, William Massey (1947) recovered secondary human burials in the Cape District, wrapped, and with inclusions of red ocher. The inadequacy of publication on the extraordinarily dolichocephalic skulls, both comparing them worldwide and relating them to or disassociating them from the historic but extinct Pericú, may still be rectified. The efforts involved in secondary burial cast at least a faint light on supernatural ideology.

Working with local *campesinos* in the early 1960s, Massey (personal communication 1974) also recovered two artifacts of special interest in the area of Misión San Luis Gonzaga. One was a highly polished cylindrical stick, inlaid with thin bands of colored beads that matches the *Stäblein* that Fr. Lambert Hostell (1750) reported from the same area in the early eighteenth century. The crafts-

manship illustrates that while most Guaicura artifacts were frontiersman-crude, as described by Baegert (1864), an infrequently expressed tradition of fine craftsmanship was retained in their culture. A similar dual tradition was recognized in 1930 among the Seri by Kroeber (1931:24-25). The latter now get a large fraction of their incomes from carving *objects d'art* from ironwood logs.

The *tabla* Massey recovered is the ceremonial instrument most widely discussed, sought out, and destroyed, material item mentioned in the mission literature. The recovered object corresponds closely to the mission description: ten inches wide, over three feet long with irregular sides and planed to a thinness that does not exceed three-quarters of an inch. Even the circular holes that Sales (1956) reported on similar objects from the northernmost part of the Central Desert are present. Through these, the shamans would speak when representing other beings. These finds physically corroborate discussions in the mission literature, but they also suggest that a profitable line of archaeological inquiry would be to seek from local informants the location of isolated small caves or possible caches.

I have always regarded pictographs and petroglyphs as the most intractable of archaeological data as far as establishing relationships with other archaeological information. They also can stimulate the most uninhibited psychological and ecological speculation. Harry Crosby's (1984) fifteen years of exploring in dissected ranges in the central part of the peninsula have defined and delimited an isolated florescence of rock art that rivals the Upper Paleolithic of the caves of southwestern France and northern Spain. The Great Murals, as he calls them, extend from the latitude of the south end of Bahía Concepción to the Sierra San Borja,

perhaps 200 miles. To the north and south only abstract paintings exist, but the Great Murals are definitely figurative.

All are found in deep canyons radiating out of four separate volcanic domes. All are in what at contact was Cochimí territory but do not extend to its northern or southern limits. The Indians told the Jesuits the murals were painted by giants who had come from the north and had been exterminated (del Barco 1973:210-213).³ The missionaries were singularly disinterested in pursuing the problem, perhaps because it conflicted with their picture of primitive savages. On the basis of overpaintings with different degrees of weathering, Crosby (1984) estimated that they were painted between 500 and 1,500 years ago, maintaining a consistent style throughout that period. One hopes that the dating can be refined but it looks reasonable. On the basis of linguistic distributions at contact it is hard to see how this artistic florescence developed and then died among other than ancestors of the Cochimí.

Here is a window, albeit not a clear one, to the magical, religious, and perhaps even esthetic life of the painters. Crosby was admirably conservative in his speculations on the subject. Others will be less so. The rock paintings were not a trivial enterprise. The figures are more than life-size and at some sites cover thousands of square feet of rock surface. Preparing the pigments and applying them would seem to have been the job of specialists, and they were carried out far from large oases or the seashore where an abundance of food could have been available, at least seasonally. It is not clear to me how hunting and gathering bands of 50 to 100 individuals could organize their economies to support the specialist painters, but clearly they thought that it was important to do so. Representations of animals permit the identification of perhaps a dozen

species, and one is led to think of hunting magic. But the assemblage of species varies greatly from site to site.

Finally we have the anthropoid figures, called *monos* by Crosby (1984) following local usage. Generally more than life-size, they occur throughout the range of the Great Murals though not at every site. Some sites are dominated by large numbers of them. Red or black with some figures divided vertically in both colors with the head always red, all but those in one painting stand with their arms raised, and flexed at the elbow. They show no neck; in some the head is a block on the shoulders; others carry elaborate but obscure headdresses. The figures are far less naturalistic paintings of people than are the representations of animals, even at the same site. They show a standardized form and posture throughout their geographic and temporal range, varying only as individual painters might in copying a single model.

PUBLISHED AND ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Our most productive source of information about the Indians of Baja California, however, remains the letters and reports of the missionaries, especially the Jesuits. They explored for mission sites and then lived at them, and modified the native culture, both material and non-material, as completely as they could. Unfortunately, the Indians could not survive this forced acculturation. These reports and the books compiled from them present a consistent picture, with the original report always worth seeking for clarity and accuracy. Diaries and reports on explorations are especially valuable because they provide locations for the phenomena described. A missionary's letters are most valuable during his first few years at a mission whether he was a replacement at an old mission or a pioneer in a new one.

The picture on material culture and subsistence economy, though skimpy, is reasonably clear and is being confirmed and extended by archaeological data since the missionaries had little to say about lithic technology, the area where archaeology is the strongest. Social organization is less clear, and values, ideology, and religion, screened through dogmatic and basically hostile reporters, are blurred. For the latter two areas there continue to be possibilities of clarification by going to the more original sources, the manuscript Venegas, *Empresas Apostólicas* (1739), instead of the published Venegas-Burriel (1757), and then to the original letters on which the great manuscript was based.

Remarkable as it may seem in view of the considerable historiographic attention that has been paid to Baja California since the 1860s (I choose the time of Rau's translation of Baegert's *Account* for the Smithsonian Institution as a departure date [1864]), new manuscripts continue to turn up; many of them are being published in such outlets as Dawson's Baja California Travels Series.⁴ The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1768 and their dispersal through non-Iberic Europe resulted in their papers ultimately winding up in unexpected archives and collections.

The most important event was Miguel León-Portilla's publication in full in 1973 of Miguel del Barco's *Historia Natural y Crónica de la Antigua California* (del Barco 1973). This major work was intended to supplement and correct errors in the published Venegas-Burriel. It was used by Clavigero (1937), but had been inaccessible to most modern scholars in a Roman library. Del Barco had spent thirty years in Baja California and had served as superior of the Jesuit mission there, visiting all the missions. Though he was writing from memory in Bologna and with only the published Venegas as a refer-

ence, he knew the peninsula and its inhabitants. His is the most complete treatment of the linguistic situation we have and many items of material culture are described better than in other sources. Further, he pondered the process of pressured culture change and reasons for the collapse of Indian societies, especially in the south, subjects he might not have felt free to treat had the Jesuit mission still been operating. He accepted the general missionary explanation that it was God's will that the rebellious Pericú and intractable Guaicura should die out, but he expressed pride that the southernmost Cochimí at his mission, San Xavier, had shown a natural increase in population in the previous 24 years. This was unique among the Baja California missions for that period, but he had hopes that the value systems of newly missionized Cochimí farther north could be understood and reconciled with imposed Christianity so that missionization would not produce a lethal culture shock.⁵

Where del Barco differs in detail with Venegas-Burriel he is almost always the preferred source. As more students of the Baja California Indians read his work closely, there will be a more accurate comprehension of ethnographic detail, but, more importantly, a somewhat deeper insight into their social structure and value system.

Two other recent discoveries and their publication provide specific new information but are also noteworthy for their provenance. Ignacio Tirsch, living in Bohemia after his expulsion in 1768, drew or painted from memory 47 scenes from Baja California and Mexico. Some of them were reproduced in a 1970 Prague calendar from originals in the Czechoslovakian State Museum. Glen Dawson published reduced reproductions in 1972 (Nunis 1972). Tirsch was not a great artist, but his characterizations of items in

the flora and fauna are generally identifiable. The drawings of Indians most frequently show them in mission costume, but a few show them in aboriginal dress.

A copy of a translation from Latin to German of ten letters to his brother by J. J. Baegert was discovered in the City Library of Strassbourg in 1972. It was translated and annotated and published by Dawson in 1982 (Nunis 1982). Baegert must have had access to his own letters when he returned to Alsace after the expulsion because many passages in his *Nachrichten von der Amerikanischen Halbinsel Californien* are taken from them word for word. That book has long been cited as the most pessimistic or realistic account of the mission process, but the letters show that Baegert softened his real views for publication. At his and the neighboring missions, there were continuing thefts of food and killing of livestock, occasional murders, regular floggings, and occasional executions. The descriptions of Indian foodstuffs, utensils, and behavior are often more detailed and, since reported closer to the time of observation, likely to be more accurate than those in his book.

More generally, with manuscripts showing up all over non-Hispanic Europe and both religious and secular archives still being explored in Mexico, Spain, and Rome, we can still hope for new ethnographic detail from direct observers to be uncovered.

Libros de Misiones, baptismal, marriage, and burial registers, have been known and exploited in their several depositories, spread at least from La Paz to San Francisco, for several decades. The Mormon Church's microfilming all known registers now makes them all available in Salt Lake City. So far the most productive utilization has involved demography, and not all of the registers have been fully exploited. Since some of the missionaries recorded Indian names for

their converts, at least for a few decades, there is a mass of linguistic data in them. I was able to identify the same names from Mulegé to San Borja, demonstrating the extent of the Cochimí language (Aschmann 1959:54-57). These names have two parts: one is used for one sex or the other only; the other may be a clan or lineage designation. Some missionaries recorded social facts such as parents and godparents from which social relationships may be inferred. Extracting it will be a formidable task, but the *Libros de Misiones* may prove to be our richest source of information on the social structure of these Indian groups.

NOTES

1. The letters in *Das Neuen Welt-Botts* were translated into German (if that was not the original language) and published in 38 fascicles over the period from 1726 to 1763 (Stöcklein 1726-1763).

2. Father Castaldí, S.J., longtime priest at Mulegé, collected aboriginal artifacts from the peninsula from 1905 until his death in 1946. Acting in accordance with Mexican law, most of the collection was taken from a curio store in Mulegé, where it was well displayed, to be placed in a museum at the monument built off the highway in the full desert at the 28th parallel. The monument is now completely abandoned and I can find no one who knows where the collection is.

3. Examination and inquiries about the pictographs were made by Fr. Joseph Rothea, evidently in the 1760s (del Barco 1973:210).

4. Dawson's Book Shop's Baja California Travels Series has recently published its 48th volume, a major fraction of which deals with Indians, entirely or in part.

5. del Barco 1973:lix-lxi, 242-244, 429.

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