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# Islands within an almost island: History, myth, and aislamiento in Baja California, Mexico

Ryan B. Anderson

*Santa Clara University*, [rbanderson@scu.edu](mailto:rbanderson@scu.edu)

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# ISLANDS WITHIN AN ALMOST ISLAND

History, myth, and *aislamiento* in Baja California, Mexico

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Ryan Anderson

San Diego State University <ryananderson75@gmail.com>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the persistent histories and lasting effects of the Baja California peninsula's status as an "almost island". The peninsula is almost an island in so many ways. Its reputation as an island-like entity has also been strengthened by a longstanding myth that it was, in fact, an actual island. In many senses it was an island— isolated, remote, difficult to envision, understand, and control. Geography and climate played a vital role in all of this, but so, too, did human imagination. The author uses the concept of shima, along with discussions about the dual meanings of the Spanish word *aislamiento* as a way to explore these issues. *Aislamiento* can refer more concretely to the effects of being on a landform surrounded by water, on the one hand, or the deep social and psychological effects of isolation. Ultimately, the author argues that it is this sense of isolation that works to produce, regardless of geographic and cartographic reality, a powerful sense of islandness.

**KEYWORDS:** Aislamiento, Baja California, peninsula, Mexico, Shima

The long rock jutting out of the sea

The Jesuit Father Johann Jakob Baegert was not kind to the Baja California peninsula, which was his home for seventeen years. The first sentence of his 1771 "Observations in Lower California" sets the tone of the relationship he had with the formidable peninsula: "Everything concerning California is of such little importance that it is hardly worth the trouble to take a pen and write about it" (1979: 5). About the character of the land itself, he wrote:

*If I wished to describe California (of which it has been said in jest that of the four elements it received only two: air and fire) in a few words, I could say with the prophet in the Sixty-second Psalm that it is waterless desert, impassable because of rocks and thorns ... or that it is a long rock jutting out of the sea, overgrown with extraordinary thorn bushes, and almost devoid of grass, meadows, forests, shade, rivers, and rain (1979: 24-25).*

Baegert's impressions about Baja California were largely shaped by the intense isolation of his experiences there. Baegert took up the reigns of the Mission San Luis Gonzaga in 1751. Located about 33 miles southeast of the present day Ciudad Constitución, this site remains one of the most remote of all the missions on the peninsula. Baegert spent much of his time reading books. In one instance, he wrote to his brother asking for more

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books, specifically "the kind one likes to read several times, because they are important companions in such complete isolation." Baegert clearly had no love for the peninsula—yet he poured considerable time and effort in writing about his experiences there. He was devoted to his mission, and, despite his tremendous social and geographic isolation, relatively content. "Health is necessary here," he wrote, "and melancholy is useless" (1979: xix). His lot in life—which he took up without question—was to save the Native people, who lived in what he described as a sort of hell on earth, from eternal damnation. Life on the peninsula was, according to Baegert, more than enough hell for humanity to bear in one lifetime.

So it goes with the story of the Baja California peninsula, which has long existed in the human imagination as a bizarre, contradictory compilation of the beautiful and the sublime, on the one hand, and the miserable, lonely, barren isolation, on the other. It's as if we just can't make up our minds, collectively, about this long, enigmatic almost-island. The writer Bruce Berger once referred to the peninsula as "an island with one loose end" (1998: 3). Loose ends abound. Geography plays a vital role in shaping what this place means—but so does culture, history, memory, and even outright fantasy. Isolation—whether physical or social—plays a crucial role in these constructions of Baja California as an island-like place, community, and territory.



Figure 1 - Location of the Mexican states of Baja California and Baja California Sur in relation to Mexico and the United States.

This paper focuses on Baja California's persistence as an almost-island. The peninsula is almost an island in so many ways—and this island-state has been supported, produced, maintained, and reproduced by various geographic—and social—factors. Baja is almost an island because it is a long, thin landmass surrounded almost entirely by water. Its reputation as an island-like entity has also been strengthened by the human

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imagination—for hundreds of years there was an ongoing debate about whether or not California was actually an island. In many senses it was an island—isolated, remote, difficult to envision, understand, and control. Geography and climate played a vital role in all of this, but so, too, did human imagination and first-hand experience.

I use the Spanish term *aislamiento* to talk about this production of "islandness" in the Baja California peninsula. *Aislamiento* translates as "isolation" but literally means something along the lines of 'the effects of making something into an island. *Aislamiento* is related to *aislar*, which means "to put on an island", and *aislado*, which translates to 'isolated'. All of these ultimately derive from the Latin term *insula* (island), hence "peninsula" comes from the Latin words "pæne" plus "insula," literally translating to "almost an island." In the linguistic sense, what interests me most here is the dual nature of meanings associated with *aislamiento*, which can refer more concretely to the effects of being on a landform surrounded by water, on the one hand, or the more social effects of being/feeling isolated on the other. This relates to the Japanese term *shima*, which also holds a fascinating double meaning as well—as a literal island or a "small but densely cultured area" (Suwa, 2007: 6). Ultimately, I argue that it is this sense of isolation that works to produce, regardless of geographic and cartographic reality, a powerful sense of islandness.

Baja is truly a case in which human imagination shaped reality and the perception of place (see Suwa 2007: 6). In this sense, this land mass, which was in fact a peninsula, was reimagined for centuries as an island. It was, in many senses, socially produced. While a bevy of explorers and cartographers spent inordinate amounts of time and energy in their efforts to prove, once and for all, that the Baja peninsula was really a peninsula, the island-like nature continues to persist.

### The peninsula

The present day peninsula of Baja California was born about 25 million years ago when it was sheared off of the North American continent by the San Andreas fault (Alvarez 1991:7). The peninsula is about 1200 km long, and consists of expansive desert and alluvial plains interrupted by jagged mountain peaks. Many travelers think of the peninsula as mostly coastline or desert, but according to Davis (2006: 2) the majority of the land surface is covered by mountains (62%), followed by desert plains (21.6%), and finally coastal plains (15.5%). The peninsula is situated between 22 degrees and 33 degrees north latitude and 109 and 117 degrees west longitude (Davis 2006: 2). It encompasses the states of Baja California and Baja California Sur (see Figure 1). To the west lies the grand Pacific Ocean; to the east the Gulf of California (also known as the 'Sea of Cortez'). The climate spans from relatively temperate in the northern part of the peninsula to semi-tropical at the tip. The vast majority, however, is characterized by arid desert. Nine principle biotic communities cover the peninsula (Laylander 2006: 1). Due to the elongated geography of the peninsula, one or both coastlines are never more than a two day walk from any point (Laylander 2006: 1). For convenience, the peninsula is often broken up into three zones: 1) The Frontera; 2) The Desert; and 3) The Cape (Alvarez, 1991: 7). These are not actual ecological or geographic barriers, but instead shortcuts for envisioning this expansive, diverse landscape. The central desert region may be the most imposing and infamous part of the peninsula, stretching about 600 miles from the town of El Rosario in the north all the way to La Paz on the cape. This

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large desert zone plays in important role in making the cape seem all the more like an island (see Figure 2).

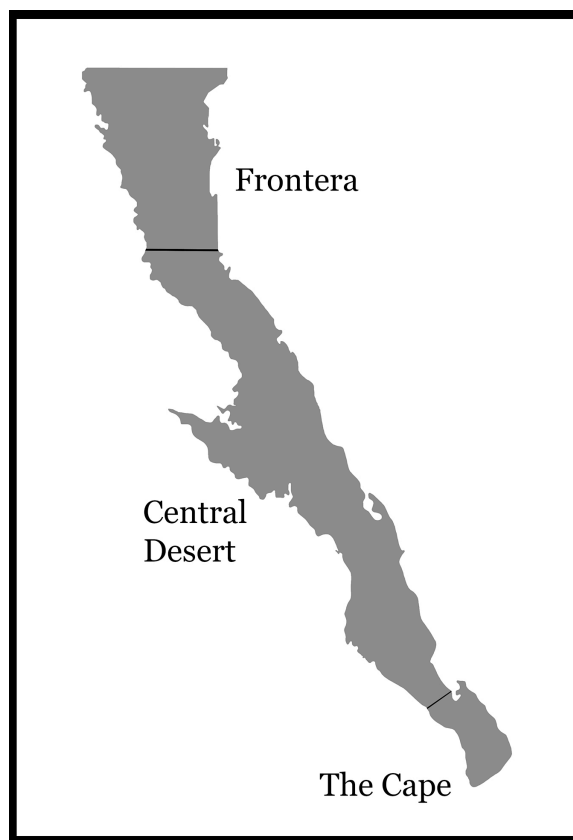


Figure 2 - The three zones of the Baja peninsula.

### First arrivals

Humans have inhabited the Baja California peninsula since the terminal Pleistocene and early Holocene. Currently, the oldest accepted radiocarbon dates for sites range between approximately 10,000 BP and 11,200 BP (Fujita, 2008, 2014; Hyland, 1997; Des Lauriers, 2006, 2010; Laylander, 2006: 3; Erlandson and Braje, 2011: 34). The oldest of these dates come from Isla Espiritu Santo, located near La Paz in the Gulf of California, and Isla Cedros, which is in the Pacific Ocean, west of the mid-peninsula city of Guerrero Negro. The oldest date from the center of the peninsula comes from the Cueva Pintada rock art site (Laylander, 2006: 3).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isla Cedros was still connected to the main peninsula between approximately 12,000 and 13,000 BP (Des Lauriers, 2006:259).

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Based upon recent theories of coastal migration, it is plausible to argue that Baja California's western coast may have been among the earliest places reached by the first Americans (Erlandson et al, 2007; Erlandson and Braje, 2011; Laylander, 2006: 2). As Des Lauriers argues, the population that lived on Isla Cedros during the terminal Pleistocene was highly skilled in marine exploitation, which suggests they arrived "with some knowledge of ocean resources and in possession of the skills and technologies necessary to access them" (2006: 264). Nonetheless, the Baja California was home to indigenous populations of hunter-gatherers and fishermen for about ten thousand years before the arrival of Europeans. One important point here is that the first humans who arrived in Baja California likely knew that it was not an island. Whether humans first arrived via land or a coastal migration route, they surely knew that it was connected to a larger land mass. One of the primary arguments of the coastal migration route theory is that people made their way down the Pacific Coast by following an extended chain of kelp ecosystems, which ran the length of the coastline (Erlandson et al, 2007). Kelp beds are not located far from the coast itself, so the people who may have traveled this route would have had direct knowledge that the landmass was not an island. They had direct experience with this place, which likely provided insight—albeit limited—into the geographic nature of the peninsular land mass. I raise this point because this issue—whether or not California was an island—vexed European explorers up until the mid-18th Century. This misinterpretation was largely possible because many of the people who actually promulgated this myth had never actually been to California's shores.

### Europeans and the island myth

The territory that is called 'Baja California' today began simply as 'California'. It was only later that it was divided into Alta (Upper) California, which includes much of the present day state of California in the United States, and Baja (Lower) California, which includes the two Mexican states. California entered the human imagination as a literary, imagined island long before it was used to describe a specific geographic place. The roots of California's island mythology can be traced to a specific European text.

In 1510, a book called *Sergas de Esplandian* ('The adventures of Esplandian') was published by an author named Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo. The *Sergas* was a sequel to *Amadis de Gaula* ('Amadis of Gaul'), which was highly popular and successful. Montalvo's work fit within the wider genre of romantic chivalry, which was popular in 16th Century Spain. This genre often featured extended narratives about the "impossible exploits of knightly heroes in strange and enchanted land inhabited by monsters and extraordinary creatures" (Leonard 1992: 13). The *Sergas* were a perfect example of this romantic genre. Esplandian, the son of Amadis, falls in love with Calafia, an Amazon Queen who lived on a fantastical island brimming with gold and riches. This island was called "California" (Leonard, 1992: 38). Importantly, Montalvo wrote these epics in a way that deliberately blended fact and fantasy. His works often incorporated narrative historical accounts, which left many readers wondering what was—and what was not—true. The legacy of Montalvo's ambiguously real and imagined tales played a vital role in creating—and sustaining—the myth that the California peninsula was actually an island. Leonard makes the case that it wasn't just lay readers who believed Montalvo's accounts of the mythical island of California. He argues that Spanish explorers from Columbus to Cortés were influenced by books such as *Sergas de Esplandian*, and actually attempted to verify those stories during their voyages (Leonard, 1992: 13-14). Imagination, in other words, fueled action. Belief in

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the existence of Amazons was so pervasive, for example, that contractual agreements between explorers and financiers "frequently included clauses requiring a search for these mythical women" (ibid: 36).

In one key passage of the *Sergas*, Montalvo writes, "Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very close to the Earthly Paradise, and inhabited by black women without a single man among them, for they live almost in the manner of the Amazons" (in Leonard, 1992: 39-40). As Crosby notes, this phrasing is quite ambiguous, but it appeared to refer to an island west of the North American continent, "since many Europeans believed that 'the Indies' of Marco Polo lay not far beyond" (1994: 4). The only metal known on the island, according to Montalvo, was gold. It should be of little surprise that such accounts held wide appeal for gold-thirsty Spanish explorers (and their financial backers). Copies of the *Sergas* were widely available in important Spanish ports and cities, from Toledo to Seville. There were editions published in 1521, 1525, and 1526, precisely the moment of Spanish conquest in the New World (Leonard, 1992: 41). One of the goals that motivated Cortés, in fact, was his desire to verify the existence of the mythical island of California (Miller 1974: 6).

By around 1524, Cortés was already receiving reports about offshore lands that were west of the territory he called New Spain (Crosby 1994: 4). Upon returning to Mexico in 1530, Cortés was granted two titles: Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca, and Captain General of New Spain. The latter title gave him the explicit right to "discover, conquer, and settle whatever islands there may be in the South Sea of New Spain" (Miller, 1974: 6). Cortés sent two ships into the gulf in 1533. One almost immediately returned to port in Acapulco. The second ship sailed west and found its way to the bay of present day La Paz on the California peninsula. The crew thought they had landed on the legendary island of the Amazons. But the dreams of wealth and paradise were not to be. The captain of the ship went ashore with about 20 of his men. All, except for one, were killed by the local Guayacura people (Miller, 1974: 7). The only person who survived managed to escape by swimming back out to the *Concepción*. The crew quickly set sail for the mainland of New Spain. Upon arrival, one of the crewmen reported news of an "island of pearls" to Cortés (ibid: 7). Upon hearing this news, Cortés was more determined than ever to visit the famed island. He was also motivated, in part, by the desire to assert his claim and authority over the new lands before his political rivals in New Spain had a chance to stake their own claims. Cortés, his soldiers, and his colonists set sail for California in April of 1535 (ibid: 6). They first sighted the land on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and landed in the bay he called "Santa Cruz" in May 3<sup>rd</sup> (today this is the bay of the city of La Paz). While full of hope and ambition, this second expedition was also a failure. It took them sixteen days to make the crossing, in part because of "many calms and foul weather" (ibid: 10).

Cortés and his men found little of interest in the real California they discovered. Reality was a far cry from the imaginings of Montalvo and the adventures of Esplandian. There was no gold to be found, few pearls, and a population that could not be readily exploited. Unlike what Cortés had discovered in mainland Mexico, the people of California were hunter-gatherers; there was no agricultural food surplus to rely upon and exploit. Moreover, the Guayacura people were, apparently, unwilling to share food with their Spanish visitors. Food shortages quickly became a problem. Cortés had to send ships back to the west coast of New Spain for supplies (Miller, 1974: 12-13). As more problems developed, he decided to return to the mainland in early 1536. He left some of his men behind, under the command of Francisco de Ulloa. By the end of that same year, Ulloa

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and his colonists abandoned California and sailed back to Acapulco. This was the end of Cortés' attempt to conquer the mythical "island" of California, which, it turned out, was a far more hostile land than many a Spaniard had imagined. Yet the island myth continued to draw people to the shores of the fabled island for the next 200 years... despite growing evidence that it was, in fact, not an island at all.

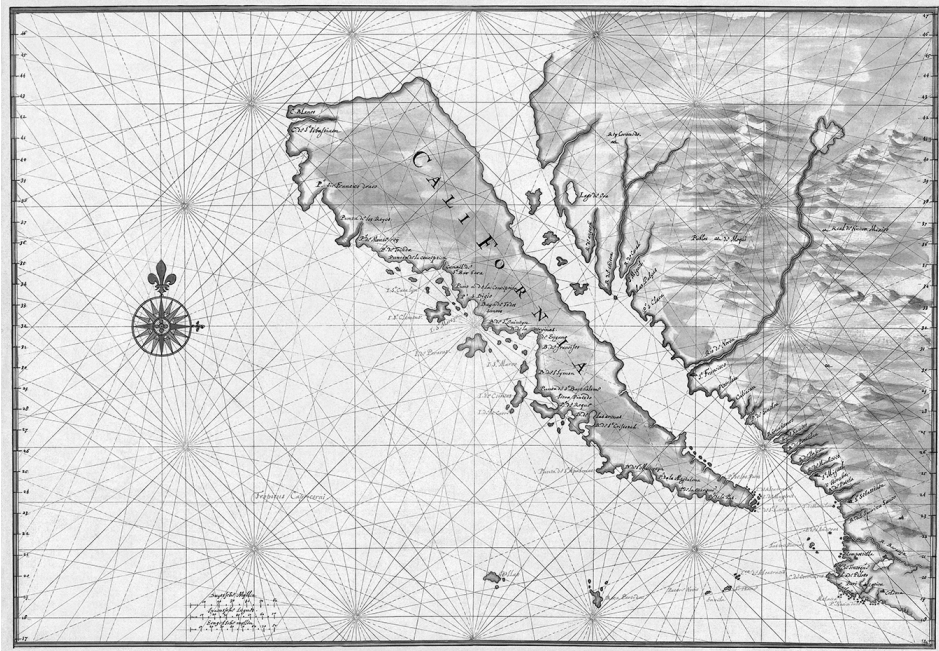


Figure 3 - Map by Johannes Vingboons (1616-1670) depicting the California peninsula as an island (circa 1650).

### The persistent effects of myth

Francisco de Ulloa sailed to the upper extent of the Gulf of California in 1539. The following year, Fernando de Alarcón ventured there as well, but went further, exploring the lower reaches of the Colorado River as far north as the mouth of the present day Gila River (Laylander, 2004: 310). Both of these expeditions demonstrated quite clearly that the California landmass was, in fact, a peninsula. For the next 60 or so years, it was considered to be just that. Things changed by around 1620 however, when maps once again began to depict California as an island. Laylander (2004) notes that much of the blame for this is often attributed to Antonio de la Ascension, the Carmelite friar who was part of Sebastian Vizcaino's 1602-03 expedition along the California coast of North America. But there is more to the story. The primary source of the new misinformation, which refueled the rumor that California is an island, actually came from the 1604-05 expedition of Juan de Oñate.

As Laylander argues, California once again became an island on January 1, 1605, when the Oñate expedition reached the mouth of the present day Colorado River (2004: 312). According to the reports of both Ulloa and Alarcon, this should have been the place



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where the gulf ends, which would present, one again, clear evidence that California was indeed a peninsula. But the Oñate party was convinced that what they saw was something very different: the gulf appeared to continue heading in a northerly direction (ibid: 312). In combination with some "creative misunderstandings" between local native informants and the Oñate party, this direct evidence seemed to indicate that California was, in fact, actually an island (ibid: 322). The Oñate party thought they had encountered a strait that separated California from the mainland. They were wrong. What they had seen was the full, flowing mouth of a large river. And so the island myth was reignited for another century and a half. This rebirth was assisted by Father Ascencion, who apparently began promulgating the island myth after he read reports from Oñate's expedition (ibid: 312). The myth persisted, incredibly, despite many first-hand accounts that existed. European mapmakers and geographers helped fan the flames of this myth throughout the 17th and 18th centuries (Polk, 1995). The island myth continued up through the beginning of the 18th Century, when the French geographer Guillaume de Lisle conducted a thorough review of the available cartographic evidence and challenged the whole notion (ibid: 313). He meticulously sifted through various maps and accounts, concluding that California was, after all, a peninsula. This conclusion was verified on the ground by the Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino's overland expedition in 1701 (Polk 1995: 297-302; Crosby 1994). Still, the doubters remained—many of them were missionaries on the mainland in New Spain. Two more Jesuit missionaries set out to prove, once again, the peninsularity of California—Father Ugarte in 1721 and Father Consag in 1746. This last voyage seemed to finally end all doubts (Polk 1995: 325). In 1747, King Ferdinand VI of Spain even made a simple, yet seemingly exasperated declaration, to end the question once and for all: "California is not an island" (ibid: 326).

### A land apart?

The Baja California peninsula—which used to be called simply "California"—is not an island. This is a cartographic and geographic fact. It is clearly connected to the North American landmass. There is no longer any question about this. It is part and parcel of the rest of the continent in very clearly defined ways. And yet it retains its island-like character. This is why the late Fernando Jordan's iconic book about the Baja peninsula was aptly titled "The Other Mexico" (Jordan, 2005). As Rebecca Solnit recently wrote, an island is "anything surrounded by difference" (Solnit, 2013). The Baja California peninsula is the embodiment of difference—historical, geographical, political, marine biological, economic, and cultural. It is a land of isolation, as Father Baegert discovered long ago, but also a place addled with contrasts and marginality. It is a land connected—barely—to the rest of Mexico and North America. There is a reason why so many of Baja's primary histories focus on themes of isolation, disconnection, and marginalization (eg Martinez, 1960; Krutch, 1986; del Rio and Altable, 2000). In relation to the rest of Mexican national territory, the lands and people of the Baja peninsula have often been ignored, marginalized, and seemingly forgotten. Throughout much of the 19th Century the peninsula existed as a distant outpost of the Mexican state. It was not seen as valuable territory, let alone a principle part of the Mexican national mythology. It was a socio-political island within the larger Mexican state; a peripheral, relatively worthless, barren landscape that just happened to be part of Mexico (see Anderson, 2014). Perhaps Father Baegert was right after all.

On January 23, 1768, in a joint dispatch to the King of Spain, *visitador general* José de

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Gálvez and viceroy Carlos Francisco de Croix referred to the territory as "the Californias" (Richman, 1965: 65). By the turn of the century, this territory was divided into two separate provinces: *Antigua* and *Nueva* California (see Bancroft 1970: 20). This boundary reflected the ecclesiastical territories of the Dominican and Franciscan missionary systems. After the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Nueva California (i.e. Alta California) was ceded to the United States, while Antigua (Baja) California was divided into a northern and southern district (Selee, 2011: 100-101 n6). Both territories were connected to the rest of Mexico, barely, by a relatively thin strip of land. Even though the peninsula was still technically connected to the mainland, the new political borders effectively exacerbated the *aislamiento* of the Baja California peninsula. The northern district, "Baja California," became 29th state of Mexico in 1953 (ibid). The southern district remained a Federal Territory until it was officially granted statehood, under the name "Baja California Sur," in 1975 (Gamez, 2012: 213). This delayed integration of the southern territory into the national project helped solidify its position as "geographically, economically, and politically distant from Continental Mexico" (ibid). While the northern part of the peninsula became increasingly more connected to Mexico—and the United States—the southern territory remained in a distinctively island-like state.

It wasn't until the final few decades of the 20th Century that the Baja California peninsula began to transform—in the eyes of the Mexican state and global investors—into a truly valuable, desirable, and exploitable place. Perhaps it is more accurate to say it was actively transformed and reimagined by certain key players—including presidents, politicians, investors, and developers. The situation truly began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Mexico started looking toward global tourism development as a way to generate economic growth (see Clancy, 2001). Almost instantaneously, the supposedly barren and isolated beaches of the Baja peninsula took on a new value and meaning. They became some of the most desirable jewels in Mexico's growing global tourism economy. And so began a massive, state-led project that focused on connecting Baja California to the rest of Mexico—and the outside world (primarily the United States). It was a grand project of *de-isolation* in various infrastructural, social, economic, and political senses. The Mexican government built roads, airports, and hotels in the hopes that tourists would flood into this relatively unknown part of Mexico. Mexico finally wanted to bring its eclectic western edge into the fold, to put the peninsula back on the map of national consciousness. Baja California is forgotten no longer. Today, Baja California Sur has one of the fastest growing economies in all of Mexico. It is home to one of the nation's premier mass tourism destinations (Los Cabos), along with a growing alternative tourism sector (see Anderson, 2014; Gamez, 2008).

### *Aislamiento* lives on

Yet, despite all of this, its island-like nature lives on. This is particularly the case for the southern part of the peninsula, which, thanks to the massive central desert and water on all sides, is about as close to being an island as possible. While the massive tourism zone of Los Cabos is decidedly connected to the outside world through international air travel, cruise ships, and global flows of goods, the nature of these flows upholds an island-like existence.<sup>2</sup> This is especially the case with Baja California Sur, which, despite

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<sup>2</sup> This observation is based upon a decade of traveling to Baja California by air and via the transpeninsular highway.

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tremendous economic and demographic growth, remains disconnected from the mainland—and even the northern state of Baja California—in powerful ways. It is certainly possible to drive the entire length of the peninsula to reach its end—and a dedicated few complete this migratory trek each year—but much of the flow of people, goods, and culture comes by sea and, much more recently, air. The sheer length of the peninsula, combined with its stark but daunting physical landscape, have discouraged overland travel. The patterns of sea-based travel began with the Spanish in the early 16th Century, and were continued by English pirates, Jesuit priests, Russian traders, and American whalers (among others) up through the 20th Century. The port city of La Paz, in the southern state of Baja California Sur, is an example of the continuance of this pattern of travel by boat. In the early part of the 20th Century, La Paz was a bustling part of the global pearling economy, which temporarily linked the Baja California peninsula to wider international markets. However, by the late 1930s, the region's well-known pearl beds were diseased and depleted, and the local pearl economy was largely destroyed.

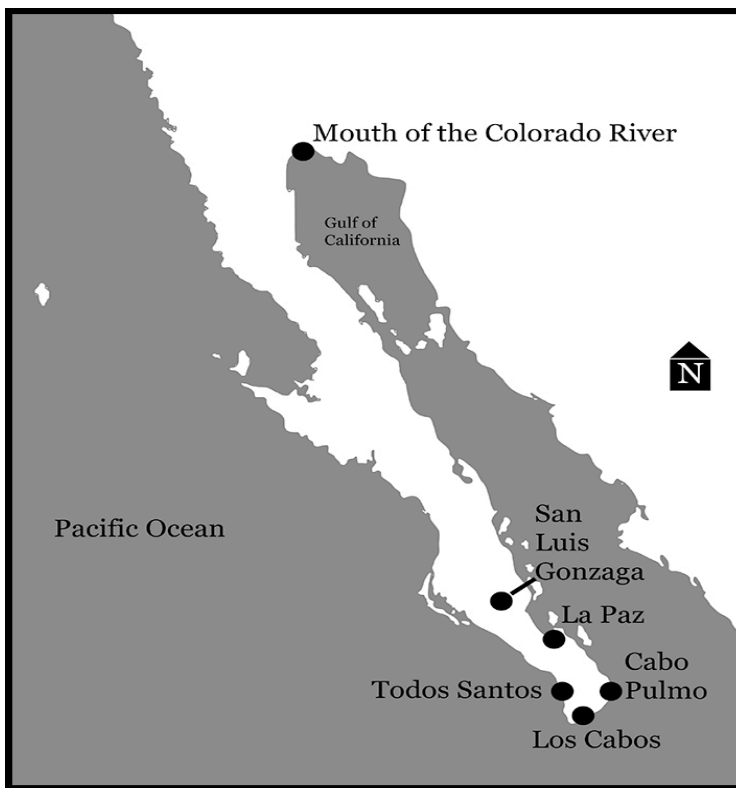


Figure 4 - Places mentioned in the text.

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In order to combat the growing economic misery, La Paz was declared a free port in 1939. By 1964, a newly created ferry system connected La Paz (and the Baja peninsula) to the Mexican mainland (see Berger, 1998: 186). The ferry system in La Paz connects with the mainland ports of Topolobampo and Mazatlán in the state of Sinaloa. Around this time, La Paz was one of the largest population centers in the southern cape region, with approximately 24,000 inhabitants in 1960 (INEGI, 1960). The ferry service helped establish La Paz as a key tourism destination, particularly for domestic tourists who sought goods that were unavailable on the mainland. In the relation to the rest of Mexico, La Paz existed in a largely island-like state. It was connected to the rest of the country by sea and also increasingly by air.

Air travel is another primary means through which people find their way to the Baja peninsula. It also helps produce an isolated, island-like sense to the peninsula. The Cape Region, which extends from the city of La Paz south, around the cape, past Los Cabos, and up to Todos Santos, is a good case in point. Before the international airports were built in La Paz (1970) and San Jose del Cabo (1977), the Cape Region was littered with a plethora of small, often remote, airstrips. These airfields laid the foundations for a pattern of tourism that continues to the present day. A number of small fly-in fishing resorts were created, starting in the 1950s, which helped solidify Baja California Sur, in particular, as a prime destination for serious anglers (see Niemann, 2002; Mayo, 2007). These resorts not only prepared the way for the larger flows of tourists that were to arrive in the coming years, but also helped produce and reinforce a pattern of island-like travel. Fishermen, mostly from the United States, were able to travel to these relatively remote, exclusive resorts much as they would any other island destination. Long before Cabo San Lucas became a popular, mass-tourism destination full of hotels, bars, and strip clubs, it was a highly exclusive fly-in fishing resort that attracted an elite set of visitors from throughout Mexico and the United States. This elite enclave, which was certainly a socio-economic island in and of itself, was the initial inspiration for the luxurious, highly segregated tourism zone of contemporary Los Cabos (see Lopez et al, 2006; Wilson, 2008).

Travel by air and sea, then, help to reinforce the *aislamiento* of the Baja peninsula. These effects can be seen throughout the landmass, but are more powerful and apparent, I argue, in its southern extremes. These forms of travel produce the strange sort of hop-scotched connected that comes with an island experience. These modes of travel, which are used to move tourists, goods, and ideas, result in the jarring experience of place that comes with either the rapid relocation of air travel, or the alternatively tumultuous or tedious sort of travel that happens on boats. Both forms of travel serve to differentiate, alienate, and set places apart from one another. There is something different about places disconnected from larger landmasses. In the Baja peninsula, this difference stands out starkly. Technically, it is not an island. But its *aislamiento* persists nonetheless.

*Aislamiento* is about something more than just being surrounded by water. There are many landmasses around the world that are technically islands in the strict, definitional sense that are decidedly not islands in the cultural, political, or social sense. The islands of Long Island and Manhattan both illustrate this quite. Each of these landmasses, while completely surrounded by water, are so deeply integrated—through culture, history, commerce, infrastructure, and the everyday mobilities of New Yorkers—that they are effectively not islands in many important ways. Neither Manhattan nor Long Island

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could be described as isolated in any meaningful sense. The complex network of bridges and freeways doesn't completely erase their islandness, but they come pretty close. One look at a contemporary aerial map confirms this.

Culture, history, politics—and flows of people—contribute to the connections, disconnections, and *aislamiento* of any place. The Baja California peninsula has a long history of cultural and economic isolation. A similar case can be made for the Yucatan peninsula, which, although it is connected to the rest of Mexico by a decidedly bigger landmass, has experienced a similar history of disconnection and marginalization from the wider Mexican state (see Miranda, 2015). The people of the Yucatan peninsula have a long, contested history with the rest of Mexico. The histories of Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo, in particular, share many similarities. This includes a long period of isolation and political disconnect from the power centers of Mexico, and, interestingly, a much more recent economic and political interest based primarily upon the possibilities of tourism development. In the 1970s, when Mexico pushed its national tourism development project forward, both Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo were selected as primary destinations for development (see Clancy, 2001). Both states, long viewed as marginal, worthless places, became states in the mid-1970s. This entry into statehood helped integrate both of these formerly isolated places, but not completely. An island is a social—and political—entity, as much, if not more, as it is a matter of geographic fact.



Figure 5 - The East Cape of Baja California Sur.

### Conclusion

I lived on the East Cape of Baja California for one year while doing anthropological fieldwork. Leaving the city of San Jose del Cabo, there are two ways to get to the East Cape. The first, an easiest, is to drive on the main paved highway for about an hour before reaching the end of the road. From there it's another 40 or so minutes along an unpaved road into the heart of the East Cape, which is where I lived. The alternative route, which I preferred, involved taking the unpaved coastal route that began on the northern edge of San Jose del Cabo. It was a long, bumpy, brutal road that wound its way along the coast of the cape. It was a beautiful, meditative, and grueling transition from the crowded, chaotic urban life of the Los Cabos tourism zone. There was a certain Turnerian (1995) ritualism to it: the separation of leaving Los Cabos, the marginalization of the remote roads, and the reincorporation into life out on the East Cape. Being all the way down there, at the tip on one of the world's longest peninsulas, far out among those unpaved roads...it was like living on an island, even though I knew it was anything but.

The Jesuits, with their dedicated empiricism, helped to expose and destroy Baja California's island myth more than three hundred years ago. However, for all of their astuteness and on-the-ground experience, there was something they were missing. Perhaps there was something else to the persistence of Baja's island myth that is worth paying attention to. There is something more to islandness than the clear technicalities of geography and cartography. The concept of shima speaks to this something more, something else. Of course, islands are literally produced by what may be called accidents of geography. Some landforms are cut off from others, and we humans draw out maps and make out claims and impose our labels and meanings. But the idea of "island" also has deep social roots and foundations. It is, ultimately, about how the human imagination perceives, processes, and makes sense of particular places, locations, and states of being. Islands are geographic facts yet also cultural, historical, and imaginative experiences. They are places where "imagination takes forms of reality" (Suwa, 2007: 6). This process, which I have called *aislamiento*, is deeply social and political. Islands are more than landmasses, bodies of water, and facts. They are products of human cultures, histories, desires, and prejudices. The *aislamiento* of the Baja peninsula, in particular, has led many a traveler to experience and understand that landmass as an island, regardless of reality and the demonstrated facts of cartography. Isolation, as Father Baegert found out long ago, has strong effects. So it goes with this enigmatic, shape-shifting, "long rock jutting into the sea."

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