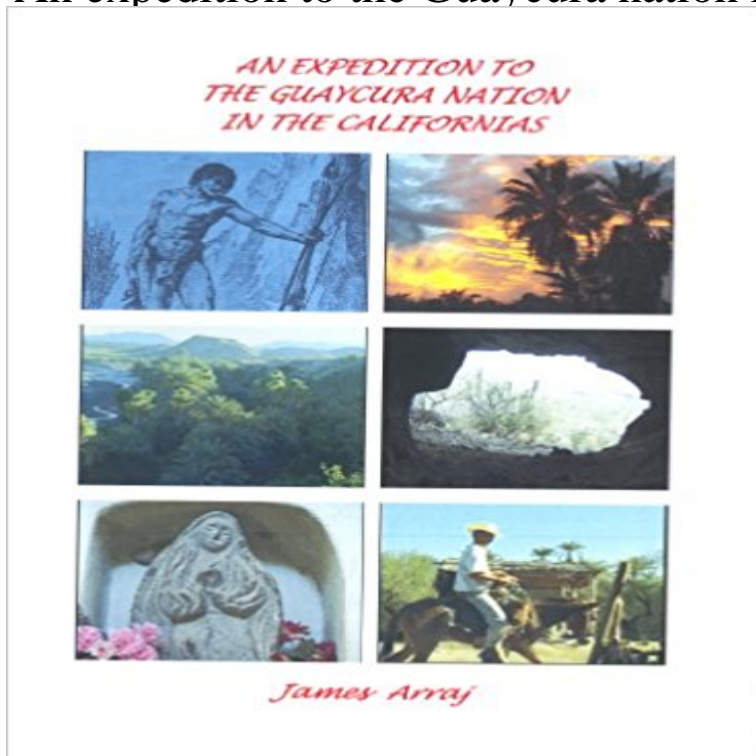


## An expedition to the Guaycura nation in the Californias



On March 3, 1719, what the Jesuit missionary Clemente Guillen was to call, An Expedition to the Guaycura Nation in the Californias, left the Royal Presidio of Loreto for the unknown south, and the land of the Guaycuras. We are going to go on another and more cerebral expedition to the Guaycura nation to try to rediscover something of its history and geography in this largely forgotten part of Baja California Sur, Mexico, which stretches from present-day Ciudad Constitucion south towards La Paz, and at whose heart were the missions of Nuestra Senora de Los Dolores and San Luis Gonzaga. At first glance such a project can hardly seem promising. One modern historian claimed that the mission of San Luis Gonzaga was the least mentioned of all the Jesuit missions in contemporary records, or by the old historians of the Order,<sup>1</sup> and described the country through which the Padre Guillen passed on a second expedition to La Paz as, this broken and well-nigh impassable country, the worst in lower California.<sup>2</sup> Even in Jesuit mission times it had a reputation as being both a rugged and sterile place, scarcely yielding its missionaries a crust of bread, and its Guaycura were seen as both primitive and intractable. Its missions were the first to disappear, and its history fell into oblivion. Even today traffic on the trans-peninsular highway speeds by to the west, but few strangers venture onto its dusty and rocky roads. The ancient heartland of the Guaycuras is all but forgotten. Yet all this should not lead us to imagine that it does not have a history worth recovering. It has, indeed, a rich history that has been appearing piecemeal during the 20th century as important documents have been published, and it is a history that even has some notable features. Modern American California, for example, owes the Guaycura nation a special debt, for the suppression of its missions and the exile of its people were

due, in part, to free up resources to found the new California missions in the north. Further, its missionaries have left us a portrait of the lives of the Guaycuras that allows us to see something of how ancient Americans must have lived. Our task, then, is to recover this history and assemble it into a whole, to begin to ask about its wider significance, and if we are lucky, to occasionally catch a glimpse of the magic that has drawn travelers to Baja California for generations. The land of the Guaycuras is, in fact, a microcosm of human history from its hunter-gatherers onward, and it turns out to be a surprisingly well-documented one so we are afforded the double pleasure of discovering a small piece of history, and reflecting on what larger lessons it has to teach us.

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