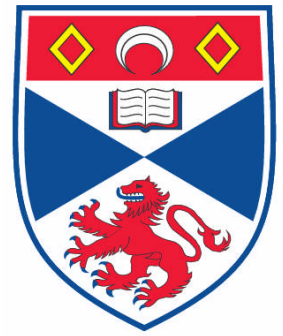
CARVING WOOD AND CREATING SHAMANS : AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF VISUAL CAPACITY AMONG THE KUNA OF PANAMÁ

Paolo Fortis

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St. Andrews



2008

Carving Wood and Creating Shamans

An Ethnographic Account of Visual Capacity among the Kuna of Panamá

Paolo Fortis

A thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of St Andrews

March, 2008

I, Paolo Fortis, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 95.000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.
date …… signature of candidate ……

I was admitted as a research student in September, 2005 (in the second year of Ph.D.) and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September, 2005; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2005 and 2008.
date ……. signature of candidate ……

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.
date …… signature of supervisor ……

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker, that my thesis will be electronically accessible for personal or research use, and that the library has the right to migrate my thesis into new electronic forms as required to ensure continued access to the thesis. I have obtained any third-party copyright permissions that may be required in order to allow such access and migration.
date ……. signature of candidate ……

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the carving of wooden ritual statues and of the shamanic figure of the seer among the Kuna of the San Blas archipelago of Panamá. Through a study of the production of wooden ritual statues and of the birth and initiation of seers, I show that the distinction between the visible and the invisible, and between designs and images, is a crucial aspect of Kuna ways of thinking and experiencing their world. On one hand, the Kuna theory of design shows the importance of the development of social skills in the creation of person and sociality. On the other hand, the Kuna concept of image points to the relation between human and ancestral beings and to the transformative capacities of both. Through the constant interplay of the two categories, people interact with cosmic forces and create social life.

The ethnography explores three aspects of the problem. First, the relationship between the islands inhabited by Kuna people and the mainland forest is described, focusing on the distance and separation of the two domains. The forest is perceived as a space populated by ancestral animal and tree entities, as well as demons and souls of the dead.

Second, the carving of the ritual statues and the skill of Kuna carvers are described in relation to human and supernatural fertility. The birth of seers, different from that of other babies, provides evidence of the importance of natal design as the potential skills of each person.

Third, relationships between human and supernatural beings are described considering Kuna myth and ritual action, in comparison with other indigenous American societies. This thesis concludes that it is through carving wooden statues and developing the capacity to see, Kuna people seek security in social life and protection from a predatory cosmos.

Per Giulia

mio piccolo tesoro

Contents

Maps, Tables and Photographs

Maps

Tables

“Everyone will have their own zoo in paradise”

Juan Mendoza, July 2004

Acknowledgements

This thesis is based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Kuna people of Panamá between 2003 and 2004. I initially started my Ph.D. at the University of Siena (Italy), which funded me with a three year scholarship, covering the fieldwork and the first year of my writing up. Additional funding for my fieldwork has been provided by a Short Term Fellowship from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute of Panamá. Before beginning my writing up period in 2005, I moved my Ph.D. to the University of St Andrews, where the School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies funded one year of my fees. The writing up has been possible thanks to the economic efforts of my parents Dario Fortis and Clara Rocco, and my parents-in-law Giampiero Margiotti and Daniella Casarini. The Royal Anthropological Institute funded the last stage of my dissertation with the Radcliffe-Brown Trust Fund/Sutasoma Award (2007).

In Siena, Massimo Squillacciotti, my undergraduate supervisor, gave me the initial support for starting my research project among the Kuna, among whom he had previously conducted his own research. In Siena and in Tuscany my gratefulness and friendship goes to Fabio Mugnaini, Pier Giorgio Solinas, Francesco Zanotelli, Simona de Bravo, Pietrino, Sara Tagliacozzo, Giovanni Burali, Valentina Lusini, Fabio Malfatti, Alessandra Pugliese, Elisa Galli, Cinzia Fia, Tommaso Vianello, Luciano Li Causi, Luciano Giannelli and Maria Marchitiello.

When I first went to Panama City Kuna friends helped me to start my research and to learn the basic understanding of the Kuna language. My deep gratitude goes to Loys Paniza, who with her calm and wise attitude helped me to set up the required permissions for my fieldwork and contact with the Kuna authorities. José Collman has been a good and helpful friend, and a source of intellectual confrontation before, during and after my fieldwork. Marden Paniza taught me his language and his music; Egnis and Abuelo Paniza provided a delightful company during my difficult initial days in the city. I am also grateful to Blas Lopez, Reina, Natta and Lola. I thank Flor Denis and the Kuna women of the Cooperativa Productores de Mola de Panamá, who embraced my

project happily and presented me to the Kuna authorities in Panamá. I wish also to thank the Kuna researcher of the Insituto de Investigación Koskun Kalu, who provided me with their consultancy, and the Congreso General Kuna, which gave me permission to conduct fieldwork in Okopsukkun.

In Okopsukkun I wish to thank all the men, women and children who provided me with their help, support and friendship, and who taught me about themselves as well as asked me about myself. I was welcomed with smiles and the doors of people's houses were always open to me. Kuna friends prepared food everyday and kept me warm with their delicate company. They made me laugh and taught me the importance and the pleasures of living together with many other people. Nixia Pérez has been a strong support throughout the whole of my permanence in Okopsukkun. Her intelligent sensibility provided me with enormous help and invaluable information. Without her much of my research would not have been possible. I thank all her family for their help and support, Nikanor Pérez, Raquel Morris, Olopaiti, Neba, Kanek, Liz, Jaison, Paolo Pippi, Enriquetta and Milciades. Juan Mendoza, helped me to translate the Kuna into Spanish during the first months and taught me much of what I know about the Kuna language. My profound gratitude goes to Aurelio Pérez, who first welcomed me in his house and died in 2007. Rotalio Pérez and Alejandrina Pérez have been joyful friends, with their daughters Nistilisop, Natisop and Tirwikili and Muu Wakala. Isaias Garcia has been a wonderful and patient informant. I remember the afternoons speaking with him and his kind way of explaining things to me. He died at the end of 2007. Garibaldo del Vasto has been a wise teacher and an invaluable source of information; he decided to meet me and left me with an open lesson. I wish also to thank Hector Garcia, Meliña Smith, Miki Smith, Mikita Smith, Teobaldo Lopez, Leobijilda Smith, Marciales Davis, Nekartyli, Reinaldo Tuny, Aurora Diaz, Papa Rey, Aurolina Tuny, Alejandrino, Inaekikinya, Mario Pérez, Muu, Remigio Lopez, Beatriz Alba, Justino Lopez, Lucrezia Morales. Many people in Ustupu and Tupile were also willing to answer my questions.

I wish to extend a special thanks to Olga Linares from the STRI of Panamá, for all her support, encouragement and important suggestions. A very important mention has to be done here to Fernando Santos-Granero. He contributed to giving new shape to my research, providing invaluable feedback and precious advice during my fieldwork. Fernando was the first to communicate to me the passion for ethnography, for this I owe him a lot.

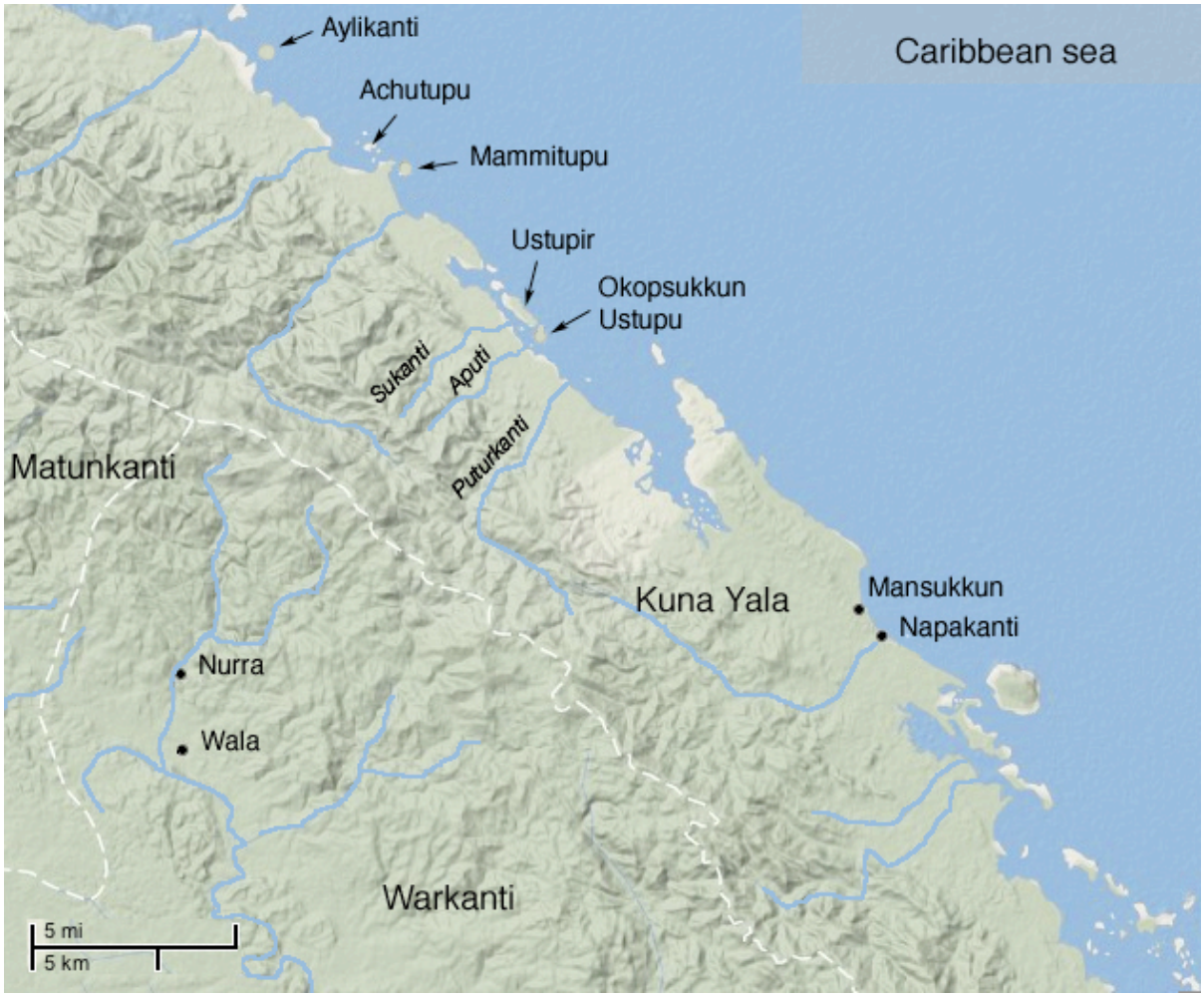
At STRI and in Panamá, I am also grateful to Adriana Bilgray and Maria Leone, who helped to sort out administrative matters, to Jorge Ventocilla and Monica Martínez.

Once I arrived in St Andrews many people have been supportive and contributed to the writing up of my thesis. The Department of Social Anthropology of the University of St Andrews and the Centre for Amerindian Studies, with their weekly seminars, provided a stimulating intellectual milieu for my writing. Peers and lecturers contributed to the development of some of the ideas discussed in this work. I wish to thank you Adam Reed, Margherita Margiotti, Suzanne Grant, Craig Lind, Eleni Bizas, Giovanna Bacchiddu, Jeanne Feaux de la Croix, Veronika Groke, Stacy Hope, Huw Lloyd-Richards, Efpraxia Pollatou, Rodrigo Villagra Carron (who also put up with me as an office mate), Conrad Feather, Peter Clark, Huon Wardle, Tristan Platt, Tony Crook, Christina Toren, Jasper Chalcraft, Paloma Gay y Blasco, Mark Harris, Stan Frankland, Emilia Ferraro and Juan Serrano. I wish also to thank Elisabeth Ewart, Stephen Hugh-Jones, Evan Killick and Magnus Course for their comments. Linda Scott patiently corrected my English and encouraged me until the end. I thank Mhairi Aikenhead and Lisa Smith for their help and patience. Margaret, Carol-Anne, Napier and Mma Ramotswe kept me laughing throughout this journey.

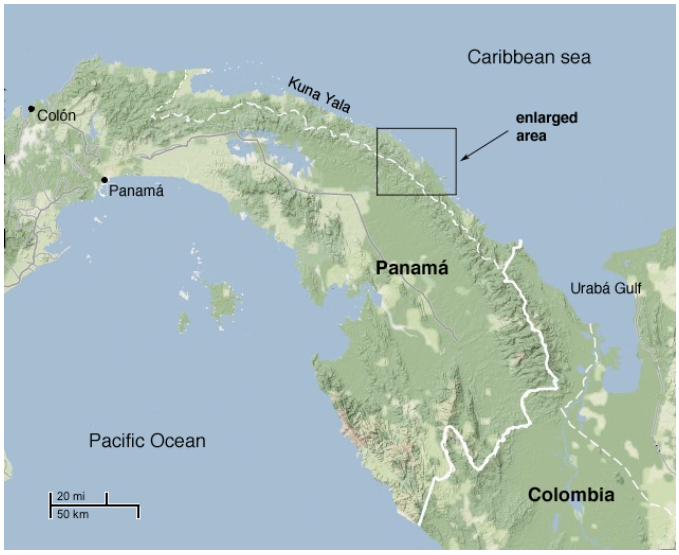
I am grateful to both my supervisors. Joanna Overing helped me in the process of writing my thesis. She always asked me challenging questions, gave me invaluable advice and provided me with support throughout the whole of this work. Discussions with her have opened new doors to the interpretation of my ethnographic material. As an undergraduate, in Siena, an article by Peter Gow set me on my way. Years later, he himself helped me to go through it. His suggestions have been invaluable and discussing my ethnography with him always kept my curiosity for Kuna people alive and provided solid grounds for developing analysis on my ethnographic material.

My family has been a continuous support during all these years. They have helped me in many ways. I thank my mother Clara and my father Dario, Myriam, Mattia, Marco, Patrick, Sofia, and Martino. I thank also Daniela and Giampiero, my parents-in-law. Giovanni, Lorenzo and Biagio, good friends.

Giulia made me discover how life is beautiful and gave me new strength. Margherita Margiotti, partner and fellow-anthropologist, brought me to the Kuna and since then has constantly engaged with me in dialogue on our respective ethnographies. She gave me invaluable insights and precious feedback. This work would not exist without her contribution. To her goes my most sincere love.

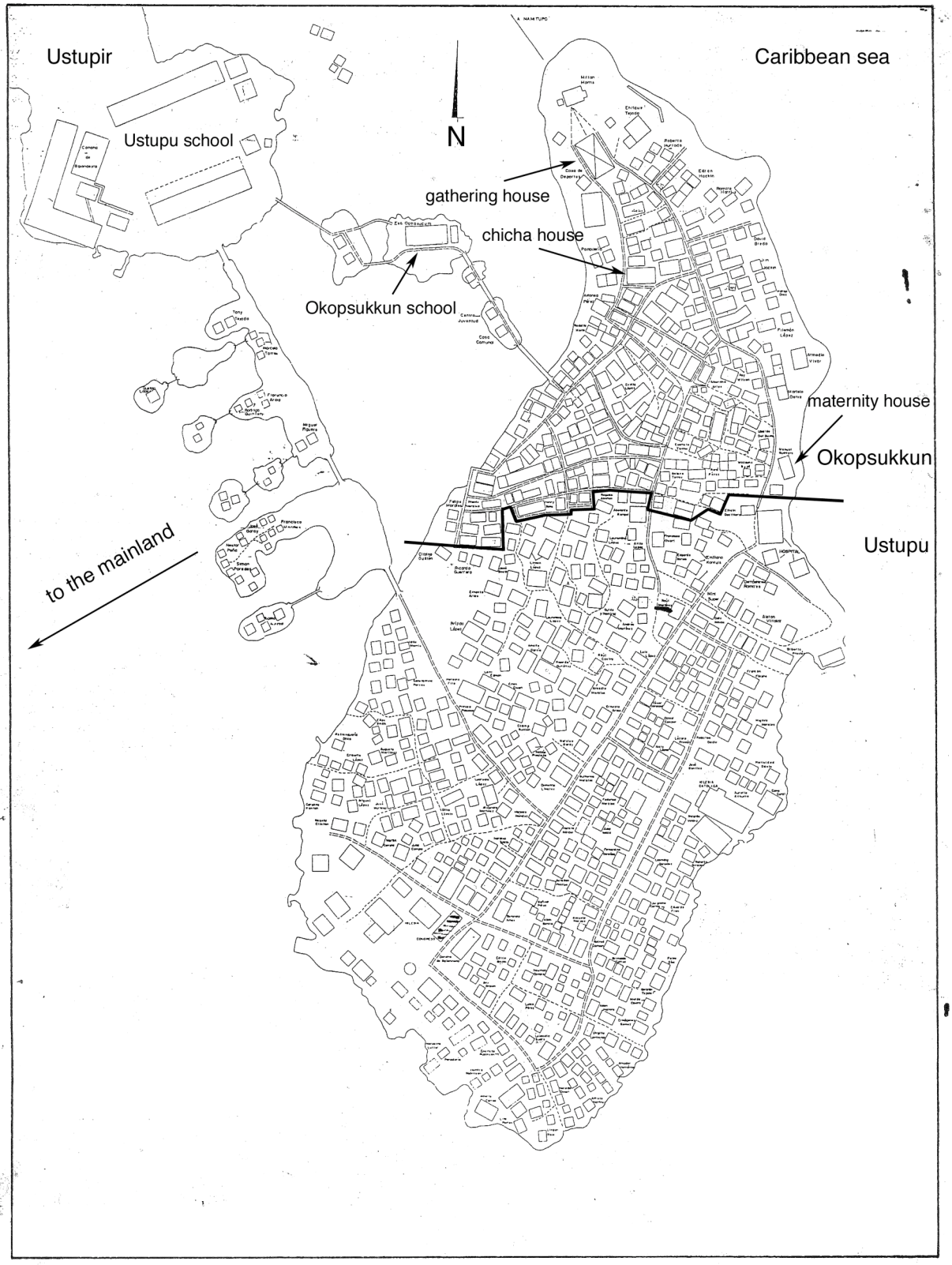


Map 1 – Villages in the Middle-East area of Kuna Yala



Map 2 – Panamá

Map 3 – Central and South America



Map 4 – Okopsukkun (map from the village library)

Note on Orthography

The Kuna language has been transcribed in several different alphabets. The system developed by Holmer (1947), has been used by academic scholars (Sherzer, 2001 [1983]; 1990; Howe, 2002 [1986]; Salvador, 1997). Another system of transcription is that of the missionary Jesus Erice (1980). In June 2004 the Kuna General Congress started a series of seminars in order to form the basis of establishing a common orthography for transcribing the Kuna language. In this work I use the system of transcription adopted by Sherzer (2003).

All words in Kuna language (*tule kaia*) are written in italics throughout the text. Kuna personal names and names of places are not in italics. Singular and plural forms are transcribed according to the way Kuna people utter them. The suffixes *–kana* or *–kan* (and less often *–mar*) are used to pluralize nouns and adjectives.

There are five vowels, which can be short or long (single or double) and the stress is usually on the penultimate syllabe:

a: *tala*, 'sight'; *kaa*, 'hot pepper'
e: *eye* 'yes'; *seet* 'to lead'
i: *mimmi*, 'little one'; *tii*, 'water'
o: *koe* 'deer', 'baby'; *oo*, 'cough'
u: *ua* 'fish'; *muu*, 'grandmother'

There are four voiced stop consonants:

p (pronounced b): *ape*, 'blood'
t (pronounced d): *tule*, 'people'
k (pronounced g): *kurkin*, 'brain', 'hat'
kw (pronounced gw): *kwallu*, 'grease'

There are four voiceless stop consonants, which occur only in the middle of words, represented as long (doubled) versions of the voiceless consonants:

pp (pronounced p): *sappi*, 'tree'
tt (pronounced t): *satte*, 'not at all'
kk (pronounced k): *takket*, 'to see'
kkw (pronounced kw): *walikkwa*, 'close'

Nasals, liquids and the r can also be short or long (doubled):

m: *ome*, 'woman'; *mimmi*, 'little one'
n: *nuu*, 'bird'; *sunna*, 'real'
l: *sulu*, 'monkey'; *pollekwa*, 'far'
r: *tarkwa*, 'taro'; *serreti*, 'old', strong'

There is a sibilant s and an affricate ch:

s: *misi*, 'cat'
ch: *macheret*, 'man'

There are two semivowels:

w: *war*, 'tobacco'
y: *maysa*, 'made'

Introduction

When entering in a Kuna house, one is always struck by the strong contrast between the bright sunlight of the outside and the obscurity of the inside. Then, slowly the eyes get used to the dim light of the interior and begin to discern the shapes of the objects and persons. Hammocks hang lifted up between the main horizontal poles; one bed is positioned in one sector of the house separated by a cane wall. A wooden trunk supported by four legs lies along the cane wall; wooden stools and plastic chairs are scattered around. A small table, used by children for their homework, is in a corner. Plastic buckets used to preserve various kinds of objects from the dust and the saline air, line the walls. Clothes hang from cane sticks attached to the roof with lines that can be pulled down when necessary. A Singer pedal sewing machine is positioned close to the door, where some light comes in. During the day the house is relatively calm and silent as the members of the extended family spend most of their time in the kitchen, a separate hut, and on the patio.

Not helped by the obscurity of the space inside of the house, it is difficult to see that at the feet of one of the two main posts there is a plastic box containing a tight group of small, carved wooden statues standing upright one beside the other. They are the *nuchukana*[1], anthropomorphic figures carved by elderly Kuna men, used in healing rituals and kept in each house as a protection against evil spirits. These small wooden statues measure between five and thirty centimetres and represent both male and female figures. They are standardized representations of the human figure with few details to represent their gender. Male figures are normally carved wearing a hat, a shirt and trousers, while female figures wear a headscarf going down to the shoulders and a long skirt. Sometimes the clothes are painted with artificial colours and their cheeks are coloured with *nisar* (*bixa orellana*). A few of them also wear bead laced across the neck or the torso. All the *nuchukana* in the house are kept together in the same box forming a

[1] *Nuchukana* is the plural form of *nuchu*. *Kana* or *kan* are the plural suffixes for nouns and adjectives in Kuna language.

quite homogeneous ensemble, despite differences in their size, style of carving, with some being older and more deteriorated than others. Despite their importance in Kuna daily life, *nuchukana* are kept relatively out of sight, and it took me a few months to notice their presence and to become interested in them. But once I did, a new world opened before my eyes.

The Kuna are indigenous people who live on the San Blas archipelago off the Atlantic coast of Panamá. A few villages are located on the mainland, while the majority are on small islands close to the coast, each with a population ranging from a few hundred to four thousand individuals. Some other villages are located in the interior of the region and in the Darién forest, and two villages are in the Colombian territory on the Gulf of Urabá. The majority of the Kuna (around 35.000) live in the Comarca Kuna Yala, which comprises the San Blas islands and a narrow strip of coastal land stretching Westward for more than two hundred kilometres from the Colombian border. Other 25.000 Kuna live between Panamá City and Colón. The language of the Kuna (*tule kaia*), although still a matter of debate, is considered affiliated to the Chibcha family (cf. Holmer, 1947; Sherzer, 1997). I conducted my fieldwork in the village of Okopsukkun, situated on an island in the middle-east sector of Kuna Yala, over a period of fifteen months between February 2003 and November 2004.

Initially, I went to the field with the idea of studying Kuna visual representations, with a focus on women's clothes (*molakana*): their colourful blouses, sewn in a rather complicated reverse-appliqué technique, with incredibly diverse designs. *Molakana* are known worldwide and sold internationally. I became interested in *mola* designs before commencing my fieldwork and I dedicated my undergraduate thesis to the creation of analytical models for interpreting the cognitive processes followed by Kuna women when sewing their *molakana*. Then, once I started my Ph.D., I decided to go to the field to observe what Kuna women actually do and say about this creative process. Unsurprisingly, I found myself in a strange situation in which I could not find a fruitful way to formulate my questions to Kuna women, and most of them did not quite understand what my interest was. My obsession with the meaning of designs appeared to be meaningless to Kuna women, who, by the same token, were keen to show me their beautiful *molakana* and to name them following design types and sewing techniques.

One day, in May 2003, after three months of living in Okopsukkun, I went to speak with Héctor Garcia, one of the chiefs of the village. While listening to my questions he sat on his stool carving a small wooden log, stopping at times to examine his work. He

was surrounded by baskets containing wood of various shapes, and roots and vines, which he explained he used for the preparation of medicines. I asked him about the meanings of the *mola* designs. He took a *nuchu* from a basket and told me:

> **"**I've carved it. It's a *nuchu*. It's like a house. Now I'm going to explain to you. If, for example, gringo soldiers wanted to come here, first of all they'd need a house to stay in. They'd need a house to be built for them before coming here. Otherwise where could they stay? It's the same for the souls [*purpakan*] of trees. If I carve a *nuchu* they can come here from the fourth layer under the world. They come to help us, to protect us against illnesses."

When I went back home, after my conversation with Héctor, I had learned little about *mola* designs but something about *nuchukana*, I kept thinking about what he had told me and about the *nuchu* he showed me. Although I could not make sense of his words, I felt a genuine interest for what appeared to me a completely different vision of the world. 'What is a *nuchu*?' I asked myself. This work is a first effort to answer such a question ethnographically, the aim is to unfold the preoccupations of the Kuna who carve these wooden statues and then use them in healing rituals and as a protection against evil entities. Such an analysis of the Kuna ethnographic material fits comfortably within the corpus of studies dedicated to the understanding of Amerindian cosmologies, especially those of indigenous societies from the lowlands of South America, with whom the Kuna share a great deal in terms of cosmovision, mythology and social organization.

The ethnographic question

A major question provoked by my conversation with Héctor raises an interesting problem, which I deal with throughout my work. It concerns the analogy between a *nuchu* and a house, which points to a relationship between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the created artefact, or, more precisely, between what is 'visible' and what is 'invisible'. Héctor's explication directed me to a basic notion of Kuna ontology, shared by many indigenous people of South America, namely that what is visible does not correspond to the whole picture of the world as people might perceive it, but only to one aspect of it. A *nuchu* is not only its wooden shape, but it is also what normal people

cannot see: that is, its powerful and invisible inhabitant, the soul of an ancestral being, which only seers can view through their dreams. In this work I argue that the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside', and between 'visible' and 'invisible' is at the core of the Kuna ways of thinking and knowing their world.

Kuna seers, *nelekan* (sing. *nele*) are born shamans who are able to see ancestral animal and tree entities in dreams. In developing their capacity to see through initiation ceremonies, *nelekan* also become able to see illnesses within the human body. Among the Kuna ritual specialists, they are the diagnosticians of illness. The curing of illnesses, on the other hand, is then performed either by a botanic specialist (*ina tuleti*), who is expert in the preparation of plant medicines, or by a ritual chanter (*api sua*), who knows the healing chants (*ikarkan*). The skill of the *nelekan* (the seers) is therefore that of being able to see beyond the limits of what is visible, to which normal people, including the other categories of specialists, are bound. They learn to see and to control their dreams in order to interact with supernatural entities and to learn their ancestral knowledge. This knowledge may then be transmitted to other curing specialists or directly used by *nelekan* to cure ill persons. A *nele* may be consulted either when a person becomes ill, to discover the cause of the illness, or when epidemics spread in a village. In the latter case, once the *nele* has discovered the cause that afflicts the entire village, he helps the ritual chanter (*api sua*) in the performance of an eight-day-long collective healing ritual, to rid the village of the presence of malevolent entities.

Kuna people are clear in saying that *nelekan* are different from other ritual specialists because they are born with a particular gift that renders them able to see supernatural entities. This distinction by birth is manifested by the fact that *nelekan*, differently from normal babies, have no designs on the remains of their amniotic sac at birth. All other babies show a design, normally over their head, at birth. In this work I describe the person of the *nele* starting from the analysis of the ethnographic problem of being born with or without designs.

I shall make one thing clear at this point, namely that throughout my work I refer to the *nele* as a male person ('he'). This does not mean that there are no female *nelekan*, as there are many of them. Kuna people always stress that the *nele* is the one who is born with this particular predisposition, and they say that only male *nelekan* are born as such. By the same token women may become *nelekan* once they are adults, and this happens as a consequence of being pregnant with a *nele* son. I analyse this case in chapter five,

suggesting an interpretation for Kuna female shamanism, which distinguishes it from the shamanic path of males. I have chosen throughout my work to focus upon the 'ideal figure' of *nele* from birth as a 'he', as Kuna people described it to me, when I speak in general about seers. This shall not thus be in contrast with the individual cases of women *nele*, which I discuss in several chapters.

As mentioned I am studying the *nuchukana* from within the ethnography. That is, my concern is with the Kuna understanding of the interplay between visible and invisible. A riddle first presented to me by Héctor's depiction of his wooden statues. More specifically, I propose to study *nuchukana* a) in relation to the Kuna concept of the human person and b) by focusing on how the Kuna conceive of their relation with the dead.

Enlightenment about Kuna ideas of human personhood emerged from my study of the birth of Kuna seers, learning the importance of the design on the caul of newborns (*kurkin narmakkalet*, 'caul with design'). In describing what the Kuna say about this design and its relevance to the distinction between seers and normal babies, I show how design is considered to be a significant attribute of Kuna personhood. Namely the type of design is intimately linked to the creation of the social person and to the development of individual capacities. In Kuna theory, every person who is endowed with a design by birth is able to develop a specific skill during his or her life, for example as hunters, gardeners, woodcarvers, *mola* seamstresses. *Nelekan*, on the other hand, are born without design, which enables them to develop their capacity to see within the supernatural realm.

Moreover, the specific design or lack thereof points to the individualization of the person through the development of his or her social skills. The relationship between design and the individualization of the person has been addressed by Taylor (2002; 2003) in a study on Achuar face painting. According to her analysis, I find it interesting to consider her suggestion that the individuality of a person is something that is manifested to other people, although not completely revealed, by one's visual appearance. It is by progressively revealing their own designs, throughout their life through skills, that Kuna people develop their capacities and are seen by other people as social persons. As Taylor suggested in a previous article (1993), it is the image that other people have of one person that constitutes the self-image of that person. In this sense the image of a person is the reflection of one's whole social person, as well as

inner properties, in other people's eyes. Kuna people say this explicitly, by stressing that one becomes him or herself, when other people recognise his or her specific capacities, first enacted at childbirth.

The Kuna theory of design suggests therefore the link between the development of personal skills and the creation of sociality. The idea of design, as potential skill to develop through social relationships, is at the core of the Kuna idea of personhood. Each person develops his or her own social skills, which have been displayed in their potential form as design at birth. It is thus through showing one's design at birth that one's kinspeople are able to start channelling one's powerful skills towards the development of social capacities. Design at birth shows the ambiguity between personal power and danger; it shows the link with animal entities. It is therefore essential to master this power, rendering it socially creative, in order to enable the maintenance and reproduction of human sociality (cf. Overing, 1985a; 1989; 2003).

The link between design, power and danger is well exemplified in the case of *nelekan*, which I discuss in chapter four. As mentioned, the design on non *nelekan* newborn's caul is seen by their adult kinspeople and thus enables the creation of sociality through the development of individual social skills. On the other hand, the lack of designs of *nelekan* at birth, shows the danger of the proximity with animal auxiliary spirits. This danger, which is first directed at the *nele*'s parents (see chapters five and six) has to then be mastered through complex initiation rituals and through the attentive care of grandparents, who look after the *nele* child instead of his parents.

Another aspect of the relationship between *nuchukana* and the human person consists in the opposition between image and design. This opposition has been originally noted by Lévi-Strauss (1960; 1972) in relation to Caduveo face painting. Reflecting upon the relation between the complex symmetrical designs of Caduveo women and the face upon which they are painted, he argued that "In native thought, as we saw, the design *is* the face, or rather it creates it. It is the design which confers upon the face its social existence, its human dignity, its spiritual significance" (1972: 259, italic in the original). The tension between the plastic form and the designed surface is particularly relevant for understanding South American indigenous visual systems. Its key importance, the complex relationship between images and designs, is receiving further attention in Amerindian studies. For instance, Gow (1989) has taken this point seriously and he has applied it to the study of the visual system of Piro people, in comparison to other

Amazonian people. As he suggests, designs enhance the external visual appearance of bodies and artefact and are linked to the importance of kinship in the creation of persons; images on the other hand, are the internal appearance of living beings as perceived through hallucinogenic experiences, and points to a particular relation with the cosmic world, beyond the human condition. Thereafter other studies have focused upon the ethnographic analysis of native visual systems (Gow, 1990; 1999; 2001; 2003; Guss, 1989; Lagrou, 1996; 1998)[2]. These authors analysed the production of designs and the conception of images in the daily life of Amazonian people, in relation to the life cycle, creation of sociality, shamanic experiences, cosmology and mythology.

These works focus on material designs, product of the skilful action of indigenous women, and consider images in their immaterial manifestations, such as in dreams or in shamanic hallucinatory experiences. My work adds new material to this discussion, since I describe the material creation of plastic images, the *nuchukana*. While previous studies focused on women's graphic activities, in my work I focus on men's plastic art. I therefore describe how Kuna men carve wood and relate it to the shamanic capacity to see. I explore the social relevance and the cultural significance of the capacity to see and to give shape to wooden objects among the Kuna. These capacities are highly valued by Kuna people, the study of which, I argue, is key for the anthropological comprehension of the Kuna visual system and sociality. The distinction and the interplay between visible and invisible, and between design and image is a crucial aspect of the Kuna way of thinking and seeing the world. My work will thus hopefully contribute to a better comprehension of Amerindian visual systems and socialities, and will provide a new perspective through which to analyze their complex ontologies.

In this work I argue that the ethnographic analysis of: 1) design at birth, 2) the capacity to see of the *nele* and 3) the carving of *nuchukana* all point to the opposition between visible and invisible. Together, design, capacity to see and *nuchukana* also point to the separation of different ways of perceiving the world and to the definition of different perspectives upon it, i.e. the individualization of the person. I will focus on the experiences of Kuna carvers and seers in order to explore the importance of what I define as the 'capacity to see'. For the Kuna, the 'visible' world, as it is perceived by human beings after birth, becomes so dominated by perceptual experiences that focus is

[2] Two new monographs came to hand at the end of my thesis (Barcelos Neto, 2002; Lagrou, 2007). These works open new areas of research, which I plan to develop further in the future.

upon the surface, or 'external' appearance of things. On the other hand, the 'invisible' world, as it is perceived by seers and to a certain extent by carvers, is dominated by the perceptual experiences of images that point to the 'internal' appearance of things.

The capacity to see - as a quality of Kuna carvers and seers - is linked to the skill of grasping the inner quality of things and living beings beyond their surface appearance. Surface appearance, beauty, and visibility thus point - and are intrinsically related to - the inner properties of things and beings. In this work I often translate the Kuna term for inner property of living beings (*purpa*) as 'image', and I use it also as a conceptual tool to understand what Kuna people mean when they say that they carve a *nuchu*.

It is with all this in mind that I describe the creation of *nuchukana* and the birth and initiation of seers among Kuna people. Considering the relationship between the Kuna ideas of 'design' and 'image', I thus argue that through carving a *nuchu* Kuna men intentionally individualizes a generic ancestral soul. I reach this conclusion by analysing Kuna concepts and practices of carving, by connecting different aspects of the life and of the myths of Kuna people.

As a small methodological note, I wish also to say that this work could not have been conceived in the form that it has acquired, without the inspiration provided by the reading of ethnographies on South American indigenous societies. These works are quoted throughout the text with a comparative intent, although many of them contributed to my comprehension of Kuna people well beyond the simple comparison of single aspects. Although Kuna people are not 'geographically' South Americans, as will become clear in the reading of the text, they comfortably fit within the wide tradition of the studies of Lowland South American societies. It is to these studies that I turned most while writing my ethnography and that most helped me in understanding what Kuna people told me and what I observed during my fieldwork.

Among the Kuna

The curiosity of Baron Erlan Nordenskiöld's was attracted by the Kuna wooden statues during his expedition in Panamá in 1927. His descriptions of *nuchukana* are accurate and reliable and give details on the rituals in which they are involved (cf. Nordenskiöld, 1938). Moreover he took with him a few exemplars of the wooden statues, which are now kept in the archives of the Ethnographic Museum of Göteborg.

He considered the possibility that the *nuchukana* were the representation of Christian saints and with this idea in mind he compared Kuna wooden figures with the ones created by their neighbours, the Emberà, living between Panamá and Colombia (*ibid*: 423-426). However, his analysis remains conjectural, and he did not develop it any further, nor did he go back to Panamà after his first trip due to health problems. On *nelekan* (seers) he received reliable information from his Kuna informant Ruben Pérez, who was the secretary of the Kuna chief Nele Kantule, political leader of all the Kuna during the first half of the twentieth century, and himself a seer. Chapin (1983; 1997) in his study of Kuna curing knowledge and practices refers to *nuchukana* and *nelekan* in various passages of his descriptions of curing rituals. Severi (1981a; 1981b; 1987; 1993; 1997; 2000), in his extensive study of the Kuna conception of suffering, memory and on the pictographic representation of curing chants, often mentions both these figures. Moreover, in his work he reflects upon the concepts of *purpa* ('soul', 'image') and *kurkin* ('brain', 'imtelligence'), which I also analyze in the course of my work through my own ethnography (see especially chapters four and five)[3].

Taussig (1993) uses the figures of the *nuchukana* as the privileged object in his enquiry on mimesis. His study concentrates on the way Western imagery is perceived by Kuna people (and, as he argues, by colonised people in general), by focusing on one aspect of *nuchukana*, noted by the Nordenskiöld and Chapin, namely the representation of European types in some of the Kuna wooden statues. Taussig observes the *nuchukana* as an example of how the Western colonial white world is perceived and mimetically appropriated by Kuna people. He reaches the conclusion that the power of *nuchukana* resides in the fact that they are a copy of the white men. In my work I look at what the *nuchukana* are for Kuna people and what they tell about Kuna preoccupations concerning their own life. I come indeed to a completely different conclusion than Taussig.

I realize that in this work I adopted the position that Amerindians are not to be seen as repressed by the West and, as such, forced to adopt foreign customs, or to find the way to express their own customs in disguised ways. I find it more appealing and realistic to think that they made their own choices in desiring what they found appealing to them vis-à-vis the foreign colonialists. I think that it is analytically significant to consider the

[3] There is a large body of literature on the Kuna, which is not on my topic. See for example, on Kuna language and verbal art (Sherzer, 2001 [1983]; 1990; 1997); on Kuna village political organization (Howe, 2002 [1986]) and ethnohistory (Howe, 1998); on *mola* commercialization (Tice, 1995); on Kuna acculturation (Stout, 1947) and on Kuna ethnomedicine (Chapin, 1983; 1997).

fact that Amerindian cosmologies were already intellectually fit to confront alterity when Europeans arrived (see Lèvi-Strauss, 1995; Viveiros de Castro, 2002). By the same token I find, and I am not alone in this, that it is important to explore what indigenous people do and say, as their personal and distinctive point of view upon life, and to focus the attention 'from start to finish' upon indigenous voices (Overing and Passes, 2000: 2). In this work, by starting from what Kuna people told me about their lives and by making an effort of translation of their ideas, I aim at rendering their categories 'analytical' (Toren, 2002)[4].

Until now, an ethnography that focuses on the place of *nuchukana* and *nelekan* in Kuna society has not been undertaken. This work is an ethnographic account of *nuchukana* and *nelekan* as I came to know them, living in the Kuna village of Okopsukkun between March 2003 and November 2004. As the majority of Kuna villages in the Kuna Yala district of Panamá, Okopsukkun is situated on an island at little distance from the coast. The island is occupied by two independent villages: Ustupu and Okopsukkun. Although the border between them is not noticeable to foreign eyes, the division is clear in terms of administration and population[5].

When I first went to Okopsukkun I landed by small aircraft at the little airport located on the mainland coast. Then I crossed the channel between the island and the mainland by canoe with an outboard motor. I did not know at that moment how many times I would make this same trip, paddling in a dugout canoe, with a Kuna friend, back and forth from the island to the mainland forest.

Arriving from the sea, the sight of the overcrowded island, one house attached to the other, was completely different from that I had seen from the plane. A line of houses, just above the sea level, emerged in front of me; there was the same closeness between each house, only from another perspective. Yet, before reaching the island, I was struck by the incredible silence (except for the humming of the motor). Once I got to the island the picture changed completely once more. A crowd of people, mostly children, was waiting for Margherita and me in front of the house where we were going to live for the first period of our fieldwork. The people were waiting for our arrival, as Margherita had

[4] When this point was originally made (Toren, 2002), it was unfortunatelly misspelled as 'analyzable'. It has been then corrected to its original spelling as 'analytical' in an article published later (Toren, 2007).
[55] Although people between Ustupu and Okopsukkun used to intermarry, and married men used to participate to the collective activities of the village of their wives, each person continues to be identified with his village of origin.

already been living in Okopsukkun for two months before my arrival, engaging in her fieldwork, and thus everyone was already aware that her partner (*we sui*) was coming. Our luggage was instantly taken inside the house and I soon found myself seated with a glass of *matun* (banana drink) in one hand and bread in the other, being observed attentively by a crowd of children.

In the months following my arrival in Okopsukkun I slowly learned how to adjust to a new style of life. I got rid of my shoes and many unnecessary clothes and I soon bought a pair of rubber sandals sold by the Colombian traders who constantly travel along the Kuna islands in the San Blas archipelago. I learned how to eat *tule masi* (a soup with boiled plantain and grated coconut, eaten with boiled fish), by putting a pinch of salt and some chilli in a corner of the plate, then with a spoon, mixed alternating bites from the plantain to the fish. I learned to take three or four showers a day, with the fresh river water that, thanks to the aqueduct, arrives in each house. I learned to be ready by half past six in the evening, dressed in long trousers and a shirt, to go to the gathering house, where the *saylakan* (village chiefs) sang the long mythic chants (*ikarkan*), describing the creation and life in heaven. Eventually, two months after my arrival in Okopsukkun, I learned to wake up at five o'clock in the morning to be ready to cross the sea channel by canoe, in order to go into the mainland forest. My first trip to the forest was with Beatriz Alba, a Kuna grandmother in her sixties, who volunteered to accompany me in the forest to collect mangoes. After that first experience I realized that I needed a pair of rubber boots, which all Kuna men have. But I had to wait for my next trip to Panama City to buy them, for it was impossible to find boots of my size on the island or from the Colombian traders. I felt very proud when I went back with my new boots and my new machete. Although I still had to realize how hard the daily work of Kuna men was: they travel everyday by canoe to the coast, paddle the river Sukanti and then walk up to a further two hours, depending on the location of their gardens.

Kuna women spend most of their time in their house on the island, preparing food and drink, sewing *molakana*, attending the morning meetings in the gathering house, and visiting kinspeople's houses. Men travel almost everyday to the forest, leaving at dawn and usually coming back at midday. Although when they carry out particular gardening work, such as felling trees, or sowing and collecting maize, they can stay away until late in the evening, and sometimes even overnight. Accompanying Kuna men to the mainland forest to collect food, such as plantain or manioc, I soon realized

that every man works alone most of the time. Except for felling trees and gathering maize, which are often carried out by groups of men, and except for working in the few big gardens that are cultivated collectively, gardening is an individual activity and requires the skill of Kuna men and a good knowledge of the forest, its plants, trees and animals. Most of all it requires the energy of young men who alone carry great quantities of crops for long distances and then paddle back to the island, where their wives wait for them ready to bring the crops into the house and to start preparing food.

Besides gardeners, many Kuna are also fishermen. They used to fish in the sea near the island. This is normally done with a simple line and a hook, in this way the fish necessary for the family daily meal is procured. Few people in Okopsukkun possess fishing nets and an outboard motor, which would allow them to catch great quantities of fish in the nearby Sukkunya gulf and to sell it to other people. Fish and garden crops provide the daily food for each family, which is integrated and sometimes substituted by the products bought in the local small shops ('tienda' in Spanish) or by Colombian traders, such as sugar, cocoa powder, rice, pasta and canned fish.

Although I had many occasions to travel to the mainland forest, I unfortunately never learned how to be a gardener and to procure the food to take home. Our Kuna friends used to laugh at me saying that I was not a good husband for Margherita and I was not taking good care of her, by working in the forest. But then they also added that as we had no children yet, I still had time to learn[6].

Once, I went to the forest with Garibaldo del Vasto, a Kuna grandfather in his fifties. He is an *ina tuleti* (botanic specialist) and decided to take me on a 'practice lesson' to show me how he worked in the forest collecting medicines. That was probably the most amazing experience I ever had while living among the Kuna, and is still vivid in my memory. We set out early in the morning with one of his nephews, who was his apprentice. After paddling for two hours we reached the coast at a place east of the island, close to the gulf of Sukkunya. We left the canoe among the mangroves and continued on foot. We walked in the forest for more than eight hours, during which Garibaldo never stopped speaking to me. He explained to me almost everything he was doing, the ways in which he cut the bark of trees, to collect medicines; he told me the names of the trees, vines and shrubs as we walked along. He showed me his gardens, told me whose garden he helped to clear of trees in the past, and showed me the gardens

[6] For this reason, Kuna friends, worried for us, suggested that we took plant medicines to improve our fertility (*purpa*). So we did and, as it became evident, they worked well.

of other people we passed by, commenting on the way they were looked after. He stopped to listen to animal cries, and to tell me which animals they were. He showed me how he put together different types of plant medicines in his baskets, in order to be able to recognize them once back home. He told me the names of the rivers and explained to me, while we were bathing, that the river water is filled with the energy of medicinal plants, which grow on the banks.

Then, on the way back to the canoe, he stopped by a huge tree, a *ikwawala* (*Dipteryx panamensis*). He took his machete out and started cutting off one of the exposed roots, at the tree base. He cut out a log around thirty centimetres long, and then sat on a stone, and started cutting the bark off. Once the inner white wood was visible, he produced a cut on one side of the log, close to one extremity. He looked at me and with his usual pedagogic grin he told me: "You think that what I'm doing is for fun, don't you?" Then he put the log in his bag, along with other roots and vines collected during the day, and we set out on our way back to the island.

Chapter 1

From the island

Since first arriving in Okopsukkun in March 2003 I realized how important the forest is for Kuna people living in the insular village. Although a separate space from the island (*tupu*), where people live, the forest (*sappulu*) is ever present in people's discourses. People constantly refer to the forest when they speak of food, medicines and when referring to animals, plants and powerful entities. The other space Kuna people refer to in everyday life is the sea (*temar*), which provides fish and is also host to supernatural entities. Both realms are important in Kuna life as sources of sustenance and supernatural agencies. Therefore, both the forest and the sea are the object of Kuna taxonomic preoccupation and of attentive observation. In this chapter, as well as in the overall thesis, I will concentrate mainly on Kuna ideas about the forest and the way people conceive it as a space inhabited by a great number of different entities and species. There are two reasons for considering Kuna ideas about the sea tangentially in this work: one is dictated by my ethnographic focus on the production of wooden ritual statues (*nuchukana*) and on the life course of seers (*nelekana*), which compels me to explore the forest more than the sea; the other is the overwhelming importance that forest animals and plants have in Kuna mythology, cosmology and everyday practices[7].

In this chapter I will describe how the forest is conceived as a separate space from the village and how the absence of trees on the latter is relevant in this separation. Everyday, Kuna men travel by canoe to reach the coastal forest to bring back crops,

[7] It is also relevant to note that in many Amazonian societies fish have the ontological status of food, differently from forest animals that have been people in mythic times (Viveiros de Castro, 1978; Århem, 1996).

plant medicines and rough materials used for the construction of objects for everyday use, like baskets, water bowls, stools, etc[8]. Among the rough materials Kuna men bring back to the island are wooden logs, which will be used to carve *nuchukana*. Thus there is a constant flow of crops and medicinal plants from the forest to the island. The former are edible plants, and as such are dead; the latter are conceived as 'living plants'. Their efficacy is used for curing purposes by specialists, who bring them to the island and activate their power. I therefore suggest that following Kuna ideas and practices the mainland forest has to be seen as the space inhabited by animal and vegetal species and their entities, as well as by spirits and demons. Whereas the island is the space inhabited by human beings (*tulekana*)[9] with the exception of *nuchukana*, which retain the agency of living trees[10]. The opposition between forest and island is marked by the contrast between mainland, where forest and gardens are, and island, which is crowded with houses and where hardly any trees are present[11]. Furthermore I will point out that another distinction is made by Kuna people, namely between cultivated and uncultivated plants within the mainland forest. This distinction is relevant in understanding how Kuna people conceive the relationship between human beings and animal and plant species, as will become clearer in chapters two and three. Thus there is a physical distance between the island and the forest, which are separated by the sea, and a qualitative difference marked by the presence of trees on the former and their absence on the latter.

---

[8] Nowadays Kuna women in Okopsukkun do not travel frequently to the forest. Men undertake all the work of gardening. Women sometimes go to collect coconut, fruits, to catch river crabs and to collect sand from the river. Old women told me that in the past they used to participate more in the gardening, helping their husbands and sometimes working alone in their own gardens. Plus they used to go many times everyday to collect fresh water from the river. Then since the building of an aqueduct in the 1980s women's travels to the mainland decreased. However, when Kuna people were living in the forest, gardening was a female task, while men felled trees, hunted and fished. For an historical and ethnographic account on the change of division of labour by gender see Tice (1995: 35-38, 124-126, 145-147, 165). Although her analysis takes into account the commercialization of *mola* as the main reason for this change, she points out that the change did not happen consistently in all Kuna communities. This depends on tourism and on whether the village is located on an island or on the mainland.

[9] *Tule* (sing.) is how the Kuna call themselves, 'people', and this extends to other indigenous people in Panamá (or, as some Kuna told me to all indigenous people in general). The Kuna distinguish themselves from other indigenous people by calling themselves *olotule*, 'golden people'. This is opposed to *waga*, 'stranger', which is what Panamanians and Colombians are called, and to *merki*, which means 'white people'. This often refers specifically to North American white people, of whom the Kuna have had extensive experience in the last century (see Howe, 1998).

[10] Plant medicines, such as leaves, barks and vines are also 'alive' (*tula*), after the specialist has addressed his chants to them before sending them to the ill person; the only difference being that their effectiveness is temporary and new plants need to be gathered every four days.

[11] Sherzer noted also that "(t)his sharp division between workplace and village, between mainland and island, stresses the island-village as the place of leisure and of ritual and political activity" (2001 [1983]: 6).

It has to be said that Kuna people moved to the islands of the San Blas archipelago quite recently, between 100 and 150 years ago. Previously, they lived on the coast in small villages near the mouth of the rivers descending form the San Blas range towards the Caribbean Sea. Before that Kuna people were living in the Darién forest, between the actual territories of Panamá and Colombia. Kuna oral history confirms the fact that they came form the Darién forest and their place of origin is the Takarkuna mountain (Takarkunyala), located near the Colombian border[12]. Then for various reasons, among which was the clash with other indigenous peoples (most likely the ancestors of the Emberá) and the pressure of Spaniards, they split into small kindred groups and started establishing nomadic villages along the banks of the rivers. Following the rivers, scattered groups of Kuna reached the Atlantic coast, arriving in different locations spread along the length of the coastal land strip that today, along with the islands, forms the semi-independent territory of Kuna Yala[13]. Here they established more permanent villages inside the rivers' mouths from where the sea was easily accessible. After some time spent living on the coast, at the end of the nineteenth century, most villages moved to the islands located near the mouths of rivers, from were fresh water could be taken. This movement did not happen at the same time for all Kuna villages and some villages remained on the coast where they are still[14]. The reasons for the movement to the islands may have been various; one hypothesis is the good location they provided for trading with foreigners (cf. Tice 1995: 36). Kuna people in Okopsukkun told me that when they were living near the mouth of the Puturgandi river many children died of malaria. So they decided to move onto the island in 1903, where they had already established coconut plantations. Then, with progressive demographic growth, houses replaced the coconut groves and the entire island was used for living, while coconut cultivation

[12] It is interesting to note that historical sources, although there is no agreement on this point, tend to identify the first indigenous people met during the arrival on the American mainland (on the mouth of the Urabá Gulf and during the expedition of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa who arrived to the Pacific coast) with Kuna ancestors (see Howe, 1998: 10).

[13] Kuna Yala was the first region to be recognised as indigenous territory (Comarca) by the Panamanian state in 1938. Today there is a total of five Comarcas in Panamá for the different indigenous groups: the Comarca Kuna de Matunkanti, Kuna de Warkanti, Emberá, and Ngöbe Buglé. Most Kuna villages are located in Kuna Yala; few are in the other two Comarcas located in the mainland forest; two villages are located in the Darién region, close to the border with Colombia; and two communities are in Colombia, on the Gulf of Urabá.

[14] See Nordenskiöld (1938: 8-28) for examples of how Kuna people from different insular villages account for their movement from mainland to the islands. Today there are still five villages on the coast of Kuna Yala.

continued on the nearby islands of Ustupir and Kusepkantup, as well as on the on the coast.

Given this, it is easy to understand the symbolic and material importance of the forest in Kuna life, as the place of origin. Besides the relevance of fish in the Kuna diet, the value attributed to the forest in everyday discourses is related to the fulfilment of two basics needs: the production and collection of food and the provision of medicines. Kuna people consider both needs basic for the survival of each individual and thus of the group. Eating forest food and using plant medicines are essential aspects of people's everyday lives; these allow people to grow up healthy into strong and intelligent adults.

Food (*masi*) is cooked and eaten in the proper way, which is 'people's food' (*tule masi*). A meal consists of a boiled soup with grated coconut, plantains (*machunnat*), manioc (*mama*) or other tubers like yam (*wakup*) and blue taro (*tarkwa*); and of a boiled, smoked or sometimes fried fish from the sea. This is the way Kuna people told me they always used to eat. *Tule masi* makes people strong (*tuttusuli*) and able to work both in the forest and in the house. It builds human bodies and makes people happy and healthy (*yer ittoke*). There was always a strong rhetoric in favour of 'real food' by adult and old people in Okopsukkun, who always stressed that they had all they needed from their land. Old men particularly used to tell me that unlike in Panamá, they do not have to go to the supermarket to buy food; they only need to work in the forest and they can have whatever they desire. Moreover, they always pointed out that their food was better than city food, because it came directly from the forest and did not remain in plastic boxes for many days, or in tins as eaten by strangers. When a family is short of fish, people will buy canned fish (usually mackerel), which is sold by Colombian traders or in small Kuna shops ('tiendas', in Spanish). They mix this with rice or make a soup; but this is not proper food. As women laughing used to tell me, it is *ua non-satte*, 'fish without head'. Often Margherita and I were asked about what we eat in our place. When we explained that our main meal would be made of pasta ('macaroni', in Spanish) they always grimaced, commenting that that was *machunnat suli*, 'not real food', but food contained in plastic[15]. For this reason they said we were weak (*nollokwa*) and unable to bear their daily work routine. This last comment was not limited to alimentary habits, but the difference between them, *tule*, and us, *waymar* (sing. *waka*, 'stranger'), was also

[15] Also Quichua people from Ecuador, commented on the same thing about the anthropologist alimentary habits, by saying 'usted come puro quimico!', 'you eat only processed food!' (Elisa Galli, pers. comm.).

imputed to another important aspect: strangers do not know plant medicines (*waymar ina wichuli*). Plant medicine is called *ina* in *tule kaia* ('people's language', how the Kuna refer to their language). As I stated above, food and plant medicine has the same importance in Kuna life. Plant medicines are used for various reasons: they are used for curative purposes, strengthening the body, enhancing one's fertility, developing one's intelligence and skills, intervening in other people's lives[16]. An old Kuna chief from Okopsukkun stressed the importance of forest plants and medicines:

> "Our forefathers lived on the mainland along the banks of the great rivers in the mountains before they came to know the sea. The rivers where places that they chose for their dwelling places. Our fathers were strong because they were nourished by the plants and trees that surrounded them. […] The rivers touch the roots of many medicinal plants and therefore we have *akwanusagana* [magic stones]. This is why the old people then were much stronger than the men who live on the islands today" (Cacique Enrique Guerrero in Ventocilla, Herrera, Nuñez, 1995: 3).

Therefore *tule masi*, 'people's food', and *tule ina*, 'people's medicine', are the basic ingredients of Kuna people's specific sense of humanity and both link people to the forest. Being islanders, it must also be said that Kuna people rely heavily on sea resources, such as fish (*ua*), which is part of their everyday meal (river fish is scarce). Nonetheless for a complete meal, *machunnat* (plantain) is needed. Margherita and I experienced fasting while living in Okopsukkun, when our hosts had fish but not plantain. In these cases the fish was smoked in order to be consumed later on. Fish, they said, do not provide a full meal and is never consumed alone; you cannot make *tule masi* without *masi*. Plantain is therefore the 'real food' (*machunnat*: *masi*, 'food', plus *sunnat*, 'real', 'proper') and hardly any meal is cooked without it. If it happens that fish and plantain are scarce, people might eat rice and canned fish; but this will not make them happy and satiated (*sattorkwa*), as *tule masi* does[17].

[16] In this work I will not deal specifically with Kuna ethnobotanic knowledge. My aim is rather to understand the way Kuna people see and relate to the world of non-human entities and how this relates to social issues and to their specific ideas of what it is to be human. For an extensive ethnographic account on Kuna ways of curing and on conceptions of illness and medicine see Chapin (1983), and the older but highly interesting ethnography of Nordenskiöld (1938), based on the information given by two Kuna men: Ruben Pérez Kantule and Guillermo Hayans.

[17] Unfortunately today Kuna people buy more and more bad quality food from Colombian traders, which, as they recognise, is not good for their children and does not provide the necessary nutrients for their growth.

Taxonomy of space

The first distinction in terms of lived space is made between island and mainland; in Kuna language respectively *tupu* and *sappulu* or *yala*. As explained in the introduction, my ethnography was conducted on an island and will therefore deal with the specific way of living that comes from being surrounded by the sea and detached from the mainland. Namely, I will argue that the relation with the mainland is one of distance and separation. On one hand, Kuna people speak about the mountainous region near the border with Colombia as the place where they came from. They speak about mount Takarkuna as the place of their ancestors, from where they departed to eventually reach the Atlantic coast. On the other hand, Kuna people often refer to the mainland forest in terms of fear and anxiety; the forest is the place where dangerous and frightening encounters can occur and where evil entities play at home. Despite this, I am aware that some aspects characteristic to Kuna people living in Okopsukkun may differ from those of Kuna people living in the coastal communities of Kuna Yala, in the few villages situated in the Matunkanti and Warkanti mainland districts, or in the two villages in the Colombian Urabá Gulf (Caimán and Arquía). Although the distinction that I found so strong between mainland and island is not applicable for Kuna people living on the mainland, I suspect that the key issue is the separation from the primary forest and the ancient trees. Kuna villages on the coast or in the forest, as typical in indigenous Lowland South America, are situated on the riverbanks, surrounded by cultivated gardens in spaces where the forest has been cleared[18].

What is striking, when seeing Okopsukkun from the small airplane that takes you there (and as far as I could see this is true also for other island and inland communities), is the almost complete absence of trees. The island is entirely crowded with houses, one roof almost touching the other, leaving a space for narrow paths. The only open spaces are the basketball pitch and the space in front of the gathering house (*onmakket neka*)[19].

[18] See Gow on the Piro: "What [people] fear most are the evil beings like the devils, the deceased, the souls of the dead, and even the trees themselves" (1987: 117, my translation). While my Kuna informants told me that Emberá shamans meet during the night the Devil that resides within the tree, which the Kuna identifies as the *suurwala* (*Ficus* sp.).

[19] I use the term gathering house as a literal translation. *Onmaket* means 'to gather' and is used for gathering food as well as for people gathering together. *Neka* means house. Kuna people assemble in the gathering house every day (women in the morning and men during the night) to listen to the chants of *saylakan*, the authorities and for discussing political and administrative matters. The term 'gathering

A few trees grow at the edge of these spaces and within the courtyards of some houses, where they have been planted. They are breadfruit trees, *matupur* (*Artocarpus altilis*), papaya trees, *kwarkwat* (*Carica papaya*) and mango trees, *manko* (*Mangifera*)[20].

The island entirely occupied by the villages of Okopsukkun and Ustupu is linked to the nearby island of Ustupir by two small concrete bridges. The bridges were built when the secondary school of Ustupu was constructed. The land of Ustupir, previously occupied by bushes and mangroves (*ayli*), was cleared in order to make space for the extended one floor building of the Escuela Segundo Ciclo Nele Kantule (Secondary School Nele Kantule), which today hosts hundreds of students from Ustupu and Okopsukkun. Moving beyond the school, on the side of Ustupir looking towards the coast (westward), there is the airport of Okopsukkun. The airport was being rebuilt and enlarged at the time of my fieldwork. This entailed a great deal of work and organization, which was carried out by all the adult members of the community. The airport was active in the past until, people told me, the U.S. company Cable&Wireless built a local plant on Ustupir, which provides access to the line crossing the Caribbean Sea towards South America. The labourers used the earth landing strip for parking machinery and for digging the sand needed for building the plant and in so doing they destroyed the airport.

The opposite side of Ustupir is still covered in mangroves, bushes and coconut palms. In the past, Ustupir was used for the cultivation of coconut groves. The land was divided between families that still possess land on Ustupir[21]. The Cable&Wireless local plant is located among the vegetation. An iron fence surrounds the site, which is always guarded by two Kuna men, one from Ustupu and one from Okopsukkun. Every evening at six o'clock the two guards (*uacimen*) are replaced and two other men arrive for the duration of the night. I remember Nixia, our host and friend, commenting that she would have never spent the night there. She feared encountering *kirmar* ('souls of dead people'), which are said to wander around that side of Ustupir, far from the houses where people live. From Nixia's and other people's words I soon realized that the

---

house' has been used recently by Kuna scholars (see Howe 2002 [1986]: 12) substituting 'council house' (Nordenskiöld, 1938: 52).

[20] Mango, being native of Southeast Asia, has no Kuna name. Nevertheless the many types of mangoes receive different names in Kuna language, such as *manko suid* ('long mango'), *manko bombea*, *manko tirkwa*, *ormanko*, *iles manko*, *manko ochi* ('sweet mango'), *sikwa manko*, *tule manko* ('people mango'), *manko wakarkinne*.

[21] Coconut was the main product that the Kuna exchanged particularly with Colombian traders and provided them with a strong economic, money-like, medium for dealing with the external commercial world. See Tice (1995: 43-44) and Chapin (1983: 463-465).

vegetated part of Ustupir was not considered much different from the mainland forest (*sappulu*). It was a place where demons and dead people may be encountered and where people's souls could be abducted by animal entities. Spending the night guarding the Cable&Wireless plant requires the same courage that Kuna men need when going hunting at night in the mainland forest.

Another important distinction is made between forest (*sappulu*) and hills (*yarmar*, sing. *yala*). The first is the coastal strip of flat land and hills where the most cultivated gardens are; the second is the San Blas range ('Cordillera de San Blas'), which stretches, close to the Atlantic coast, from the border with Colombia almost to the municipality of Chepo (before the Panama Canal). I have to clarify that for what I translate here as forest (*sappulu*), the Kuna use the Spanish 'monte'; while what they say in Spanish 'montañas' (*yarmar*), I translate as hills, being too low for what we normally call mountains. The distinction Kuna people make is quite clear between the two territories, and making a rough generalization I would say that the forest is where food is produced and collected and mountains are where most medicines are collected and most animals are hunted. Although this is not completely accurate, it is rare that gardens are cultivated on the hills, although a few are situated on the sloping foothills. This, I was told, is dictated by the lack of flat cultivable land near the coast, caused by the overpopulation of the island in recent years[22]. Moreover, since the end of the nineteenth century land has become private property and has been divided among families and transmitted from generation to generation, so that nowadays land on both the coast and the island is divided into plots and parcels according to kinship (cf. Howe, 1976b and Tice, 1995: 38-39). Therefore new gardens are either cleared deeper inland, on the hills, or in more distant areas along the coast, which entails longer trips by canoe.

To reach his garden, a Kuna man has to paddle for at least half an hour to enter the river Sukanti. Then, depending on where his garden (*nainu*) is located, he will tie up his canoe along the river bank and continue on foot. Walking on the flat land near the coast one encounters mostly small trees and bushes. Coconut trees were and are still planted in this area along with mango, avocado, cacao and other fruit trees. It is also here where

[22] Starting from a population of around thirty or forty people at the beginning of the XXth century, now Okopsukkun consists of 1419 inhabitants (following a census done by the village in 2003) and Ustupu of around 3000.

wild cane (*masarwar*, *Gynerium sagitatum*) used for making house walls is found and where Kuna men gather other plants like *naiwar* (*Carludovica drudei*). These stems are used for extracting fibres used in basketry and the leaves are used for roof thatching. Different from fruit trees, these plants are not owned by people and everyone can take canes or *naiwar* from other people's gardens. The difference is that these have not been planted by one's kinspeople and therefore no one can claim ownership over them. While mango, coconut and other trees had been planted by one's father or grandfather and are thus considered to be the property of the person who continues to nurture them. Taking mangos or coconuts from someone else's trees is thus considered theft; while people are allowed to take fallen fruits. Leaving fruits to rot on the ground is considered a pity and a waste, and the owner of the trees will be thanked for his generosity and wished richness in the afterlife[23].

The forest space near the coast is also the place where Kuna women may venture alone, to collect mangos or sand from the riverbank. They normally do this in groups of two or more and they always keep moving quickly without stopping anywhere. Since the construction of the aqueduct women no longer have to collect fresh river water, and their trips to the river and the forest have become irregular and young women particularly have become less and less familiar with the forest. Moreover, I was told that women are frightened to be alone in the forest because they fear meeting *wai-sappur* ('stranger of the forest'), non-Kuna people who venture into the forest alone and are said to rape women[24]. As for my habit of smoking while walking in the forest I was often called *wai-sappur* and my Kuna friends mockingly told me that I alarmed the women passing nearby who would smell the smoke from distance.

Moving inland towards the hills one walks through people's gardens. Gardens are cultivated mainly with one crop, like for instance plantain, manioc or maize, although

[23] In this respect see Howe and Sherzer (1975) on Kuna plant classification related to the possibility of having access to other people's plants depending on kinship ties and on what kind of crop one is asking for.

[24] At times it was also mentioned to me that these men were guerrilla members coming from Colombia and moving within the forest hiding from the army, which normally moves by the sea. It has to be said that Okopsukkun is not far from the border with Colombia and many times during our stay we heard of episodes in which Kuna families from neighbouring communities had to flee from their village in order to escape guerrilla or paramilitary retaliation. On one occasion the rumour spread that during the night a boat was patrolling the sea around the island looking for a Kuna family that escaped from their village fleeing the guerrilla.

sometimes mixed gardens are found[25]. This is allowed by the fact that each man and woman often possess more than one garden, being gardens inherited bilaterally from the mother and the father. Therefore men often look after more than one garden, at the same time cultivating different crops according to seasons[26].

Some gardens may be left fallow for a number of years and thus they return to *nainu serreti* ('old gardens'), where trees grow up and the forest quickly re-gains ownership. If the years pass, such gardens have to be re-opened. First of all trees have to be slashed and burned before sowing a new crop. This is similar to what is done when new gardens are cultivated in primary forest. The felling of trees (*sappi sikke*) is normally done by groups of men working together under the guidance of an older man (ideally groups of brothers-in-law directed by their father-in-law). Kuna people consider this work highly dangerous and young men are often reproached by elders for the light hearted attitude with which they approach this task. Felling trees is highly dangerous because one can trip over a vine and be hit by a falling tree. For this reason, the wives of the men who have gone to cut trees, hang up the hammocks in the house during the day. This is meant to help their husbands to detect and avoid obstacles during this work.

The role of the older man of the group is also to teach how to cut a tree properly so that it falls in the desired direction. This has a double significance; one of security for the people felling the tree, another for the tree that is being felled. Trees are alive and when felled should ideally fall on their back, in order to rest on the ground as with dead humans when put in their grave. Cutting trees is also a dangerous operation for another reason: some trees should not be cut because they are powerful entities and the Kuna say that they could take revenge against the cutter and even against his entire family. Members of the family, especially the children, would begin to fall ill and slowly they would die. For this reason these trees are left uncut in the gardens. The other trees may be cut only with the intervention of a man who knows how 'to counsel the trees' (*sappimar unaet*). He has to address the tree with a brief chant in order to advise it that it is going to be felled, so that its soul has the time to leave. In this way the tree becomes

[25] I have to say here that my knowledge of Kuna gardening is limited and I cannot say with enough precision which kinds of crops are cultivated together and the preferences related to proper mixing. For example I observed that pineapples are cultivated in-between plantains and various types of plantains and bananas are often mixed in the same garden.

[26] Due to the fact that men and women inherit gardens separately from their parents (both from the mother and from the father), men work both in their gardens and in their wives gardens. It is in fact a man's duty to maintain his wife's garden that otherwise would soon be invaded by wild plants.

virtually dead before being cut. Cutting a living tree may be a highly dangerous operation and in most cases ritual precautions must be taken (see chapter three).

Moreover trees must not be cut in particular areas of the forest where evil entities have their abodes in the underground. These places are called *kalu* by Kuna people, which means 'enclosure', 'pen' and indicates the 'supernatural village' of animal entities and demons. Although they are actually situated at an invisible level, some *kalu* may be identified by reading signs in the forest. For example boulders are said to be the house of demons (*nia*, translated as 'diablo' in Spanish, or *kalutor*, 'dweller of *kalu*'). Other *kalu* are known because a *nele* has identified their exact location in a dream. The dangers represented by the *kalu* become obvious when new gardens are opened in the primary forest (*ney-serreti*, 'old place'). This is particularly delicate work and I was told that in the past, when Okopsukkun and Ustupu people opened many gardens in the forest, before felling the trees preventive collective healing rituals (*nek-apsoket*) were held, in order to clean plots of land from the presence of evil entities, which otherwise would have caused epidemics[27]. For this reason areas of the forest that are or have been cultivated are considered safer than areas where gardens have never been opened[28]. Places that have been cultivated have also been rid of the presence of evil entities; while the uncultivated forest may always conceal a *kalu* infested by its inhabitants, ready to attack human beings when disturbed by their presence.

Mainland forest and hills are thus conceived by Kuna people as a populated space, where one should venture conscious of the various risks attending him or her. From evil-minded strangers hiding in the forest, to lurking demons, the forest is a space populated by entities that do not generally welcome the presence of human beings. Also trees, which are the primary source of healing and protection, as we will see later on, may be treacherous and revengeful. Moreover the cemetery of Okopsukkun is situated

[27] Cf. Guss for a similar account on the way Yekuana men 'cleanse' themselves after having felled the trees when opening a new garden (1989: 36). See Howe (1976a) for an interpretation of the *nek-apsoket* ritual as a collective 'exorcism' against the presence of evil spirits affecting the whole village.

[28] I am aware of the studies of historical ecologies, which take seriously the influence of human activity in the natural environment through time. As Rival says "The Huaorani are very conscious of past human activity, and are perfectly aware of the fact that every aspect of their forested territory has been transformed in equal measure by their ancestors, other indigenous groups, and the forces of nature and the supernatural. […] Their relation with the forest is lived as a social relation with themselves across generations, hence its eminently historical character" (2006: S89). By contrast, the Kuna seem to conceive the relationship with the forest as a relation with ancestral forces, which became other to human beings after mythic time.

on the banks of the river Sukanti, some hundred metres inside its mouth. Graves are scattered over quite a wide area along both sides of the river. This area is cleared of trees and appears almost like a copy of the village. Small shelters are built on the graves, in the same fashion as the thatched roofs on houses. Underneath, one can identify the graves or small mounds, beside which there are objects owned by the deceased during life, such as a plate, a spoon, a mug or a wooden stool. Men and women walk tranquilly among the graves during the day, but I was told that they avoid crossing the cemetery during the night. They fear, in fact, encountering the soul of a deceased person, and such an idea utterly terrifies everyone. Also hunters, whose courage of venturing alone deep into the forest during the night is widely acknowledged, avoid walking in the proximity of the cemetery when it is dark. Souls of dead people may also be encountered during the day in other areas of the forest. These were described to me as figures walking silently on their own, looking at the ground, not seeming to notice the passer-by; or as scary figures, with rotten bodies, which try to attack the unfortunate person crossing their path. These daily encounters cannot be foreseen or avoided and they are often, people say, the punishment for the bad behaviour of a person. If a man is known to hit his sons and wife or is considered mean, because he does not provide enough food for his family, when he tells that he has met a ghost (*kirmar*) in the forest, people generally comment that he deserved it and it could have been worse. Nonetheless, venturing into the cemetery during the night would be foolish behaviour for anyone.

Trees and gardens

It could be said that bad encounters are generally made on the mainland rather than on the island. Island space is inhabited by human beings, where trees have been cut, and where the space has never been as intensely vegetated as the mainland forest[29]. Thus

[29] I do not have accurate descriptions of how the island appeared before people moved there from the coast. Kuna people were living at the mouth of the Puturgandí river (on the mainland coast on the east of the island), before they started clearing the land on the island and planting coconut trees. I was told that there were many mangroves and some other trees, but I suppose not the high, hard wooded trees found deep into the forest. There was also a dense population of agoutis (*usugana*), from which the name of the island, Ustupu, 'agouti island', comes. The only island in Kuna Yala that hosts a forest is *Tupac*, to the east of Okopsukkun, which is also the only non-flat island. It has a hill at its centre, emerging above sea level, differently from all other San Blas islands and its name derives from its characteristic shape: *tupu*, 'isle' and *paka*, 'whale'. The vegetation on the hill is dense like the mainland forest and the people living in the village situated on its coast say that in the past there were many animals there.

forest is the space inhabited by ancestral beings, such as the ancient trees and by dreadful entities, like demons and ghosts. But, as we have seen above, the vegetated part of the nearby island of Ustupir is a scary place like the mainland forest. What is it then that renders a place dangerous from the perspective of Kuna people? My aim in this chapter has been to show that the space in which Kuna people live is a space where trees are absent. At this point, before proceeding with the following chapters, I feel that a clarification is needed. If a first distinction can be made between *tupu*, the island where trees are absent and vegetation is tamed, and *sappulu*, the mainland, where trees and plants reign; a further distinction has to be made between areas of mainland where there are mainly cultivated gardens (*nainumala*) and areas where the forest is left untouched by human action (*nek-serreti*). What is the difference between 'cultivated gardens' (*nainumala*) and 'primary forest' (*nek-serreti*) for Kuna people? How does this distinction reflect upon the differences between types of plants and trees and the way they are conceived by human beings?

Kuna people distinguish the origin of trees and uncultivated plants from that of edible plants that form their everyday diet. Forest trees are the ancestors of human beings and were the first to appear on the earth during its creation, as the myth in the next chapter will describe; while all edible plants were discovered later on by octuplet heroes[30]. The myth of *paluwala* ('the tree of salt') describes the discovery of salt and edible plants by Kuna mythic heroes and the origin of the sea and the land that is inhabited by Kuna people today. The myth presented below was told by the *sayla* William Archiból from Okopsukkun in 1969 (Chapin, 1989: 64-70). It starts with a woman, who is a butterfly in human guise, visiting the house of the octuplet heroes. When she was offered food she secretly added salt to the soup. Olowai-ili, the only woman of these eight siblings tasted the soup and wondered, along with her brothers, where the woman got the salt.

> "Some days after they built a surba [shelter] and entered to make magic and to discover the origin of salt. They saw that far away, in a place called Yurup Yala, which was at the end of the earth, there was an enormous tree of salt, with a diameter measuring eighty arms. It would have been very difficult to fell, they thought, because it had many big roots the diameter of one arm that came out of the base of the trunk and nailed the tree into the ground. The tree shone like the fireflies and the

[30] See chapter six for an analysis of a myth describing the birth of the octuplet heroes.

luminescence between the branches was continuously moving and sparkling among the clouds. Among the branches there were wide savannahs and valleys sown with plantain, manioc, pumpkin, taro, sweet potato, avocado, cane and all the edible plants that were not known on the earth then. The main food of the animal-people that lived in the world was roots, leaves and seeds that they gathered or dug out from the ground" (*ibid*: 64-65, my translation).

Then Tat Ipe and his seven siblings tried to fell the giant tree, but every night a toad came and licked the wound of the tree, healing it. The heroes soon realized that it was impossible for them to fell the tree and to get hold of all the delicious crops if they did not kill the toad. Once they killed it they asked the help of other animals to fell the tree. The peccaries helped them but the tree, while falling down remained stuck among the clouds by its lianas. Eventually the small squirrel climbed the tree and cut the lianas.

"The tree started moving at the base and began to fall. Tad Ibe had put golden and silver nets on the ground to gather all the plants where the branches would have fallen on the ground. But as it was falling the trunk broke into pieces and the animals ran to rob the manioc, plantain, bananas, avocados, canes, pumpkins, taros, sweet potatoes and all the other plants. […] The big logs of Paluwala rotted and turned into the seas, covered by foam and shining like fireflies. The valleys on the earth filled with water and formed the bays, the coves and the whirlpools that produced strong streams toward the open sea. Then Tad Ibe took cloths of different colours – blue, red, golden, black, green, white, orange and yellow – and burned them. Multicoloured stones and sand took form from the ashes. In this way the seas were created" (*ibid*: 69-70, my translation).

Myths on the origin of cultivated plants are present throughout the lowlands of South America (see for example Basso, 1973: 30-31; Descola, 1996 [1987]: 266-268; Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 164-170). The common theme is the shift from a diet based on raw meat and roots or rotten wood, to a diet of cooked meat and vegetables, associated with proper civilized life. Moreover what the Kuna myth has in common with other Amerindian myths is that it tells of the origin of gardening as a human activity. All edible plants were stolen by animals after the felling of *paluwala* and the consequence was, although not explicitly told in the myth presented above, that since that moment Kuna people had to practice the hard work of gardening in order to produce crops.

Edible plants stopped being able to grow without human assistance, after the felling of the tree, and needed to be sown and nurtured by people in order to grow and produce fruits. Similarly the Achuar myth of Nunkui describes how edible plants stopped being generated through the voice of the sloth-girl Uyush, who had been mistreated by people and left the village leaving the men only a few seeds of manioc (Descola, 1996 [1987]: 268-269). Whereas in the Kalapalo myth, the tern-man, married a woman, "prepared the gardens with his magic axe, and the manioc harvest was bountiful even though the men did not have to work at weeding or planting." Then the tern, reproached by his mother-in-law for having an affair with his wife's younger sister, left the village embarrassed. His wife tried unsuccessfully to follow him. "In pity, however he threw her a few manioc stalks, saying, 'Now men will make their own gardens, and will have to work hard. Men will wait a long time to dig up the roots'" (Basso, 1973: 31).

It is interesting to note that all edible plants used to grow on the branches of the giant tree, the *paluuala*. Similarly the Apinaye, Kraho and Kayapo myths narrate that maize used to grow on an enormous tree (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 165-167); in the Piaroa myths, all edible plants were on the Tree of Life (Overing, 1985a: 264-265); for the Muinane it was a giant manioc tree that contained on its branches all other cultigens (Yépez, 1982: 63-69). In all these cases, people had to fell the giant tree in order to get the fruits of all plants and to seed them. The felling of trees for opening new gardens in the forest, as practiced today by indigenous horticulturalists, seems thus evocative of the origin of cultivated plants linked to the felling of a giant tree in some myths.

As it will become clearer in the next two chapters, for Kuna people trees are antecedent of cultivated plants and more precisely they are the ancestors of human beings. Cultivated plants were discovered after human beings were created and started living on the earth. Then people learned how to cultivate, harvest and cook them and stopped living off roots, leaves and seeds. In general, trees and other uncultivated plants are considered to posses an entity and are like people (*tulekana*), while cultivated plants seem to receive less attention by human beings in terms of their supernatural life[31]. The

[31] Although I have to say that my data on cultivated plants is limited and needs to be expanded, during my fieldwork the supernatural entities of edible plants were hardly mentioned, as well as the agency of these plants did not receive much attention. In other contexts plants such as manioc are considered to be bloodthirsty vampires (Descola, 1996 [1987]: 280) or endowed with a supernatural master (see Guss, 1989). In these contexts the relationship that women have with cultivated plants entails specialist knowledge and is more complex than the relation between the Kuna gardener and their plants. Since Kuna women abandoned gardening when they moved to the islands and men took over the whole work, it

relationship between cultivated and not cultivated plants is conceived by Kuna people in chronological terms. In Kuna cosmogony trees and wild plants came first followed by cultivated plants. This reflects on the way the Kuna name the spaces in the forest occupied by primary forest, secondary forest and by gardens. The first is called *nek-serreti* ('old place'); the second is called *nek-nuchukwa* ('young place') or *nainu serreti* ('old garden'); while the third is called *nainu*[32].

As I described in this chapter spaces are classified by the Kuna depending on the types of beings dwelling in these. This classification also reflects degrees of alterity. The island is therefore the space of human beings, where people live; where they eat, sleep, make love, give birth, make objects and die. The forest is the space of plants, animals and spirits. Within the forest further distinctions are applied between places where people grow their plants for everyday consumption and spaces where trees and other uncultivated plants grow. The former are the spaces where men regularly go to work and in some way feel secure, almost an extension of their house. But to reach their gardens men sometimes have to cross areas where the forest is wild and where the presence of supernatural forces is more palpable. Men venture into the primary forest and on the hills especially when they go hunting. Hunters must have a thorough knowledge of the forest and the hills extending all around the coast nearby the island. They often stay away for days, walking most of the time and venturing deep inland. It is vital that they do not lose orientation. When they do not see the sea from the hill tops, or are too far away, they use the course of the rivers to orientate. Knowing the rivers and brooks well is essential for not getting lost in the forest and for always finding the way back. For this reason I was told that would-be hunters take a medicine made with the meat of the Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*), *tuli* in Kuna language. This bird lives by the rivers and knows all the small tributaries (*tian*), helping hunters to find the way back home.

Even if not many men hunted regularly in Okopsukkun at the time of my fieldwork I heard many stories from hunters who had dreadful encounters during their night expeditions. These encounters were with demons (*kalutor*) or souls of the dead (*kirmar*); but more frightening were those with devils (*niakana*). Venturing into the

---

would be interesting to consider the hypothesis of whether this change entailed the loss of a female knowledge of cultivated plants.

[32] Cf. Ventocilla, Herrera and Nuñez (1995: 16) for a similar distinction between spaces in the forest. See Margiotti Ph.D. thesis for an analysis of the Kuna concept of the term *nainu* and its implication in kinship organization.

forest is thus to enter the space of alterity, where ancient and untamed forces have their homes. The forest is inhabited by ancient beings, among which trees are the primordial and most powerful. Their power is sought by Kuna specialists to protect against evil spirits, but may also be treacherous. Gardens are relatively safe places compared with the wild forest, but the separation is never clear-cut. Although ancient spirits are easier to encounter in the deep forest, they used to wander in people's gardens. Under some circumstances and especially if annoyed by human beings, spirits and demons may also cross the sea channel and arrive at the island, provoking fear and epidemics among villagers.

The relation Kuna people from Okopsukkun living on the island have with the mainland forest, despite being separated and distant from it, is of paramount importance in their everyday life. Being that the island is deprived of any tree or animal, it is also deprived of their ancestral entities. It is a safe place to live in, but it lacks of the vital source of knowledge that enables Kuna people to live their life securely and fully. The relation with the forest is thus essential, it structures everyday practices and is at the core of Kuna cosmology. The forest is the source of food, medicine and knowledge and Kuna people rely on it and spend much energy and time in learning about different species and entities living in the forest, their behaviour and their characteristics. For this reason I will now turn my attention to the description of the forest and its inhabitants.

Chapter 2

The populated forest

How do Kuna people perceive the mainland forest as a space populated by ancestral entities? How do they account for the origin of these entities and how is this related to their present classification? This chapter deals primarily with forest ancestral entities and their symbolism in contemporary Kuna life. More attention is here to forest animals, while trees are examined in more detail in the next chapter. Departing from the fact that Kuna people conceive land occupied by cultivated plants (*nainu*) and land occupied by spontaneous vegetation (*nek-serreti*) differently, as we have seen in the previous chapter, I will now deal with the way Kuna people think of the mainland forest as a space populated by various species of living beings. I will therefore focus on those species that for the Kuna, most intensely retain their ancestral agency of people and are both the cause and the source of the remedy for illnesses. These species that live in the forest under animal and plant appearances, have a parallel life in the underworld that enables them to interact spiritually with human beings.

This task will entail the sketching of the Kuna taxonomies of natural species and the description of how they think of different kinds of animals, plants and trees. Mainly, Kuna people conceive the forest as it is today as the outcome of the events that happened during ancient times. Through their knowledge of these events the Kuna retain the awareness of the 'real nature' of each living being, be it a plant, an animal, a bird or a spirit. It is therefore through looking both at contemporary taxonomies of nature and at a creation myth that I will describe how the Kuna understand the forest as a richly populated space, dangerous for its treacherous inhabitants, and precious for its powerful potential to cure people.

Knowing the world

Although Kuna people live mainly on islands, their relationship with the mainland forest is highly relevant, as has been shown in the previous chapter. My focus here is on the importance of the forest as the place where both the source and the remedy for evil reside. The forest is the place where powerful beings live and their ancestral knowledge is both dangerous and sought after by Kuna ritual specialists. Their knowledge derives from ancestral times, when the earth was created along with all living beings. Following a strict order of who arrived first, today the Kuna organize supernatural agents as more or less knowledgeable and powerful. Beings that arrived first on the earth gained the greatest knowledge as they observed the creation of all the other creatures which followed. For this reason a primary distinction the Kuna make is between animals and trees that are 'ancestral entities' (*saylakan*), and those that are their 'offspring' (*apkilakan*, sing. *apkila*). As I will show below, myths inform this order of arrival and explain the present state of things as the result of a process of subsequent transformations and unions between different types of beings.

For Kuna people the spirits of forest animals, called *ponikana* (sing. *poni*), are responsible for either 'stealing the souls' of people (*purpa sue*), or 'occupying the body' of a person in the form of illness (*poni nai*, litt. 'a *poni* lies in'). These animals are malevolent agents and predate human beings either to take revenge against human acts that upset them in some way[33], or for their incurable desire to steal children or marriageable partners[34]. Trees are mainly used for preparing medicines and for carving *nuchukana*, but can take revenge against people who cut them without 'advising' them (*unaet*)[35] or without following ritual prescriptions. At the same time seers (*nelekan*)

[33] Not all animals for the Kuna are directly responsible for transmitting illnesses to human beings out of their will. As I shall describe, some animals do so only when ordered by their 'chiefs' and similar to what the Piaroa say "(…) it is not on the animal's volition that it sends disease" (Overing, 1985a: 266; 1986: 147).

[34] Kuna oral history mentions people called *bugi bugi tule* and *sau sau tule*, who used to raid Kuna villages when they lived in the forest, killing their people and drinking their blood. I was explicitly told more than once that these people correspond to the present day Emberá. It could be that the place today occupied by supernatural predators previously corresponded to neighbouring people, such as the Emberá or other people with whom the Kuna had previously been in contact (see Ventocilla, Herrera, Nuñez, 1995: 10; Wassén, 1955: 61-64) or with whom the Kuna were in a warfare relation. This hypothesis would also suggest a change in the cosmology and the removal of violence from everyday relationships to the supernatural sphere. This point has been addressed in a different fashion by Severi (1987: 82-83). I will refer again to this shift in chapter six and seven.

[35] See previous chapter.

learn in dreams from evil animal entities how to cure those illnesses and ritual chanters (*api suakan*) cure ill people with the help of *nuchukana*.

As has been pointed out, for many Amazonian people the forest and the river are inhabited by the 'primary sources of disease and of curing power' (Gow, 1994: 94-95). Not operating a distinction between evil forces of nature and good forces of culture Amerindians put much effort into learning how to transform animals' and plants' knowledge into a sociable force (see Londoño-Sulkin, 2000; Overing, 1985a, 1986). The relationship that indigenous people have with the forest as a space inhabited by supernatural entities is therefore a power relation, in the sense that it entails a constant struggle over the acquisition of knowledge by shamans to protect their kinspeople against malevolent forces. The mainland forest, for Kuna people, is a space inhabited by beings who in ancient times were people too[36]. Then, as we shall see below, for different reasons they were transformed into plant and animal species by both the Great Father and by culture heroes[37]. Therefore relating to forest entities is relating to beings that in the ancient past were close to human beings and with whom they intermarried[38]. Forest entities live in the forest and their presence is acknowledged by Kuna people in the form of trees, rocks and boulders, animals, and sometimes only perceived through noises, smells and strange fleeting visions.

The forest for the Kuna is therefore the result of both present and past agencies and of both human and supernatural entities (cf. Rival, 2006). The relationship Kuna people have with the forest points to two different directions: on one hand it is a power relation with ancestral beings mediated by shamanism, on the other, it is a nurturing relation with other humans, mediated by kinship. The former is a relation that points to the role of the ancestral past in the present, while the latter points to the recent past, present and future, which are the temporal axis through which kinship is conceived. Following this idea I will show how Kuna people conceive different plant and animal species, focusing on the different meanings that relationships with different species entail. This will serve as a basis to describe, later on in this work, how people establish individual relations

[36] "We must remember, above all, that if there is a virtually Amerindian notion, it is that of an original state of undifferentiation between human and animals, described in mythology" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 471).
[37] See chapter seven on the transformation operated by the octuplet heroes.
[38] For a discussion over this point see chapters six and seven.

with certain kinds of animals and trees as a form of bringing ancestral distant power into the lived present.

It is by reading this complexity that I investigate the way Kuna people see the forest, more generally the world within which they live, and the ways they relate to all forms of agencies within it. The mainland forest as it is conceived today by Kuna people, is a space shaped by both human and supernatural agencies. Human actions aimed at producing food through gardening have to be informed by the knowledge of non-human agencies, in order to be successful and not to incur danger. Adult people working in the forest have to know such agencies and learn how not to upset them during horticultural activities or when hunting. In the same way, ritual specialists have to learn how to approach and establish relationships with forest entities, in order to be able to cure affected ill persons or, in the case of epidemics, the entire village.

Great emphasis is put upon the telling of the creation stories and its transmission among generations by Kuna people. In Okopsukkun, as well as in almost all other Kuna villages, meetings are regularly held within the gathering house (*onmaked neka*), during which the village chiefs sing chants from the *Pab igar* (the 'Father's path'). *Pap ikar* is what the Kuna call the ensemble of stories ('paths', *ikarkan*, sing. *ikar*) regarding the creation of the world by *Pap Tummat* and *Nan Tummat* (the 'Great Father' and the 'Great Mother') and the emergence of Kuna culture and society as they are now. In Okopsukkun adult men, during the night and adult women, during the morning sit in the gathering house every two days listening to the *saylakan* singing stories from the *Pap ikar*[39]. In this way young adults start learning 'where things come from', which is considered a fundamental part of adult people's knowledge of the world. It is by learning how mountains, rivers, trees and animals were created and how they became as they are now that people come 'to know the world' (*nei wisi*) and become responsible adults. Otherwise, old Kuna men say, as I heard many times, '*Binsa anmar weki mai!*', 'We would not be here without any reason!' Chants sung in the gathering house, even if they cover a wide range of topics (Howe, 2002 [1986]: 47-50), often describe episodes from the mythic past when trees and animals were people and lived alongside human

[39] See Howe's description of the variation in frequency and modes of the gathering house reunions in the different Kuna villages. Despite these differences he says that the pattern and the aim of the reunions are shared by all Kuna (2002 [1986]: 276, note 1).

beings[40]. The struggle between culture heroes, powerful shamans and the chiefs of animals resulted in the establishment of the present day cosmological order. However the Kuna do not think that the world as it is today is the outcome of an irreversible process. On the contrary it is constantly under threat and can always collapse once again to its ancient chaotic form. It is for this reason that Kuna people are constantly reminded by their elders that what men and women do is rooted in the 'Kuna way' of life (*tule ikar*), and that this has not always existed but was conquered as a struggle both against ancestral evil beings in mythic times and against foreigners (*waimar*) in more recent times. Young Kuna adults are advised by older people (village chiefs and ritual specialists) both in collective gatherings and individually. Individual advising (*unaet*) is another way of learning about the world and it is carried out by an older kinsman, normally a father, a father-in-law or a maternal uncle for a boy, or the mother or an older sister for a girl. The aim of advising young people is to teach them how to do things properly. Operating as a rough synthesis, this means to teach people how to be loving and skilled. Men and women have to be caring parents and kin, taking care of their children and kin, and at the same time well informed on the real nature of things. They must know how things are beyond their visible appearance; they have to learn how trees and animals became how they are now and what their relationship was to humans in the ancestral past. In general people must come to know how the external world is and how to deal with it. It is by following this same principle that I intend to continue my analysis of Kuna cosmology and their classification of forest animals and plants.

Pap masmala – The young men of the Father

One day Margherita and I were sitting in the house of Nikanor and Raquel, where we had been living for most of our stay in Okopsukkun. Often during the afternoons, we would pass some time in the house chatting with Nikanor, Raquel, Nixia and their kinspeople and the friends who visited them. Late afternoon is the time for visits. People who normally visit the house are kin, close or distant, living in other houses. They come to bring some food, ask for some plantain, or to borrow a canoe for the next day, or just to sit down and exchange the latest news. The curiosity of people is palpable

[40] For some examples of chants sung by *saylakan* in the gathering house see Howe (2002 [1986]: 31-50) and Howe, Sherzer and Chapin (1980) and Sherzer (2001 [1983]: 76-89).

and nothing is more welcomed than a visitor coming into the house with the intense desire to tell something he or she has just discovered. A consequence of our presence in the house was an increase in the number of people passing through the house, especially children, who were curious to see us. Although we used to visit people unrelated to Nixia's family, it often happened that we were also called to eat in other houses. In such cases it was always a young girl who was sent to invite us and she would never dare to enter the house, but rather would shout from the external door: "*Maskuntakeeeee*", "Come eat". One day we received a visit from a young girl we already knew because she was the daughter of Elasia, Aurora's daughter-in-law. We knew Aurora well because we had lived in her house, so were also acquainted with Elasia; but we had never eaten in her house before. So we were a bit puzzled when the young girl escorted us to her house. Once there, Elasia greeted us and told us that her father wanted to speak with us. We had never met him and therefore our curiosity was aroused. Garibaldo del Vasto, Elasia's father was waiting for us in the house of a friend of his, who offered to host our meeting. The house was one of the few concrete houses of the village, because, as it turned out later, Garibaldo's friend had worked as an employee in the Panama Canal and had received a good pension as was the case for all other Kuna men who did the same work. When we got there the two men greeted us and after a short introduction Elasia left us in a small room with them. The friend, who spoke Spanish fluently presented both of them to us: Garibaldo is an *ina tuleti* (botanic specialist) and knower of *pap ikar* or 'historia' as he put it, and himself a specialist in curing chants. He also specified that he was still learning while Garibaldo was his *tummat*, wiser and more knowledgeable than he. Then Garibaldo explained the reason why he had called us. He had known us indeed since our arrival and was aware that we were studying Kuna culture and way of life[41]. He knew that I was studying *nuchukana* and Margherita was

[41] Many Kuna in Okopsukkun have an idea of what an anthropologist is, either through hearing stories from their kinspeople or from direct experience. Among other anthropologist, Chapin, a former Peace Corp volunteer, lived for various years in Kuna Yala (1967-1970) and then conducted his Ph.D. fieldwork in Ustupu and Okopsukkun between 1975 and 1976. Still today in both Okopsukkun and Ustupu there are also people claiming to possess notebooks handwritten by Ruben Pérez Kantule and Guillermo Hayans, two Kuna who worked between 1920 and 1930 with the Swedish anthropologists Erland Nordenskiöld and Henri Wassén (see Nordenskiöld, 1938 and Wassén, 1934, 1937, 1938). Both Pérez and Hayans collected and transcribed a great number of ritual chants, myths and stories, which have been published in the above mentioned volumes. Some of their original transcriptions are kept in the archives of the Goteborg Ethnographic Museum, others are claimed to be jealously possessed by Hayans' heirs in Ustupu. I found it interesting during my fieldwork to note how such written documents were considered incredibly valuable by people and some of them commented on the Swedish museum that it was like a *kalu*, a spiritual village were cultural skills and knowledge are kept under the surveillance of the chiefs of animals.

studying Kuna kinship. But he thought, with good reason, that it was very difficult for us to understand properly what people told us. He was also particularly concerned with the way we were taught things by other people, because he knew that no one would have told us 'where things come from' (*pia inmar tanikki*). Therefore he told us that we could not really understand how things are today and why they are the way they are. He said that he would teach us the origin of things in such a way that we would not go back to our home like cripples who could not walk properly. At six o'clock in the morning after, payment was agreed, we were already sitting with Garibaldo and his friend around a table, listening to the account of the creation of the world by the Great Father and the Great Mother. What follows is an edited extract of the longer story.

> Pap Tummat went down to the earth. The earth was not completely created yet. He wanted to see the earth. He went there four times. He started creating the *purpa*[42] of the world. He created the *purpa* of the mountains, of the sea, of the rivers. He created the *purpa* of all living things.
>
> Pap Tummat went to the earth four times. The earth was completely silent and dark and you could not see anything. Pap Tummat and Nan Tummat went down to the earth on a golden saucer. There were no mountains, no sea, no rivers. Pap Tummat made the tornado wind blow. He blew it for four times. Then the boys arrived. They were Papa's boys (*paliuittur*[43]). Papa said to them: "You will learn the *purpa* of everything. You will learn the *purpa* while I create everything. You will learn by seeing how Nana and I create things."
>
> Thus he sent them four times to the fourth layer under the earth. When they went there, the earth had no name yet. There was Pursoso[44], there was the river Oloispekuntiiwar[45], there were a lot of marvellous things. There were no people yet and the earth was still. But when they listened, they heard noises; the earth was alive. They heard people speaking and laughing. The *purpa* of the earth was becoming alive.

---

[42] The word *purpa* means 'immaterial double', 'image', 'soul', 'semen', 'menstrual blood' and 'origin'. I will deal with this rather complicated and complex concept in various parts throughout this entire work. For some interpretation of the Kuna concept of *purpa* see also Chapin (1983: 75-78), Nordenskiöld (1938: 334-360) and Severi (1993: 221-247).

[43] The meaning of the word *paliuittur* is still unclear to me. In one occasion a Kuna man translated it in Spanish as 'angeles' ('angels').

[44] Pursoso, Pursop, or Punasop are the various names given in myths to the first woman in the world, who was married to Piler. Pursop is also the transformation of the original divinity Nan Tummat after the earth was created and mother of the ancestral fathers of animals. See below in this chapter for more details.

[45] The name of the river means *olo* ('gold'), *ispe* ('mirror', 'glass'), *gun* (maybe plural modifier), *tiiwar* ('river'), the 'river of the golden mirrors'.

Then they went to Papa and told him what they had seen. He sent them again to the fourth layer under the earth and there they saw that the earth was changing, that something was happening. The wind was blowing and different creatures were moving and dancing around. They told what they had seen to Papa and he said: "I see, now you will go there again."

The earth had become marvellous; the juice of the earth was whirling. They saw Pursoso in the middle of the creation. Then they saw a giant canoe. It was Kilupilaulesaulu. It was the canoe of Nia[46]. Nia was standing on the prow of the canoe. When they came back, Papa told them that they had to go there for the last time.

The earth was powerful then, it was materializing. There were many people yelling. The earth was just juice, there were no rivers. These people were drinking from the many puddles that were around. The boys were watching and they saw many strange and different people. One had a thorn; he was the demon-thorn. They were *ponikan*; they who eat us. The boys were learning by going into the places where the *ponikan* lived. The master of *ponikan* was Oloniskakkiñaliler. Before, he had been living with Papa. Then he revolted against him. Thus Papa became angry with him and sent him away. Then the boys saw the mountains, the rivers, the sea and the stars appearing.

At that time it was still impossible to have babies. Men and women could not be together yet. Thus Papa told the boys: "You have been on the earth. You have seen the mountains, the rivers, the clouds, the stars and the sea. You have seen the *purpa* of the earth. Now I will show[47] the *purpa* to you." The boys looked at the earth and saw many people walking on it. They saw a man with just one eye walking about. They saw a man with his belly inflated. They saw a man walking in a circle. They saw a man staggering and another man rolling about. There were many different types of people.

At that point the boys had completed their learning (*nelegusa*); they had become very wise. They terminated their university degree. They travelled four times, they learned how Nia had arrived, they saw his transformations and observed his behaviour. They knew all these things. Then they ascended to Papa. They wore beautiful red shirts, they had red bead necklaces, red hats and they were holding their staffs. Everyone had his own shirt, different from each other. Papa told them: "My little ones, I sent you to the *purpa* of the earth, to the *purpa* of mountains. Now you are powerful.

[46] Nia is usually translated by Kuna people as 'diablo', 'devil'. Below I will give more details on the place of this figure in Kuna cosmology.

[47] I translate here 'to show' the Kuna verb *oyoket*. Kuna people translate it in Spanish as 'to show' ('enseñar') and 'to interpret' ('interpretar'). You can 'show' or 'interpret' something of which you have a deep understating or a direct visual experience. For example a seer may 'show' to the patient the illness he has seen within his body; or a knower of dreams may 'interpret' the dream of a person, thanks to his knowledge accumulated from his direct personal experience (cf. chapters five and seven for more details on this issue). Furthermore the *arkar* (spokeman) interprets the *sayla*'s (chief) mythic chants for the public audience.

You are pointed noses (*Pemar asu tukku takkensoke*). You will transform into powerful medicines."

Thus he started calling each one of them by his proper name. They were Olowainanele, Olokurkinakwilotule, Olokurkinatirpitule, Olokurkinasuitakiñalinele, Olokurkinaekekiñalinele, Oloopanappinele, Olomekekiñalinele, Olotinkunappinele. Papa was going to transform them. They were powerful men.

Then, as a woman when she gives birth, the earth began to produce fruits. Papa had an automatic button through which he could transform anything. The boys were looking while he pushed it. The earth started whirling. It was little as a newborn baby. It was tender like rubber. It was growing up, as a child. While it was whirling, Papa called it: "Oloittirtili, Maniittirtili yee." The earth was solidifying. The boys saw all this. They looked toward the four directions. Papa was transforming them[48]. Then they went to the *purpa* of the earth. There was a big stone with a hole in the middle. They put their *purpa*[49] in the hole. Their *purpa* whirled into the earth and changed into seeds. That was how the medicine against Nia was born.

Even if this myth has been largely trimmed, it still contains a great amount of information on Kuna cosmology, most of which I will not be able to deal with in this work. Speaking in general, this myth describes the first people to live in the world, the eight boys, who then generated the trees as they are now. They also became the owners of trees, as I was told on other occasions, and went to live in relegated villages of the underworld. It points also to the fact that their transformation was a consequence of the learning to which the Great Father exposed them. Here I want to call attention to some issues particularly relevant for the present chapter and for issues discussed later on in this work. One is that the eight Father's boys (*pap masmala*) appeared before all other beings during the creation of the world; 'There were not yet people and the earth was still'. The Great Father sent them down to the earth eight times to witness the creation. Thus they saw the various stages of the generation of rivers, mountains and the sea, from the immaterial state of *purpa*, to the liquid and then solid form. In this way they got to know how things generated in mythic time. They saw 'Pursoso in the middle of the creation', which means that they assisted the first woman as she became pregnant and gave birth to all living beings. Knowing the secret of birth of all living species is

[48] "You are also transforming here with me. You're learning our language, *tule kaia*, and you're changing in a *tule*, Kuna. Listo!" Garibaldo used this example to explain to me the use of the verb 'to transform', *piñe*, at this point of the story.
[49] In this case Garibaldo specified "… *e purpa*, *e raiz soke*" ("its *purpa*, its root I mean").

part of the skill of Kuna ritual specialists. It means that a specialist possesses the key to the inner nature of a particular animal or vegetal species and therefore is able to control it and, if necessary, counteract its actions. Trees for Kuna people possess the most powerful knowledge as they assisted in the whole creation of the world and its species. Secondly, they saw Nia, the 'Devil', arriving on his canoe and then they saw the first *ponikana*, the evil entities, making their monstrous appearance. As the Great Father proudly tells them at the end, they knew Nia and his offspring and learned about their behaviour and their own transformations. Thirdly, once their apprenticeship was completed they also completed their transformation. When their knowledge had reached fullness they ascended to the sky wearing 'beautiful red shirts', 'red bead necklaces, red heads' and 'holding their staffs", to be individually named by the Great Father[50]. Once they had acquired their names, they went for the last time to the earth, which is now represented as the body of the Great Mother, soft, rubber-like and slowly solidifying. They put their semen (*purpa*) into it, through a stone, to be moulded and to generate the seeds from which all plants would grow.

Kuna people in Okopsukkun often told me that forest plants nowadays are all female and that male plants come down from the sky during the night to make love to them. This is why at dawn their leaves are covered with dew, which is the semen of male trees. Ancestral trees today live in Sapipe-neka, the 'house of the owners of trees', situated in the sky, along with *muukana*, the ancestral grandmothers who are responsible for the formation of human foetuses (see chapter five). While animal ancestral spirits each live in a different *kalu* ('enclosure', 'supernatural village') in the underworld where they look after their offspring, sending them occasionally to the earth.

Nia - The father of evil

With the help of an easy generalization I would say that in present day Kuna discourses animals are normally associated with dangerous alterity, while trees are associated with a more positive and manageable form of otherness[51]. In mythic times all

[50] Each one of them is called with four different names by the Great Father, each one beginning with the four prefixes *olo-*, *mani-*, *ikwa-*, *ina-*. This, following Kuna ritual logic, means that a person has reached full power, after having undergone four processes of transformation.

[51] This is true when considering the mainstream discourses, but nonetheless has to be taken with care. The problem seems to be more complex. On one hand I was told that old Kuna people in the past used more animal medicines because they were more knowledgeable and powerful. They knew how to handle

animals had human form and were transformed into animals as an act of revenge undertaken by the mythical hero Tat Ipe (or Ipelele, as we shall encounter in chapters six and seven). Animals, when they were still persons, were not able to behave morally: they copulated with their own kin, fought among themselves and were prone to getting drunk at every occasion. They were ignorant of social and cultural skills and were not able to establish kinship relations (cf. Londoño-Sulkin, 2000; Overing 1985a, 1986). That is why today, most animals have no *pinsaet*, 'love', 'thought' and 'memory'. Nevertheless some forest animals are said by Kuna people to be powerful shamans (*nele tummakana*). How do the Kuna think of these animals and explain their ancestral origin? What then is the difference between animals that are powerful shamans and other kinds of animals? In this and the following section I deal with these problems.

As I was told on many occasions, animals are the grandchildren of Piler and Pursop, the first human couple living at the origin of the world[52]. Piler and Pursop had five sons: Kana, Kuchuka, Topeka, Inoe and Olokunaliler. Each one of them was father of several animal species. As Luis Stócel, a Kuna man from the village of Cartí Tupile in 1969 recounted to the US Peace Corp volunteer Norman MacPherson Chapin, animals came from different fathers, depending on their characteristics:

> The sons of Kaana were all the animal-people (*ibtulegan*) with claws that can climb trees: Wiop (bear), Achu Tummat (jaguar), Ibguk (anteater), Pero (sloth), Sulu (monkey), Tidi (squirrel monkey), Uskwini (squirrel) and others. The sons of Inoe were all the animal-people with big bellies: Moli (tapir), Timoli (manatee), Ansu (siren), Wedar (collared peccary), Yannu (white-lipped peccary), Sule (paca), Usu

('aguantar' in Spanish) them. Kuna people told me that nowadays such powerful knowledge has been abandoned because of the dangers it entails. People became mad and even killed each other, overwhelmed by the animal poisonous knowledge (cf. Londoño-Sulkin, 2000 and Overing, 1985a, 1986). On the other hand, in many cases I heard that cutting trees for clearing the land is a dangerous thing, because people do not know if a *nia* (devil) lives in the land and they may upset him, with disastrous consequences for the whole village. I suggest that the abandonment of animal medicines corresponds to the huge population growth of Okopsukkun and Ustupu (from around 30 to around 4500 people in 100 years). As a consequence a pro-tree discourse may correspond to the progressive clearing of the mainland forest of big trees (the really powerful ones), for opening more gardens to compensate for the increased numbers of people living on the island.

[52] As noted above, and as will become clearer below, Pursop is the transformation of the original deity, the Great Mother. Following this I would be tempted to say that Piler is the transformation of the Great Father. However this has never been told to me by the Kuna, who rather draw a comparison between Piler and Pursop and Adam and Eve, as created by God. The overlap with Christianity, to which the Kuna have been exposed for centuries, is evident here. Nonetheless I wish to call the attention to some issues that would shed light on the transformational nature of Kuna cosmology, which preserves an internal coherent logic able to cope with changes and foreign impositions (Lévi- Strauss, 1966).

(agouti), Koe (deer), Yauk (sea turtle), Yarmorro (river turtle), all the fishes and others. The sons of Topeka were all the poisonous animal-people: Naipe (snake), Tior (scorpion), Igli (army ant), Sichir (spittlebug), Bulu (wasp), Butarar (sea urchin), Nidirbi (sting ray), Naipeniga (centipede) and others. The sons of Kuchuka were all the illness-people: Kalanuke (illness that eats bones), Tusi (rheumatism), Istardaket (tuberculosis). Tolotolo, Poni Kortikit, Poni Ginnit and others. Olokunaliler was the father of the Cold (Chapin, 1989:26, my translation)[53].

The story goes on to explain that when the world was populated only by animal-people the chaos was sovereign. Everyone used to get drunk during rituals and fight against each other. Everyone pretended to be the leader and did not listen to the words of Piler, their grandfather, trying to counsel them. They did not respect his authority and behaved without moral concern toward their own kin. Violence and incest spread, life was chaotic and disgusting, and the world was an unpleasant place in which to live. Social life, as it is today was not possible yet.

An explication for the reason of mythic time corruption was given to me by Garibaldo del Vasto, always keen to explain things to me 'from the beginning', as he put it. To understand the nature of the world as it is now he told me that another figure must be considered beyond animals and trees: Nia, the Devil. As we have seen above, Nia is the devil figure arriving on a canoe, while the world was being created. He was described to me by Garibaldo as the fellow of the Great Father, who then turned against him and became evil. This description is indeed similar to the Christian story of the fallen angel, who became the Devil. Although I am aware of the delicacy of these resemblances and do not wish to downplay their relevance in the understanding of indigenous cosmology, in what follows I will focus on what Kuna people say about Nia and their perception of it[54]. I am also confident that once some light has been shed upon Kuna categories it will become easier to draw a clearer picture of the effects of this contact on indigenous categories.

[53] Similarly the Piaroa tell of the origin of poisonous animals by the hand of Kuemoi: "Through the desire for and the malice towards jungle beings, he created all the poisonous snakes and insects of the world; he created poisonous toads; he poisoned all large rock formations and streams" (Overing, 1985a: 258).
[54] See Overing (1996) for an analysis on how the Piaroa borrowed the image of the conquistador and made it a figure of their own cosmology. This is analysed by Overing as related to the Piaroa's concern of alterity as an immanent cosmological fact and their reflection upon how to master forces that prey upon social life. Indeed these predatory forces have easily been associated with Spanish invaders since the time of the conquest. However evil, untamed and destructive forces are also associated with the origin of time in indigenous mythologies, when they where possessed by mad heroes, who eventually died and gave space to the emergence of human controlled sociality (Overing, 1985a).

As the myth of the Father's boys tells, Nia had never been a person, as animals and trees had not yet been transformed. Actually he has never transformed from his original state. Instead he masters the power of transformation at the highest level, he is able to transform into whatever form he pleases. Although he has no stable form, his form 'is transformation'. Further, he generated all demons (*niakan*, *kalutor*) and all sorts of evil animal entities (*ponikana*), and is today considered their father. As we saw in the above myth, soon after Nia arrived monstrous creatures made their appearance, people with ugly forms: black hairy figures, one-legged men, people with two faces, with one eye, cripples, people with enormous bellies, with the face on the knees and all other kinds of deformities. Today's demons are descendents of Nia and are described as tall creatures, with black skin and curly hair ('like Colombians!' as some Kuna told me). Their houses are underneath big rocks (*ipe*) in the forest. *Nia* and *kalutor* are also the cause of madness for the Kuna. They cause people to lose their minds and to become homicidal (*kia takkaler*), by killing people in dreams. Nia was also the father of various animals, namely those that are dangerous to humans.

> *Ipkuk* (anteater), Olopapaniler, descends from Nia, who was a great *nele*, and Nana. Nia and Nan Tummat had five sons, who were quintuplets and were also great *nelekan*. Then Nana died and split in two: Muu Oloupikuntisop, the sea, and Pursop, or Nana Olokuatule, the mountain. Like in all mixed marriages, some children are born the colour the father and some of the colour of the mother. Thus here, good animals come from Nana, while evil ones come from Nia. Piler was innocent; Nia cheated him. Like one who always goes to visit a friend just to see his wife. Then Piler was corrupted by his wife and himself became evil.

Thus, following what Garibaldo explained to me, it is possible to unfold the Kuna taxonomy of animals. In fact Kuna people generally make a distinction between inoffensive and edible animals (like peccaries, tapirs, most monkeys, agouties, and most fishes) and dangerous and inedible animals (like anteaters, sloths, jaguars, crocodiles, snakes). The former derive from the union between Piler and Pursop, two human beings, the latter from the union between Pursop and Nia, a human and a devil. And as with their father Nia, these animals are powerful *nelekan*. They possess the ancestral knowledge that since humans and animals split, they guard jealously. Their knowledge is also their capacity to attack humans; it is the cause of illnesses for human beings. But their dangerous powers are also the source of knowledge that *nelekan* seek, in order to

cure afflicted persons. The same knowledge that is vital for the formation of *nele* is poisonous for all other people (cf. Overing 1985a, 1986).

Another point which I want to call attention to is that Nia is one of the 'original others' in Kuna cosmology. As the myth tells us, both the eight boys and Nia are, beside the Great Mother and the Great Father, the first beings to appear in the world. All other creatures will be the transformations of or generated by, each of these four original figures. Nia is described by Kuna people today as the predator *par excellence* and is associated with a number of predatory figures and 'Others' that populate Kuna cosmology and history and which in some way take on the forms of its transformation. Such figures are: the jaguar (*achu*), white people (*merkimar*) and black Colombians (*waymar*). As it is clearly argued by Severi (1981b, 1987**,** 1993a) madness, as the illness provoked by an encounter with Nia, is the other-becoming and the ultimate risk for human beings. As Severi argues, Nia and 'sky jaguar' are the same interchangeable thing in Kuna descriptions of the cause of madness. Severi, in his analysis of the ritual chant for curing madness (*nia ikar*), points to the fact that the 'sky jaguar' is the invisible predator, "(…) whose presence could be conceived only under a deceptive incarnation: in the sound produced by another animal" (Severi, 1993a: 135, my translation). Therefore he suggests that *nia* is one of the transformations of the sky jaguar. Namely, when the supernatural predator seduces and copulates with a human being, the human becomes prey, who in turn generates *nia*, as the fruit of the mixed union between a human and an animal (*ibid*: 157). The human prey then becomes a mad person and slips into the category of enemy, showing a concrete will to hunt and prey upon those of his own kind (Severi, 1981b: 91). *Nia* signifies the point of no return, when the human prey becomes a predator of humans and therefore must be killed. The illness may still be treated, if diagnosed in time, with the use of plant medicines and through the performance of the long and powerful chant, the *nia ikar*, the 'way of the devil' (see Severi, 1982, 1983, for a French and a Spanish translation respectively of the chant). But it always leaves a mark, even if 'cured', on the person. As I was told, until the recent past, people who became affected by *nia* would be forced to drink a decoction prepared with *ina nusu*, a poisonous plant (*Spieghelia anthelmia L.*)[55]. In this case they survived and became particularly intelligent and an able learner. This was the

[55] This plant is literally called 'worm medicine' and is used in small doses for cleaning the guts of intestinal parasites. However, used in greater amounts it may be lethal to humans.

case for a man in Aylikanti (an insular community west of Okopsukkun), who after having survived the poisonous drink started carving wonderful wooden objects like stools, tables and chairs, which he said he saw in dreams[56]. But people, once attacked by *nia* are prone to fall ill again, and are thus always regarded with some suspicion, a bit like *nele*. Even if *nele* are said to be unable to harm other people, their life constitutes a mystery for other people, who do not know what the *nele* really does during dreams. While mad people, *kia takkaler*[57], are always considered evil and dangerous, because of their desire to kill their own kin (cf. Overing, 1985a: 265, Londoño-Sulkin, 2000: 175, Fausto, 2001: 316-317). They are brave and ferocious beings, who can disguise themselves, continuing their normal life during the day, but lurk in dreams, seeking victims. But sooner or later someone will see them in dreams, trying to strangle the dreamer. Thus they can be accused in front of the collective gatherings of the village and forced to drink the poison[58].

Having seen how Kuna think of the origin of evil entities in their historic vision of the world, let us now return to the wider topic of the chapter, namely how the Kuna perceive the mainland forest as a space populated by supernatural entities.

Ancestors and offspring

What to my eyes seemed a uniform vegetated space, I realized that for Kuna people is a space where specific kinds of trees, bushes, shrubs and flowers grow and where specific animals, spirits and demons dwell and wander about. Furthermore each plant and animal species has different properties that point to manifold relations between the visible and non-visible forms they assume and between the past and the present. Plants, trees and flowers have different properties, and people thus can use some of these for

[56] It is interesting to note how the capacity of the cured person to see images in dreams is similar to that of *nele*, who are able to see the images of animal entities in dreams.

[57] *Kia takkaler* is the nominal agent form of the verb *kintakket*, 'to kill'. Interestingly in the Kuna-Spanish dictionary of Erice there is the definition of *kiataka nele* as 'matasanos', 'quack'. As we have seen a *kia takkaler* is more dangerous than a quack, but what calls attention is the reference to the *nele*. It is in fact the 'evil *nele*' able to harm through his wild knowledge and power, as in some way the quack is. By pretending to be able to cure, but in fact being unable to do so, the charlatan might kill his patient, as we hear many times from the news. The difference is that the *kia takkaler* does this by following his (externally-imposed) will, and not just for money.

[58] It is interesting to note here that the person in charge of forcing the 'mad one' to drink the poison was normally a hunter, one who had taken medicine for hunting and was considered brave but also easily overcome by rage during arguments with other people. Hunters are, interestingly enough, able to confront jaguars face to face, without fear.

diverse purposes. Some animals can be hunted and eaten, like collared peccaries (*wetar*), white-lipped peccaries (*yannu*), deers (*koe*), tapirs (*moli*), agoutis (*usu*), pacas (*sule*); others cannot, like giant anteaters (*ippureket*), silky anteaters (*ukkuturpa*), sloths (*pero*), crocodiles (*tain*). Other animals, like the turtle (*yauk*), can be eaten only following particular restrictions related to age and sex[59].

As with many other Amerindians the Kuna do not have general words for plants and animals (cf. Descola, 1996 [1987]: 116). *Inmar turkan*, is a generic word used to indicate forest animals. *Inmar* is a common name meaning 'thing' used to refer to abstract categories of things, such as *inmar iskana*, 'bad things', *inmar nuekana* 'good things', or concrete categories, such as *inmar kukkualet*, 'birds' (litt. 'winged things'). Moreover when a person indicates an unknown thing, she would say: '*a inmar*', 'that thing'; or when she forgets the name of a person she is referring to, she would take time by saying: '*...inmar... inmar... Paolo*'. Therefore forest animals are 'person things'[60].

Kuna say that every animal is a person in the underworld, where they live in villages (*kalukan*, sing. *kalu*) that can be seen as such only in dreams or by seers while smoking tobacco. A general division is applied to differentiate animals that people meet in the forest: some are said to be the offspring (*apkilakan*) of ancestral animals, which are now their chiefs (*errey*, *e tummat* or *e sayla*)[61], others do not have a chief and are therefore ancestral beings themselves. Although among animals that have a chief some are more endowed of agency (*pinsaet*)[62] than others, ultimately agency is imputed to their supernatural chiefs, who live in the fourth level of the underworld and are extremely powerful shamans (*nele tummati*). Conversely animals that are themselves ancestors are said to be shamans and have a strong and clear agency. Both the chiefs of animals and the animals-shamans retain knowledge from ancient times, when they were mixing with human beings, although they never developed any social skills. Some of them are malevolent towards humans, with the desire to kill them, eat their bodies, drink their

[59] See Nordenskiöld (1938: 382-389) for a taxonomy of animals different in some points to the ones I present here. For the specific case of the turtle (*yauk*), he gives details about its hunting, saying that in the past Kuna people did not hunt this animal for food but just for selling its shell (*ibid*: 342-343).
[60] See the description of animals among the Araweté as "those that are really existent" (Viveiros de Castro, 1992: 72-74).
[61] The Kuna concept of chiefs of animals is very similar to the one of masters of animals, often found in Amazonian literature. I use the word chief in my work, as it is closer to the Kuna word *sayla* and *tummat*, which are used to refer to village authorities. While the word *errey* seems to be of Spanish derivation; form 'rey', which means 'king'.
[62] When referring to animals I heard Kuna people using the word *pinsaet* ('love', 'thought' and 'memory'), used also for people. While I never heard it when referring to trees.

blood or abduct their children. Moreover all animals that are shamans and do not have a chief in the underworld are not eaten, while among the animals that have a chief some are edible.

Table 1 - Edible animals

Kuna	English	Latin	Panam. Spanish
Yannu	White-lipped peccary	*Tayassu pecari*	Puerco de monte
Wetar	Collared peccary	*Tayassu tajacu*	Saíno
Moli	Tapir	*Tapirus bardii*	Danta
Usu	Agouti	*Dasyprocta punctata*	Neque
Sule or Nappanono	Paca	*Agouti paca*	Conejo pintado
Koe	Red brocket deer	*Mazama americana*	Corzo
Wasa	White-tailed deer	*Odocoileus virginianus*	Venado coliblanco
Ari	Green iguana	*Iguana iguana*	Iguana verde
Yauk	Hawksbill turtle	*Eretmochlys imbricata*	Tortuga carey
Tete	Nine-banded armadillo	*Dasypus novemcintus*	Armado
Uksi	Naked-tailed armadillo	*Cabassous centralis*	Armadillo rabo de puerco
Sur sichit or ulur	Mantled howler monkey	*Alouatta palliata*	Mono negro
Opsur	White-throated Capuchin	*Cebus capucinus*	Mono cariblanco
Sikli	Great Curassow	*Crax rubra*	Pavón grande

The majority of animals for the Kuna are the offspring of their ancestral chiefs living in the supernatural dimension of the world. Among them there are the animals and fish that are hunted or fished and eaten by people, animals whose body parts are used for preparing medicines, and dangerous animals whose proximity is avoided by any means.

Animals that are normally hunted (*maysa*)[63] for food are not attributed with having individual agency. In general they are said to follow the orders imparted by their underworld chiefs, who are mainly busy either making them run out of their village (*kalu*) into the forest, or to keeping them within. These are normally animals that move in herds or small groups in the forest and feed on fruits and leaves, like peccaries and tapirs, deer, agoutis, pacas and monkeys. Among edible animals there are also fish (*ua*), which now constitute the main source of protein intake in the Kuna diet. Kuna people have developed a deep knowledge of marine fish, which is reflected in the number of names given to them. The reason why, in this work, I principally deal with forest animals is dictated by the fact that these animals still have a higher symbolic importance in Kuna cosmology than the marine fauna. However, Kuna people living in the San Blas Archipelago do not hunt as much as they say they used to do in the past. Among other causes that I was told contributed to the decrease of hunting was the construction of a dam in the Bayano region, in the Darién forest behind the San Blas range, which formed the huge Bayano Lake. This caused a massive change in the forest ecosystem, and people in Okopsukkun told me that it also shifted the route of animals that used to pass close the coast, the most accessible to Kuna hunters[64]. I heard many men in Okopsukkun give the reason for not hunting as the cost of shotguns and bullets. But at the same time I was told that men in the past were skilled hunters and were constantly taking medicines to increase their hunting capacities. Furthermore, money could not be the main cause for not hunting, because people buy fishing nets or diving equipment (like spears, diving masks and flippers) when they can afford it.

Kuna people are very critical about eating some fish and sea creatures that are considered to have a bad temperament or characteristics that would cause problems to human beings. Biting fish like shark (*nali*) and stingray (*nitirpi*), for example would pass their biting mood onto human beings. Kuna people do not eat octopus (*kikkir*) either, the reason being that this is particularly risky for pregnant women, because it makes the foetus stick to the womb, causing problems in childbirth. In general it could be said that although fish are the object of people's pragmatic activities they are less the

[63] The word for 'hunting' is *makket* and refers to killing animals, birds or fish with a shotgun or spears. *Inmar makket* and *ua makket* respectively mean 'hunting (forest) animals' and 'fishing with harpoons'. A large fish called sábalo in Panamanian Spanish and *mila* in Kuna is hunted by the Kuna with the harpoon. While fishing with a line is *ua soet*, and fishing with fishing nets is *ua kaet*.

[64] Another reason for the changing of the presence of game animals in the mainland forest has been the construction of the Pan-American highway that affected both Kuna and Emberá (Hanbury-Tenison and Burton, 1973). Nonetheless Kuna living in the Darién forest still practice hunting on a more regular basis than those living in the San Blas islands (see Ventocilla, 1991; Ventocilla, Herrera, Nuñez, 1995: 43-51).

object of symbolic speculation than forest animals. This, as it has already been argued (see for instance Howe in Ventocilla, Herrera, Nuñez, 1995: 12), is caused by the fact that the Kuna moved from the forest to the coast quite recently and are therefore still in the process of adapting a forest cosmology to the marine environment.

Other animals that have their chiefs in the underworld and are not edible for the Kuna are the crocodile (*tain*) and snakes (*naipe*). Although Kuna people do not associate the two taxa in any way, however they are both considered dangerously relevant. Crocodiles are among the animals that are able to 'steal the soul(s)' (*purpa suet*) of people. What the crocodile does is in fact bring the abducted soul to its chief or to the chief of other animals, who will keep it in their spiritual abode. In curing chants the crocodile is called the canoe (*ulu*) of *ponikan*. This points to the fact that the crocodile is considered a means of supernatural transportation between different realms. In the myth of the Father's young men Nia arrives paddling in a canoe, which is called Kilupilaulesaulu. *Kilu* refers to the 'mother's brother' and is also used as a prefix to form the name of supernatural evil entities[65]; *pila* means 'war'; *ulesa* could be the past of *urue*, 'to get angry'; and *ulu* is 'canoe'. Furthermore I was told that the *nele* travels using a canoe, which is actually a crocodile, in dreams within the supernatural world. What is seen by people in waking life as a crocodile is therefore a canoe from the point of view of supernatural beings, or in people's dreams. Interestingly, dugout canoes are the means of transportation people use to move between different domains, from islands to mainland, and through rivers. It is also in a canoe that the soul of a dead person travels to the house of Pap Tummat. Crocodiles are the only animals that are able to move between water and the mainland, they can swim and walk, and sometimes they can also reach the islands. People in Okopsukkun are often scared of meeting crocodiles on the shores during the night when they go out to urinate and there was always a great deal of laughing, but also preoccupation, when someone came back from a night walk saying that he had sighted a crocodile near the rocks.

Snakes (*naipe*) too are critical animals, as they have a chief in the underworld but also possess dangerous immanent qualities affecting human beings. First of all they can attack people, not only by biting, which is of course the most common method of attack,

[65] It would be interesting to explore more thoroughly the connection between this kinship term and animal entities. See chapter six for a discussion on how affinity is useful category to understand human-animals relationship.

but they can also enter a person's body when he or she walks over its tracks. Unlike crocodiles, they do not steal people's souls but instead enter the body and keep on changing form, so that it is difficult for specialists to cure the illness (see Nordenskiöld, 1938: 396-414). Snakes can appear in great numbers in a particular place in the forest as the consequence of some events that caused the rupture of the tranquillity of a supernatural village of animals. If such a thing happens, villagers might decide to celebrate the collective healing ritual (*apsoket ikar*), aimed at placating the upset ancestral spirit and to send the snakes down into their *kalu*. Snakes are also considered beautiful (*yer taileke*) by the Kuna for the coloured designs on their skin. The beauty of their designed skin, as I shall describe further in chapter four, is associated with the snake's capacity to transform. Snakes, besides changing form inside the human body, may also appear in dreams as beautiful sexual partners to both men and women to trick their victims. But the most powerful predator and the most agile transformer for the Kuna is the jaguar (*achu*).

Table 2 - Non-edible animals

Kuna	English	Latin	Panam. Spanish
Masar naipe	Red-tailed coral snake	*Micrurus multifasciatus*	Gargantilla
Nipa naipe	Neotropical bird snake	*Pseutes poecilonotus*	Mica pajarera
Tinan naipe	Tropical kingsnake	*Lampropeltis triangulum*	Coral falsa
Ukkunaipe	Tiger ratsnake	*Spilotes pullatus*	Mica
Tain	American crocodile	*Crocodylus acutus*	Cocodrilo
Iskin	Spectacled caiman	*Caiman crocodilus*	Caimán or guajipal
Achu parpat	Jaguar	*Panthera onca*	Jaguar
Achu kinnit	Puma	*Puma concolor*	Puma
Achu narkwinkwa	Jagurundi	*Herpailurus yagouraoundi*	León breñero or yaguarundi

Jaguars are among the animals that do not have a chief in the underworld. They are themselves, as I would put it, ancestral animals. Nonetheless, Kuna people distinguish between actual jaguars, dangerous for their ferocity when they are hungry, but also, as I was told, not keen to meet human beings in the forest, and 'sky jaguars' (cf. Severi, 1993, for the link between sky jaguars and *nia*). The latter, called *achu nipali*, cannot be

seen by people and move about high up in the sky. I was told that they prey on turtles, which they grab and bring up into the sky. Once they have eaten the turtles they let the shell fall down. It is for this reason, a Kuna friend told me that he once found a turtle shell deep inland. Jaguars are the most skilled predator of both animals and humans. They prey upon animals in the forest and people in dreams[66]. What renders them so dangerous for people is their capacity to metamorphose. As snakes do, they also attract humans in dreams by transforming into beautiful women or men, irresistible to dreamers for their sexual appeal. At the same time Kuna people say that their fur is beautiful, and they never fail to point this out when describing such animals[67]. Like crocodiles, jaguars are also considered a means of transportation in the supernatural domain. As Severi points out, the 'sky jaguar' is also called 'golden saucer' (*olopatte*) in the curing chant for madness (*ibid*: 146). In his long description of this 'celestial animal' Severi shows how its appearance may be characterized by blinding light or by dark obscurity[68]. The 'golden saucer' is mentioned in many Kuna myths which I collected and I found this used by the creator divinities the Great Father and the Great Mother, as a way to move between the sky and the earth, and also by ancient shamans, who used to descend to the underworld riding black jaguars and winged snakes.

Other animals are considered ancestral beings, but not the offspring or incarnation of their supernatural chiefs. They are defined *ponikan*, evil entities and most importantly, they are the auxiliary spirits of seers (*nelekan*). These animals are the sloth (*pero*), the giant anteaters (*ippureket*), the silky anteater (*ukkuturpa*), the porcupine (*akkwanukku*), the river otter (*saipa*), the sea siren (*ansu*) [69]. What they have in common is that these

[66] See Viveiros de Castro (1992: 74-76, 335) for a description of the jaguar spirit of the Araweté. It is also interesting to note that "… *Me'e Ñã*, 'Jaguar-Thing', and his partner *Moropïcï*, the Master of Snakes, both of which eat tortoises, may become enraged and release their pets against humans who are negligent in inviting them to banquets of tortoise meat" (*ibid*: 76).

[67] Jaguars and snakes are considered beautiful animals for their designed fur and skin not only by the Kuna; see Gow (2001: 110-111) for a description of Piro's perception of these animals and the transposition of their designs onto objects and bodies.

[68] See Viveiros de Castro (2006) for an interpretation of the Yanomami spirit vision, which highlights the relevance of light, mirrors, and opacity as terms describing indigenous visual experiences of beings of the other world.

[69] The association between *saipa* and river otter is mine. *Saipa*, as well as *ansu*, was described to me as a creature half woman and half fish. Although I cannot say it with certainty, I am tempted to associate the sea siren to manatees (*tii moli*, 'water tapir'). Once I was told that in the past there were many manatees along the coast, especially close to the river mouths. Then people in Okopsukkun and Ustupu celebrated many collective healing rituals (*nek-apsoket*), sending these animals back into the underworld, where they now live. This would make the associations between manatees as underwordly animals and the powerful sea siren sound and possible. Moreover manatees became more powerful by being sent to the supernatural

animals are normally found alone in the forest, in rivers and in the sea[70]. Once an old Kuna man told me: "Anteaters, porcupines and the sloth are all *ponikan*. They are all *achu* (jaguar). They eat scorpions (*tior*), spiders (*akkwaser*), ants (*seka*) and snakes (*naipe*). They suck their poison (*kichi*) and are therefore not edible for people." Most importantly all these animals are 'great seers' (*nele tummakana*). They have the ancestral knowledge and are therefore sought by *nele*, who want to associate with them to learn their knowledge. For this reason people must not hunt them, otherwise they may transmit incurable diseases to the hunter and to his children. This restriction becomes even more important when a woman is pregnant; her husband should avoid looking at these animals in the forest. Once I was told: "If one shoots an anteater he must not to tell anyone. The anteater is a *nele* and has many *tarpa* (auxiliary spirits). Therefore it can hear you speaking about it and will attack you."

These animals, as well as snakes, prey upon human beings, not by stealing their souls, but by entering their body and eating it from the inside. For this reason the illness transmitted by the anteater, which is called *ipkuk*, can only be cured temporarily, for it always reappears, especially when the person becomes older, eventually causing its death. Instead, crocodiles and jaguars are responsible for what is called 'soul stealing' (*purpa sue*). This idea, quite widespread in Amerindian societies, is based on the fact that people have more than one soul, in the case of the Kuna, eight. One of these souls can be abducted by an animal spirits, causing the person to become ill and suffer a high fever (cf. Chapin, 1983: 104-117). The Kuna say that one of the *purpa* is the first, the most important and chief of the others (*purpa nuet*). If that *purpa* is abducted, the person will soon die.

Table 3 – Non-edible animals/shamans

Kuna	English	Latin	Panam. Spanish
Pero	Three-toed sloth	*Bradypus variegatus*	Perezoso de tres dedos
Pero	Two-toed sloth	*Choloepus*	Perezoso de dos

world and to become only ancestors, not having any more offspring visible in the waters nearby Okopsukkun and Ustupu.

[70] As the distinction between animals that are offspring of their supernatural chiefs and animals that are themselves ancestors was not clear to me during fieldwork, I unfortunately failed to ask more precisely which animals pertain to each group. The animals listed above are the ones which were the most commonly cited as potential auxiliary spirits of the *nele*. However other animals have on some occasions been added to the group, such as sea turtle (*yauk*), barracuda (*tapu*), shark (*nali*), stingray (*nitirpi*). Also quartz stones (*akkwanusa*) found in riverbeds are among the *nele*'s auxiliaries.

		hoffmanni	dedos
Ippureket	Giant anteater	*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*	Oso hormiguero gigante
Palipirki	Northern tamandua	*Tamandua mexicana*	Hormiguero banders
Ukkuturpa	Silky anteater	*Cyclopes didactylus*	Gato balsa
Akkwanukku	Rothschild's porcupine	*Coendou rotschild*	Puercoespín
Akkwanukku	Mexican porcupine	*Coendou mexicanus*	Puercoespín Mexicana
Saipa	Neotropical river otter	*Lutra longicaudus*	Nutria neotropical
Ansu	Amazonian Manatee?	*Trichechus inunguis*?	Manatí?

I want to add here another remark on the concept of animal ancestors and animal offspring that I have used so far. Namely this distinction does not entail a temporal divide for the Kuna, because animal ancestors and animal offspring co-exist in the same time, and during certain moments share the same space. The only difference is that animal offspring are able to incarnate and assume the form of forest animals, while their chiefs live only in the supernatural world and can be seen by human beings only in dreams or by seers during rituals. When they refer to the cause of illnesses, ritual chanters mention the name of the ancestral beings that are now the chiefs of the animals. They hold that there is a fundamental difference between the animals that live in the forest or in rivers and the spirits responsible for illnesses. The names of the chiefs of animals, I was told, are names of persons (*tule nuikana*), meaning that the chief in the underworld is a person and he lives with his animals as people live on the earth. They have their own village, and houses and eat their own food. Once a Kuna botanic specialist explained to me the relationship between ancestors-chiefs and offspring in the following way, before listing the proper names of animal ancestors: "I'm going now to tell you the names of the hosts (*akkwemala*) of animals, of the persons (*tulemala*) who are *sayla* of animals. It is as if I caught a little white-lipped peccary (*yannu*) to grow up in my house; then my friends would joke calling me *yannu akkweti*, even if that is not my real name." It is by knowing the personal names of ancestral animal entities that

ritual specialists can effectively cure ill persons, with the help of their auxiliary spirits, the small carved poles (*suarmimmi* or *nuchu*).

Moreover, animals that are themselves ancestral beings have an independent agency, as opposed to other animals that basically act following the will of their chief. Animals that are themselves ancestors seem to flatten the spatio-temporal distinction between ancestors-chiefs and offspring. They are the manifestation of the category of *poni*, the evil that resulted from the mixing between human beings and the Other in mythic times, as we shall see below. Two ethnographic references are particularly relevant here and may shed more light on the consistency of the Kuna classification of animal and supernatural species. The first regards the Bororo of Mato Grosso, described by Crocker (1985). In his description of the two all-encompassing cosmological categories of *bope* and *aroe*, Crocker states: "Each is manifested in various 'pure', undiluted, awful forms, but each is present also in an unstable synthesis within each living creature" (*ibid*: 121). Then, considering the various degrees of manifestation of the *bope* in plant and animal species, he describes animals that for the Bororo are the 'pure' manifestation of *bope*, as he calls them, that are themselves *bope*.

> The Themselves *bope* creatures are so tangibly filled with appearances and habits otherwise thought unique to the *bope* that a clear distinction cannot be drawn between them and the suprareal principle. These species, just like rain, thunder, the sun and the moon, are sensate evidence of the *bope*'s control of organic transformation. They are metonyms for the *bope*, revealing the spirits through mirroring (though in attenuated ways) their appearance and by being in physical conjunction with the serial changes of birth, death and decay. (*ibid*: 180)

Following the inspiration provided by the Bororo classificatory system I wish to draw the attention to another system of classification also reflected in the use of linguistic modifiers, that of the Yawalapíti of the Upper Xingu (Brasil). The Yawalapíti classify natural phenomena and relationships in relation to gradual distance from a model. This has been described as a 'continuous-gradual cosmology' (Viveiros de Castro, 1978: 9). Living beings are classified in relation to 'ideal' forms through the use of linguistic modifiers. This allows for the definition of ancestral powerful beings and their manifestations in the sensible world, divided more or less closely from the supernatural model.

> The addition of the modifier */kumã/* to the term for a specific animal, or object, reveals, as we have seen, that it is supernatural: big, ferocious, invisible. There are fishes-*kumã*, jaguars-*kumã*, canoes-*kumã*, pans for baking cassava bread that are *kumã*. Some animals do not need modifiers to be considered *apapalutápa* ['spirits']: the jacaré, the jaguar, the deer, the macaque, were identified to me as '*apapalutápa*'. These animals (all *apapalutápa-mina*, 'terrestrial animals'), are also included among the beings *umañí*, archetypical, i.e. mythic beings (*ibid*: 33-34, my translation).

Ancient trees and young gardens

Plants, as well as animals, are classified by the Kuna following a precise scheme. In what follows I will only deal with some aspects of such classification. My main interest is that of describing how Kuna people today think of trees considering what the myth of the Father's boys told us.

Plants and trees are generally divided, following Kuna categorisation, between those used for specific purposes, such as preparing medicines, building houses, making canoes, stools and carving *nuchu* and those that produce food. Although not all vegetal species have a practical use, they all have a name and are recognizable by the Kuna. This means that the division between plants used for specific purposes and edible plants are not explicit categories for the Kuna, but rather implicit, which points to the supernatural agencies attached to them[71].

The former plants form a group composed of high trees and medicinal plants (see next chapter). These trees were the first people to appear on the earth during the creation of the world, they were the Father's boys as we have seen above, and are therefore considered today as the repository of the most profound knowledge. Kuna ritual specialists today choose them as their auxiliary spirits (along with, in some cases, animal spirits) and refer to them as seers (*nelekan*). After trees, during creation time what the Kuna call 'their companions' (*e sortamala*), other plant species, normally smaller trees, vines and shrubs, which were also people which were then transformed

[71] For a definition and an application of explicit and implicit natural categories see Descola (1996 [1987]: 113-144) on the Achuar. I will refer again to his work below developing a definition on Kuna plant and animal categories.

into their present-day vegetal form were also created. These plants also have a spiritual agency and are used by specialists to prepare medicines.

The latter plants are all fruit-bearing and are used for human consumption. The most cultivated are plantains (*machunnat*), bananas (*way-masi*), coconuts (*okop*), mango (*manko*), cacao (*sia*). On one hand there is the distinction between ancient trees (*sappi serrekan*), which were the first inhabitants of the earth, and their companions (*e sortamala*), which came second during creation time. On the other hand the Kuna seem to distinguish all forest plants that grow alone spontaneously, from edible plants that have been planted by people.

As we have seen above, trees were the first people to appear during the creation of the whole world. The eight boys of the myth became the chiefs, or the owners as Kuna people put it, of today's forest trees. My point is therefore that for Kuna people trees are the instantiation of their distant ancestors, who were people in ancient times and then transformed into trees, becoming detached (and 'others') from humans. This point will be further developed in the next chapter, where I describe the carving of ritual statues, using the wood of these ancestral trees, and in the concluding chapter of this work.

In the previous chapter I described the division between non-cultivated land (*nek-serreti*) and cultivated plots (*nainu*). This division, I would argue, is associated with and reinforced by the ancestral quality of non-cultivated land, and the sense of present and continuation associated with cultivated gardens. While non-cultivated forest and especially its high trees, remind the Kuna of their ancestral past, cultivated plants point to a recent past, present and future. As I said in the previous chapter I did not ask specifically about cultivated plants during my fieldwork. Moreover as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the focus would have been on uncultivated plants and non-edible animals, for their strong relationship with the ancestral past. This does not mean that I assume that cultivated plants have no history, or power for the Kuna, as they have among other indigenous people (see among others Descola, 1996 [1987]; Guss, 1989). Kuna people always remember who planted a mango or a cacao tree in their gardens and this is often used during inheritance disputes over land: "That mango has been planted by my father, therefore its fruits are now mine". Present and future are personified by people working in the gardens and by their children, whom the fruits are destined for. Kuna people say that they work the land to produce food to give to their

children, so that they grow up healthy and happy. This is directed towards future generations.

When it comes to the forest flora Kuna people make a distinction between 'trees' (*sappiwalagan*, sing. *sappiwar*, or *sappi*), 'vines' (*tupakan*, sing. *tupa*), 'bushes' (*kakan*, sing. *ka*) and 'flowers' (*tuttukan*, sing. *tuttu*). These are explicit categories of everyday use (cf. Descola, 1996 [1987]: 116). Most adult men know the various types of trees, vines, shrubs and bushes and their various uses. Firewood (*sappan*) may come from certain types of 'mangroves' (*ayli*) or other hardwood trees; baskets and hats are made by weaving strips from the stems of *naiwar* (*Carludovica drudei*); house posts are made using the core of hard wood trees.

Botanic specialists (*ina turkan*) have a vast knowledge of forest plants. They know the characteristics of each plant thoroughly, such as common and ritual names, and where they prefer to grow. Following their taxonomy we can see how the Kuna divide plants, using their properties in relation to medicine (*ina*), into pragmatic categories (*ibid*: 116-117). Trees are divided between, 'trees with hard core' (*sappikan kua nikka*); 'trees with sap' (*sappikan kichi nikka*); 'trees with spines' (*sappikan ikko nikka*). These categories are used when botanic specialists teach their young pupils how to distinguish trees and how each tree is used for preparing various types of medicines[72]. At the same time most adult men know how to distinguish trees that are good for making house posts, canoes or for carving stools and other objects. Pragmatic classifications of trees and other vegetal species are thus directed towards various utilitarian aims. Although categories often overlap and specializations often come integrated, Kuna people are quite keen to distinguish different fields of knowledge: medicine, mythology, carving and other practical activities that require the use of wood.

When speaking of cultivated plants there is no generic term in Kuna language used to refer to edible plants. People refer to these plants using the name of the fruit they produce: *machunnat* (plantain), *sinamas*, *way-matun* (other types of bananas), *tarkwa* (blue taro, 'otoe' in Panamanian Spanish), *mama* (manioc), *uakup* (yam, 'ñame' in Panamanian spanish) *manko* (mango), *matupur* (breadfruit), *opa* (maize), *aswe* (avocado), *osi* (pineapple), *naras* (lime). All these plants are important as they provide nutrition and strengthen peoples' bodies. They are the vital source of energy which

[72] For a more detailed description of Kuna ethno-botanic taxonomies see Chapin (1983: 223-229).

enables children to grow up strong. Yet, when old men sit at the table, with their plate full of *tule masi*, made with boiled plantain and manioc, along with a big boiled fish on the side, or more rarely with a piece of meat, they feel happy. '*Tule mas an kucha, an yer ittoke!*', 'I ate *tule masi*, I'm happy!' an old man would say as a sign of happiness and fulfilment after a life of hard work in the gardens and fishing. Happiness and fulfilment are provided now by the fact that he ideally has many sons-in-law working arduously in the forest and bringing back plenty of food to eat with fish everyday. Cooked food is also the sign of a good life in the family, when people live in love and harmony and feel happy (*yer ittoge*). If there is food people are happy, and people are happy that there is food. When kinspeople fight, sometimes men stop working in the gardens and women stop cooking. When people are sad (*pukki pinsaet*), because they miss a dead person or a distant kinsperson, they do not feel hungry (cf. Lagrou, 2000)[73].

Cultivated plants thus carry the memory of living or deceased relatives; uncultivated plants provide living people with a connection to their ancestral past and with their ancestors, who became 'Others' at the end of mythic times. Kuna people consider forest trees ancestral beings, the knowledge and power of which accompany them in their everyday struggle against evil entities. By establishing a relationship with ancestral tree entities, ritual specialists are able to draw from their source of knowledge and to protect their living kinspeople against the evil predating forces. As I argue in the first chapter, the island is inhabited only by human beings and by *nuchukana*, the carved logs representing human figures. In what follows I will suggest that a *nuchu* is the transformation of a tree, which maintains the tree's powerful agency and makes it relational to human beings. The first step in this process is that of carving *nuchukana*. It is to this topic that I will turn in the next chapter.

[73] What I only sketch here is a whole issue about Kuna sociality, which is addressed by Margiotti (Ph.D. thesis) and has been addressed previously by Amazonian scholars who looked at the importance of conviviality in the on-going generation of indigenous way of life (Gow, 1991; Overing and Passes, 2000; Belaunde, 2001; McCallum, 2001).

Chapter 3

Carving

One day I was speaking with Justino Lopez, an old Kuna man ('grandfather', *tata*), about *nuchu*. We spoke together about the same topic many times and as normal he was very kind and willing to help me to understand what I wanted to know, as well as extremely clear in his explications and examples. He was used to my repetitive and naïve questions and he never seemed annoyed by them, rather he was patient and keen to repeat many times, what for him must have been the most obvious things in the world. In this way he taught me many things about *nuchu*, how they live within Kuna households and their relationship with members of the family and also ritual specialists. That day, after we had already met several times, I felt confident to ask him to show me his *nuchukana* and he replied: "Ask Beatriz, she is the one who takes care of them[74]". So I did this and Beatriz, Justino's wife, told me to come back the next day. Beatriz and Justino were living in the house with their two daughters, their sons-in-law and three grandchildren. As I observed, when I came back the following day, the *nuchukana* were kept in a wooden bowl at the foot of one of the two main poles of the house. Beatriz went in and brought the *nuchukana* to the patio, where we sat and we started speaking. I asked her who made these *nuchukana* and she told me the story of each one and the type of wood they were carved from. She told me that with them in the house she felt secure. They protected all her family by keeping away dead people's souls and demons. Then she told me:

> "One day I brought my *nuchukana* to a *nele*, here in Okopsukkun. That *nele* saw them in dreams. She told me that the woman - and she pointed to one *nuchu*

[74] Justino used the word *sapeti* to refer to Beatriz in this case. From the verb *sapet*, it refers to someone who takes care of someone else, implying also love and mindfulness.

representing a female figure holding a cross - was very powerful. If bad people arrive she does not let them enter my house. She also told me that this *nuchu* comes from far away and talks a lot (*we kati sunmakke*). This is true, the man who carved it is from Paya (a Kuna village in the Darién forest close to the Colombian border) and he's an *ina tuleti* (botanic specialist). He knows also how to make canoes and to weave baskets. He is old but his wife is very young. He knows many secrets."

In this chapter I deal with the carving of *nuchukana*, the small wooden ritual statues used in curing rituals and for protecting households. I will show how this activity is linked to old Kuna men's fertility and to their ritual skill in dealing with ancestral tree entities. Although virtually every man is able to carve *nuchu*, only few men are recognized as *nuchu* makers (*nuchu sopeti*) in Okopsukkun. Curing specialists are also able to carve their own *nuchu*, however this is an activity normally carried out by someone else and it is considered separate from the performance of curing rituals, in which *nuchu* are involved as auxiliary spirits. I will argue that carving *nuchu* is an independendet ritual activity, requiring a specific skill. The skill of carving *nuchu* is developed throughout the life course of a Kuna man, who first learns to make canoes, stools and other objects and later on in his life becomes able to make *nuchu*. For the Kuna creating *nuchu* comes as a transformation of previously acquired carving skills and is their highest manifestation.

I will also point out that Kuna men who specialize in concrete activities, such as woodcarving, share transformative and generative skills. Through mastering woodcarving, a man may thus become able in his old age, to deal with the powerful fertility of trees and transform his own fertility. He transfers his own life giving force to wooden logs, creating an artefact that will gain its own independent life. My point will be that old Kuna men transform their fertility and become able to 'give shape'[75] to ancestral entities. 'Giving shape' is thus to be interpreted as the prerequisite for 'giving life'.

This capacity connects old Kuna men with the ancestral deities *muukana* ('grandmothers'), ultimately responsible for human childbirth. Kuna grandfathers and grandmothers become responsible for the fertility of younger couples, developing

[75] Kuna people use the verb *sopet* when referring to the carving of a *nuchu*. 'To give shape' is the English translation I have chosen, as it seems to convey more of the meaning of the Kuna term. Below I analyse further the meanings and the implications of this expression. It is nonetheless a translation and the meaning will become clear through the ethnography.

respectively the capacity to deal with supernatural fertile forces, those of *muukana* deities and those of ancestral trees. In this chapter I will follow the process of carving *nuchu* giving an account of how Kuna men become able to master transformations with the aim of protecting their kinspeople.

Transformative capacities in everyday activities have to be seen in the larger framework of productive knowledge. Amazonian ethnography strongly suggests that men and women contribute to the everyday creation of social life with their respective creative knowledge (Overing, 1989; 2003). This knowledge increases and accumulates in the person's body with the process of aging. It is by looking at the different contributions of men and women in the creation of bodies and artefacts (cf. Munn, 1986) that it is possible to understand how individual creative processes fit into the wider cosmology.

In this respect the example of canoe making, also inspired by the beautiful analysis of the similar activity in Gawa (*ibid*: 138-147), is significant for two reasons. First because it represents the first step in the learning of transformative skills among Kuna men. Second, because it is an example of men's and women's participation in everyday productive processes. The most marked example of this is found among the neighbouring Emberá people, of whom it is said, in the making of dugout canoes, men 'take the guts of' the trunk, while women prepare the food. The food prepared by women serves two purposes, one of feeding the workers, another of feeding the dying tree before it is transformed into a canoe. Men and women actively participate in the making of canoes and their body parts are used as metaphors for the canoe's parts, resulting in "an elegant affirmation of unified but separate relation, the basic principle of Emberá social structure" (Kane, 1994: 79).

The carving of *nuchu* should be seen consequently as a transformation of a tree into an artefact. Old men's transformative capacities are linked and in some way are the development of the reproductive capacities of younger men. Carving is described as a meaningful process by Kuna carvers and it entails a set of steps to be performed in order to produce the final artefact. In order to give an account of such ritual transformation I will focus on three dimensions of *nuchu* making: 1) the skill of the carvers, which has to be seen as a transformation of young men's fertility; 2) the *nuchu* material, which is the wood of particular trees associated with ancestral entities by Kuna people (I will also

describe how these trees are thought of by the Kuna); 3) the process of carving *nuchu* as a combination of old men's fertility and their capacity to give shape to objects.

Nuchu in Kuna language means 'little one', 'young' and its adjective *nuchukwa* is often applied to youngsters (*wemar ampa nuchukwa*, 'they are still young'). In the case of the small ritual statues it has an affective meaning, such as 'my little ones', the ones I take care of, I love. Other names used to refer to *nuchu* are *nuchumimmi* and *suarmimmi*. *Mimmi* means 'little'; *mimmikana* are one's offspring, or children (*mimmikan nikka?* 'Do you have children?'). *Suar* means 'pole', 'stick' and derives from *war*, or *wala*, meaning 'trunk', or more generally 'straight long thing', used as a suffix for trees' names (see section on trees in this chapter)[76]. Added to the word 'water', *tii*, it means 'river', *tiiwar*.

Suar is a log detached from the tree, like a branch, a root, or the main trunk. Therefore *nuchumimmi* results in a tautology and *suarmimmi* means 'little pole'. These three words are equally used to refer to one's *nuchukana* in non-ritual situations, whereas when a chanter refers to his *nuchukana* while singing curing songs he calls them *nelekana* (sing. *nele*), 'seers'.

Carvers

Carving *nuchu* is a men's activity and it is normally performed by old Kuna men. In Okopsukkun, at the time of my fieldwork, there were around four or five men renowned for their skill in carving *nuchu*. Although many men are able to carve *nuchu*, some of them become particularly good and their skill is recognized by other people. As we will see, the skill of carving *nuchu* is both connected to becoming an old man, a grandfather (*tata*) and it goes along with the ability to make other objects and tools relevant in everyday life.

Soon after I started my fieldwork people suggested that I visit Eladio Pérez, a Kuna man in his late sixties, who was a skilled wood carver and a basket weaver. Eladio has a large family and is the grandfather of so many children that I could never count how many. People often commented that he had been a hard worker in his youth and still he

[76] Interestingly 'pole', 'stick' and 'trunk' were translated in Spanish by the Kuna with the same word 'palo'. Nordenskiöld reports that "The Cuna Indians call them *suar nuchukana* or *suar mimmikana*" (1938: 344).

was active in minor agricultural and fishing works. I went to Eladio's home many times to meet him only to find out that he had gone fishing shrimps in the river, or that he was busy helping a friend to repair his canoe, or he had gone to the gathering house to attend a meeting with other village elders. For his unstoppable working attitude he gained the Spanish nickname of 'hora zero', literally 'no time'.

I remember meeting him, during the afternoon, when he would be either carving a *nuchu* or weaving a basket. In both activities he was considered particularly skilled and many people would visit him asking if he could carve a *nuchu* for them. Normally he would be paid few dollars for this[77]. He also knew how to prepare some medicines and how to perform brief chants, *ina unaet* (literally 'to counsel the medicine'). Beside he was also one of the *arkar* ('spokesman') of the village, a person chosen for his knowledge of mythic chants, able to interpret them for the wider audience[78].

An *arkar* must be able to speak for up to half an hour, picking up the topics of the chant just sung by the *sayla* and connecting them to the everyday life of men and women. Such discourses are improvised and, as I often heard, Kuna people are severe critics of both *saylakan* an *arkarkan* and of their respective abilities to sing and to speak. Most of all an *arkar* should not bore listeners by being repetitive and giving the impression he does not know what to say. He has to address the gathering with interesting topics and keep the attention alive, as many people (especially during the night reunions of men) fall asleep during the singing of the chant. His task is 'to counsel' (*unaet*) people, communicating moral rightness and giving them the enthusiasm to think of a new day of work ahead.

If the most important role for a father is that of working hard in the gardens and in fishing to provide food for his children. The role of a grandfather is that of 'counselling' (*unaet*) his grandchildren and his sons-in-law. Eladio is a good example of a man who has been a father (*papa*), a man who has worked hard at nurturing and taking care of his kinspeople, especially his children who represent the future generations. When he became a grandfather (*tata*), whose wisdom of life made him able both to guide and

[77] The currency in Panamá is the balboa; it is equated to the U.S. dollar and there are only coins in balboa. Therefore money (*mani*, in Kuna!) only circulates as American dollars.
[78] Chants from the mythic tradition are sung by *saylakan* ('village chiefs'), but are not comprehensible to all people, especially younger women and men because of the often metaphorical language. The task of the *arkar* is 'to interpret' (*otuloket*) the chants, making their meaning manifest to most. Often this task is freely accomplished by focusing on some aspects of the chant and relating it to contemporary events or contingencies (for an example of a chant and its interpretation see Howe, 2002 [1986]: 31-50)

help the younger generations and to be in the position of being able to deal with the ancestral entities of forest trees, thus making *nuchu*. Together with the grandmother, he is the centre of the family.

As the Kuna put it, grandparents are like the pillars of the house (*puar*), providing stability to the whole structure. Together they help the younger members of the household to develop their own creative capacities. When major work need to be carried out in the fields, like cutting and burning trees and sowing, the brothers-in-law work together under the guidance of their father-in-law. He is the one who directs the work, who decides when to take a break to rest and drink some *inna*, 'chicha'.

'To give advice' (*unaet*) is a core aspect in the Kuna lived world[79]. It entails the sharing of social values and the transmission of knowledge from the elders to young people. Therefore 'talking a lot' (*kati sunmakke*) is a good quality for old men, who mainly stay in the house and speak to their young kinspeople. Whereas young men are not expected to talk a lot and their attitude is appreciated rather when it is silent, showing that they are good listeners.

Giving advice is not merely a verbal communication, but it has to do with the transmission of inner and intimate properties from old men to young men. Old people transmit their *purpa*[80] to younger people, which strengthens the potential for the personal development of young people. Through their everyday speaking grandfathers transmit their knowledge and skills to younger kinsmen. Thus they enable young men to grow up into wise and responsible adults.

Purpa is thus not only something that is transmitted through speaking (*kaia purpa*, the '*purpa* of the mouth') and giving advice that teaches what to do and how to behave. *Purpa* is also what people acquire from their elders by being close to them, watching them and listening to their voice. Young people are constantly seeking to increase and strengthen their *purpa*, because having a strong *purpa* is what enables them to have many children and to work hard. Plant medicines are regularly used from childhood to 'strengthen one's *purpa*' (*purpa kannoket*). These are prepared by a botanic specialist,

[79] In his extensive study on Kuna language and 'ways of speaking' Sherzer also deals with "[…] the frequent use of verbal advice as both counsel before the action and punishment after one" (2001 [1983]: 9).

[80] For the meaning attached to this world see note five in chapter two. In its most general meaning of 'soul' and 'image' of a person, a *purpa* of a person is composed by multiple *purpakana* situated in various parts of the body, for example in the hair, fingernails, eyes, etc. Similar concepts reflecting the idea of an immaterial double, detachable from the body in dreams and after death, is widespread in South America: like, for example, *yuxin* for the Cashinahua (see Lagrou, 1998); *wakan* for the Achuar (Taylor, 1996); *akua* for the Kalapalo (Basso, 1987b).

who knows plant composition and the chants that activate their effectiveness (as Eladio did). It is therefore through closeness to old people and through the use of plant medicines that young people build up their *purpa*.

The ability to speak profusely and mindfully, namely through the form of 'counselling' (*unaet*), is an important quality of Kuna grandfathers. 'Talking a lot' entails the transmission of an old man's *purpa* to younger men and it is the transformation of the physical strength that a man has when he is younger. Therefore as working in the gardens and fishing provides food for young children, giving advice to them provides them with moral guidance and a stronger *purpa*. 'Talking a lot' means therefore that a grandfather is an active man, dutiful towards his kinspeople and whose skills have transformed into more sophisticated ones able to cope with the supernatural forces immanent in the world.

When a Kuna man carves a *nuchu* he transmits his *purpa* to the *nuchu* that he is making. Therefore if the man is one who 'talks a lot', so it will be with the *nuchu* he carves. As Beatriz told me, one of her *nuchu* was particularly powerful and an eloquent speaker. This, she said, was because the man who carved it was a wise man and a botanic specialist, meaning indeed that he was a good speaker. She also meant another thing by mentioning that the man was from Paya; namely she was referring to the fact that the Kuna living on the islands perceive the Kuna living in the Darién forest as more skilled in ritual knowledge: 'they know more secrets'[81]. Moreover living in the forest means that one can easily find the big trees, which supply the wood used for carving *nuchu*. Many of these trees are in fact said by the Kuna from Okopsukkun to be difficult to encounter near the coastline.

The quality of 'talking a lot' is an important one for *nuchu* to have. On one hand, when a person becomes ill, one of his or her *nuchukana* (the one that is known to be more loquacious) is brought to a seer (*nele*), who keeps it for some days in order to meet it in dreams. The seer then asks the *nuchu* about the nature of the illness that has affected the ill person and sometimes might even ask which medicine is appropriate.

[81] This sentence can refer to two issues. One is the memory that the Kuna in Okopsukkun have of their ancestors living in the forest, who were said to be powerful shamans and skilled in many cultural activities. The other is that often Kuna specialists learn 'secrets' ('secretos' in Spanish) from the Emberá who also live in the Darién, on the Pacific side of Panamá. Chapin has noted this issue (1983: 551-554) but dismissed it as a 'borrowing'. I find it rather a form of acquiring knowledge from an external social source, completely compatible with Kuna shamanism. The knower of 'secretos' is therefore one who managed to venture into another social world and returned with something only he knows.

Not all *nuchukana* are keen to reveal the real nature of the illness at the first attempt of the *nele*, and not all *nuchukana* are easy to interrogate, as they refuse to answer to the questions. On the other hand seers have their own personal *nuchukana,* which they consult to learn how to recognize various types of illnesses. Even though some seers are able to 'see' the illnesses alone, they still refer to their *nuchukana* for particular advice. Much of the seers' capacity of 'seeing' illnesses in the patient's body depends on the relationship they have with their *nuchu* auxiliaries. It is therefore important that *nuchukana* are loquacious speakers in order to reveal to seers both the causes and the remedies of illnesses.

Nuchukana are thus an essential source of protection for Kuna people. They protect households against the penetrations of demons, they help seers to discover the causes of illnesses and not least they are the auxiliary spirits of ritual chanters (*api sua*). Moreover, *nuchukana* are also the auxiliary spirits of ritual chanters (*api sua*), who direct them through their curing songs to retrieve the souls of ill persons. The success of this task depends on two factors: the ability of the chanter to sing for a long time, remembering the complex structure of the chant, and the ability of his *nuchukana* to trick evil animal spirits.

It is significant to note that through its verbal skill the *ukkurwala* (balsa tree) is able to trick the chief of animals, convincing it to reveal where the stolen human soul is kept. It is also through its verbal skill, that the balsa tree is able to direct the other tree entities in the battlefield against evil spirits. *Ukkurwala* is the chief of the trees because of its ability of 'giving advice', much like Kuna village chiefs[82]. While Kuna ritual chanters, beside being skilled in memorizing and performing long chants, they have to know the *purpa* of the chants. In this case *purpa* is translated in Spanish as 'secreto' ('secret') and it is a short story, repeated mentally by the chanter. Differently from the chant itself, this is in normal everyday language and comprehensible to non specialists[83]. The *purpa* of a chant describes the birth of the ancestral being to which the chant is addressed. Therefore the chanter, repeating silently the *purpa* is able to establish a partner relationship with his spirit helpers and to ask them to retrieve the stolen soul.

Speaking, especially in the form of 'giving advice' (*unaet*), is creating, it is giving *purpa*. If we assume this, we can also see how the skill of Kuna carvers is not just a

[82] See Howe, 1977: 145-149 for an analysis of tree metaphors referring to Kuna village chiefs.
[83] See Severi, 2000: 143-144 for a translation of the 'secret' of the *nia ikar* ('the way of *nia*'), which narrates the birth of the balsa tree.

manual skill, but it is socially valued as the ability of transmitting *purpa*. Given that for the Kuna *purpa* is also semen, the vital force that transmits life, *unaet* is a transformation of young men's fertility. Old Kuna men are able to control their *purpa*, better than young men, and this ability makes them able to transmit their *purpa* through their voice (singing and speaking), and their actions. Moreover, through their speech, old Kuna men transmit force both to human beings and to other species, such as plants and trees. The acquisition of the skill of speech is thus to be intended as hierarchically superior to other men's skills and has to be regarded as a purely creative capacity[84].

Therefore both young and old men have to learn to manage the accumulation and transmission of their *purpa*. Young adult men, take plant medicines to strengthen their *purpa* in order to be strong workers. Moreover when a young man takes his *purpa* strengthening medicine, people often comment laughing that for a while he will not leave his wife to sleep. Such comments point to the fact that a strong *purpa* makes a person more willing to make love and more fertile. It is therefore through the transmission of their *purpa* to their wives that young men become fathers. Together the woman's *purpa* and the man's *purpa* contribute to the formation of babies. When a couple does not have children or have only a few, both the man and the woman have to take medicines in order to strengthen their *purpa* and sometimes speculations are made by older kinspeople about whether it is the man or the woman who is weakest (*nollokua*).

When a man gets older, his workload diminishes as does his sexual activity. It is therefore commonly held that he would lose less *purpa* and need to take fewer medicines than younger men in order to increase it[85]. As I have shown above, old men continue to transmit their *purpa,* but in a transformed way, namely through talking and giving advice to younger men. The transmission of *purpa* shifts from a predominantly physical level to the verbal level, as if the speech would be the substitute for both sex and work.

Kuna grandfathers start dedicating most of their time to ritual activities, such as learning curing chants or myths, carving *nuchu*, learning medicines. Even though still active in minor productive work, Eladio delegated the 'hard jobs' to his sons-in-law,

[84] In this regard it is interesting to compare the Kalapalo theory of speech and sound, the latter being the manifestation of the hyperanimacy of powerful beings (Basso, 1985: 69-71).
[85] It is interesting to note that the Ecuadorian Achuar associate sexual activity with the weakening of the semen's force. For this reason a man preparing curare poison must refrain from sex, in order not to cause a dilution of the poison (Taylor, 1998: 321).

while he devoted himself to 'finer' activities. As most old men do, he used to sit in a corner of the house or on the patio, while he was carrying on his activities and every once in a while scolding his grandchildren for misbehaving. He did not like walking around the village, as he told me, visiting friends or going to the local small shops ('tiendas'), hanging around and drinking cold beverages, as younger men do. If he wants to meet his peers he goes to the gathering house and spends some time chatting and smoking his pipe.

Moreover, old men are less prone to indulge in sexual adventures, which would cause their *purpa* to weaken. They are *serreti*, which means 'old' but also 'strong' and 'hard'. They are strong and steady, like old trees. *Sappin tummakana*, 'big trees', is what the elders of the village are generally called. Old men normally sit in the first rows of benches from the centre of the gathering house, close to *saylakan* (chiefs) and *arkarkan* (spokesmen). Among them there is the knower of curing chants (*apsoketi*, or *api sua*), botanic specialists (*ina tuleti*), chanters for puberty rituals (*kantur*), experienced hunters and knowers of the forest, and basket weavers. Contrarily, young men are called *sappinkana* (sing. *sappinkwa*), meaning that they have just reached puberty, *sappileke*, 'sprouting'[86].

Nonetheless one has to bear in mind that old Kuna men do not stop being fertile, but rather they continue engaging in seductive games and courtship. What they do is change the object of their seduction, turning their attentions to the female entities of plants and trees. Botanic specialists, for instance, treat plant medicines and trees as sexual partners. They perfume their bodies with sweet *pisep* (*Ocimum micranthum*) and paint their cheeks with *makep* (*Bixa orellana*) before going to the forest to collect medicines. They also avoid sleeping with their wife the night before, so as not to make the plant entities jealous. Then, when they are back, they sing to the collected plants to gently ask their help in the curing process. In their singing (*ina unaet*. 'to counsel the medicine'), they refer to the medicinal plants in general as *ina puntorkana* ('medicine girls'), and the words directed to these plants indicate their beauty and power.

[86] Similar to the Kuna, in Kalapalo cosmovision, as described by Ellen Basso, the first people to appear on the earth were trees, "(…) so our lives – as the nephew of the leader explained to the anthropologist – begin in childhood like resilient sprouts; we grow towards 'firmness', 'ripening', and strength in adulthood; and end with an increasing 'over-ripeness' and decay during old age" (Basso, 1987a: 10). Another time metaphor that makes reference to the trees growing is that associated to the spatial organization of clans in the village of the Panará from Central Brasil, where the names of two clans make reference to the base and the leaf of the buriti palm (Ewart, 2003).

For this reason I deal with the carving of *nuchukana* as a specialised activity, which entails the personal skill as well as the life experience of old Kuna men. This activity is normally separated from that of collecting and preparing medicines. Although some botanic specialists and ritual chanters are also able to carve *nuchukana*, there are men such as Eladio, whose skill in carving *nuchu* and other wooden objects is considered their predominant quality. This leads me to make two remarks. First, as a Kuna man once told me, everyone has his own *ikar* ('path'). Some people want to learn ritual chants, some want to learn medicines, other are better at fishing, and so on. It is out of question for Kuna people do things forcedly and against one's will. As Overing (1996) has pointed out, for Amazonian people personal autonomy is highly valued, and is at the core of their 'sense of community'. Confirming this idea, the Kuna also stress that every individual is born with a particular gift, which is one's own responsibility to develop during one's life.

Second, there is a difference between skill and specialization when referring to indigenous knowledge of visual artefacts. Carving *nuchukana* is an activity that requires the specialization of an old man, who has observed the activity of other men during his youth and has interiorized their knowledge. He thus becomes able to do his own carving as the manifestation of his own knowledge. As Gow argued in respect of the skill of 'painting with designs' of Piro women, there is a difference between specialist knowledge and memory. "This is the process by which hidden bodily-interior knowledge is manifested outside the body as *yimaka*, 'teaching'. By imitating this process, a woman learning how to paint with designs comes to 'hold designs in her head': she becomes a creator of designs" (Gow, 1999: 241).

Trees

Some points need to be made clear in order to proceed with the description of *nuchu* carving. In this section I will describe how Kuna people think of trees. The wood of the tree is the material used for carving *nuchu* and it is said to carry over the property of the tree to the finished artefact. Both the hardness of the wood and its supernatural qualities are acknowledged by Kuna people when it comes to making *nuchu*. Combined with the carver's capacity to give shape and to pass to *nuchu* his verbal skills, the wood is also an essential part of *nuchu*.

The difference between forest and edible plants consists in the fact that the former are said to be persons (*tulemar*) by the Kuna, while the latter are not and are food for people. The former category comprises most of the high, hard wooded, tropical trees, with straight vertical trunks, which stand out in the dense vegetation, as other plants and vines. These trees and vines are mostly used for preparing medicines and for carving *nuchukana*, as we will see below. Moreover, almost all these trees and plants have not been planted by people but they grow on their own in the forest. Some of them, such as the balsa tree, grow quite rapidly in fallow land; another exception is the cacao tree, which is planted by people. The other trees grow only on uncultivated land, deeper inland and on the hills of the San Blas range. People familiar with tropical rainforest will be acquainted with such 'emergents', with an average height of around 40 m. or more, and with straight vertical trunks.

Forest trees are important for Kuna people as they were the first inhabitants of the world. A particular group of trees are considered by the Kuna to have been the first inhabitant of the earth. They were the Father's boys (see myth in the previous chapter). These trees are the ancient trees (*sappi serrekana*) and possess the ancestral knowledge of the creation of the world. They saw the birth off all its beings; they witnessed the arrival of Nia on his canoe and the appearance of *ponikana*, evil and monstrous entities. They know, as the myth goes, the transformation and behaviour of evil entities. Therefore Kuna people seek the help of these trees to fight against evil entities that cause illnesses. On one hand botanic specialists know how to use the bark, the sap and the roots of these trees for preparing medicines. On the other, some old Kuna men are able to carve statues out of the wood of these trees to make *nuchu*, the auxiliary spirits of ritual chanters and seers and protectors of houses.

Each of these trees is associated with one of the boys named by Pap Tummat at the end of the myth, 'The young men of the Father' (see underlined names in table 4). Unfortunately I could not identify all trees. Moreover sometimes the list of ancient trees was explained to consist of twelve species instead of eight[87]. Listed below are the Kuna names of these trees, and the Spanish, English (only for some) and Latin names of those

[87] What seems interesting is that both eight and twelve are multiples of four, which seems the basic number for the Kuna. For example each boy received four names by the Great Father; when botanic specialists cut tree bark, they take pieces from the four sides of the trunk; the supernatural domain is located in the fourth layer under the world (*pillipakke*).

that I could identify. The ritual name is the one specialists use to refer to supernatural entities of trees when singing ritual chants and it is a person's name (*tule nuka*)[88].

Table 4 - Trees

Ritual name	Current name	Panamanian Spanish	Latin	English
Olowainanele	Muksuwala			
Olokurkinakuilotule	Soilawala	Cativo	*Prioria copaifera*	
Olokurkinatirpitule	Sichitwala or Sapturwala	Jagua	*Genipa americana*	Genipa
Olokurkinasuitakiñalinele	Serupwala			
Olokurkinaekekiñalinele	Suurwala		*Ficus* sp.	Wild fig
Oloopanappinele	Mulasappi			
Olomekekiñalinele	Katepwala			
Olotinkunappinele	Tinkuwala			
	Ikwawala	Almendro	*Dipteryx panamensis*	
	Kapurwala	Caoba?	*Fam. Meliaceae*	
Olokunipippinele	Ukkurwala	Balsa	*Ochroma pyramidale*	Balsa
Olonekakiñappinele	Nekawala			
Olotukkiñalinele	Mummutwala			
	Siawala	Cacao	*Theobroma cacao*	Cacao
Oloinuilipippinele	Masarwala	Caña brava	*Gynerium sagitatum*	Wild cane
Olokurkinakiappinele	Nipar			
Olokurkinkilamakanele	Naiwar		*Carludovica drudei*	

[88] The ritual name is formed by the prefix *olo* ('gold') and the suffix *nele* ('seer'), with a name describing some characteristics of the plant in the middle. For instance in the name *Olokurkinkilamakkanele* (*Carludovica drudei*) *kurkin* ('hat') indicates the palm-like leaf of this plant; *kila* ('leg') refers to the stem and together with the verb *makka* (*kilamakka*) indicate the stems that stand together in groups, like many people standing together.

A Kuna man, observing one of these trees once remarked: "*We sappi serreti kuichi sii*", "That old tree stands straight you see." The two adjectives used in the sentence are also used to refer to human beings, especially old people. *Kuichi sii*, 'standing', describes the vertical, upright position of a man or a woman when they are doing something, such as speaking or looking at something. It is an active posture and it expresses both a person's will, even if it lacks movement, and moral posture. Normally when men and women they speak publicly in the gathering house (*onmaket neka*) they stand still, with their arms against the body and utter their speech controlling the force of their voice. People who speak too loudly or gesticulate are not considered good speakers.

Kuichi sunmakket, 'to speak standing', is considered the appropriate way of speaking in public and it conveys the moral authority of the speaker[89]. Old men are normally in the position of being good speakers and able to control both their voice and their gestures. They are also considered able to control their behaviour better than younger people and, most importantly they do not 'wander around' (*pirpirmakket*) in the village and do not go from one house to another. They remain in their home most of the time, only leaving late in the afternoon to go to the gathering house.

Serreti means both 'old' and 'strong'. When people told me about old Kuna people, their ancestors living in the forest, they referred to them as their grandfathers (*tatkan*), who were hard workers, possessed powerful knowledge and had been strong fighters both against Spaniards and other indigenous people[90]. Kuna people often told me: "*Anmar tatkan serret kusa*", "Our grandfathers were strong." Another expression means that a person has become old, *serret kuti*. This means that for example a man does not work any more in his gardens and, if he goes to the forest, he does not walk too far inland. On one occasion I decided to ask a botanic specialist (*ina tuleti*) to prepare a special medicine intended to improve my energy. This kind of medicine is taken by men and women during their life regularly at intervals over years in order to 'reinforce their blood' (*aplis kannoket*). I did it because in some way I was trying to impress my Kuna friends, showing them that I was integrating well into their way of life. But once I started taking the medicine I had asked for, a friend commented that the medicine would

[89] See Sherzer (2001 [1983]: 56-60, 98-99) for a description of the speaking abilities of Kuna chiefs, and Howe (2002 [1986]: 84-86) about morality and leadership.
[90] Some colonial chronicles, while describing the bellicosity of Kuna Indians against Spaniards, suggest that the Kuna also used to prey against the Cueva (Salcedo Requejo, 1908 [1640]: 115-130). More recent studies show how the Emberá from the Darién consider the Kuna to be dangerous enemies (Wassén, 1955: 61-64; Howe, 1998: 218).

have only a weak effect, because the man was already old (*seret kusa*) and he only collected those medicinal plants growing closest to the coast. My friend added that one must attend middle-age specialists, who walk deep into the forest, hours away from the coast, in order to get the best and most effective medicinal plants.

I find this statement is equally interesting for both the status of old men in Kuna society and for the idea Kuna people have of the forest, which represents a space of power and alterity. The older a man becomes the more he will stay at home, carving *nuchukana* or other wooden objects, weaving baskets or preparing medicines with the plants gathered by a younger kinsman or an apprentice. Kuna people consider old men's activities highly relevant and do not think at all that they are less important than younger men's productive activities. They seem rather to be the transformation of people's skills when they become older. When they do not dedicate time to preparing medicines or carving objects or basketry, old men go to the gathering house and have long conversations with their friends, lying in hammocks and smoking pipes or cigarettes.

Strength and stillness are thus characteristics of old age in people and are also associated with some trees, the ancestral trees of the forest, the ones that retain the knowledge of the young men of the Father. Following the myth presented in the previous chapter, some trees (as shown in the table above) are associated with the eight heroes sent by Great Father to the earth, while the others are still related to them and have their own characteristics. Many times these other trees and plants were told to be *e sortamala*, 'their companions', the ones that help the powerful trees in the fight against evil spirits. For instance, *naiwar* and *nipar* are reeds; the canes are used to build small crosses (*nakrusmar*) used in rituals besides *nuchu* statues.

The hard wood of these ancestral trees is used for carving *nuchu*, which retain the qualities of the wood that they are made from. For instance *mummutwala* (the 'drunken pole') is said to be like drunk man, behaving violently and reacting with rage. I was told that *mummutwala*, when meeting demons or evil spirits, does not wait a moment but directly strikes them. He does not speak, but strikes. *Kapurwala*, is related to the smaller plant *kapur* ('Spanish pepper'). The *nuchu* made of this wood have the secret weapon of intoxicating their supernatural enemies by lifting their hat, provoking the

burning smoke characteristic of when one burns the small fruits[91]. Moreover trees such as *nekawala*, *mucsuwala*, *soilawala*, *tinkuwala* are also used to make canoes. The hard wood and straight trunk are considered particularly good for this purpose. It also appears, although I have less precise data on this point, that these trees are used for making house pillars, as the name *nekawala*, *neka* ('house') would suggest.

In light of what has been said above, two cases seem to stand out as exceptions, that of the balsa tree (*ukkurwala*) and that of the cacao tree (*siawala*). The first is renown for its light weight, soft wood and it is a tree that grows quite quickly on land where trees have been cut and burned. The balsa wood is also paler than that of other trees. Beside *nuchu,* due to its easy-to-carve wood, it is used for making toys for children and for making sticks placed across one shoulder to balance the weight of produce that men transport. The cacao tree seems to be the only wood used for making *nuchu* that is planted by people. Moreover the tree is not as tall as the other trees (between 4 and 8 m.) and it is not used for other purposes. While the fruits of cacao are dried in the sun and used in most curing rituals. Burning cacao beans is meant to give power to the *kurkin* ('brain', 'intelligence') of both seers and of *nuchu*, thus improving their capacity to see and act in the supernatural world.

Learning to carve

When speaking with old Kuna men about their skill in carving *nuchukana*, conversation often turned to another, evidently related, issue: the making of canoes. The skill of making canoes was often associated with that of carving *nuchu*. As happened on many occasions, when I asked a man about his life experience and how he came to learn about carving, the man would start by telling me about how he learned to make canoes when he was younger. Also when other people speak about a man skilled in carving *nuchu* they often refer to his general ability in woodcarving, and sometimes also in building houses and weaving baskets, almost suggesting that these activities are related to each other. Another comment, I sometimes heard, was that a man must be born with the gift to make such things.

[91] In the text of the curing chant performed by the specialist this moment is vividly described. For an English translation of the *kapur ikar*, the 'way of the Spanish Pepper', see Chapin (1983, 483-511).

When I asked Eladio how he learned to make canoes, he told me that he learned by himself. God gave him this gift. When he was a boy he used to make small wooden boats through observing the yachts moored by foreigners off the island. He also observed adult men making canoes and he slowly became able to imitate them. Then he became very good at making canoes and many people paid him for this work. Now he is too old and no longer makes canoes. Sometimes, if he is asked, he might repair a canoe. Instead he carves *nuchukana* and many people ask him to make a *nuchu* for them. They come and they ask him for it, so he asks what type of wood they want and he goes to the forest, cuts the log and then carves the *nuchu*. Once the *nuchu* is completed it is the task of the person who asked for it to bring it to an *api sua*, who knows the chant 'to give life to' (*otuloket*)[92] the *nuchu*.

Another story is that of Miki Smith, a man in his eighties and a renowned carver in Okopsukkun. Although limited by not being able to go to the forest any more, due his age and an aching knee, everyday Miki sat on his stool on the house patio and carved wooden objects, such as *nuchukana*, small canoes (*ur pippi*) used in death ceremonies, wooden pestles (*orsar*), and other utensils. His daughters used to reproach him almost daily, suggesting that he should rest more in the hammock so he did not get worn out by so much work. This made him upset and he would respond angrily continuing his activity, stopping only for a quick lunch. As I read from my fieldnotes, once he told me about his youth:

> Miki had a teacher ('maestro' in Spanish) who taught him how to make canoes. His name was Miguel Chiari. They used to make canoes together. They made medium and big sized canoes, which they sold in the Cartí area (Western part of the San Blas archipelago). His teacher told him to observe while he worked, then he gave him the tools and made him practice. In the meantime the teacher corrected him. Once, while he was making a canoe alone, two older men came by and told him that his canoe was not good. He felt shame inside, because they were more expert than he. Then he made the canoe again and they gave him the 'diploma'.
>
> When his teacher was young, his father gave him, as a medicine, the heart of an anteater (*ippureket*) to eat. It is said that this animal was one of the first creatures to

[92] The verb *otuloket* derives from the noun *tula* ('alive') and the prefix *o-*, which turns intransitive verbs into transitive form. Therefore, I translate it here, along with Howe (1977: 147), as 'to give life to'.

learn secrets and medicines[93]. But his teacher got seriously ill and his father had to go to Caiman (a Kuna village on the Urabá Gulf in Colombia) to learn the medicine to cure him. Once he recovered he learned how to work, he built his house alone, he learned to make canoes and other things.

Two motives are present in both Eladio's and Miki's narrative about their learning experience and in the story about Miki's teacher. One is the learning through imitation; the other is the learning as the result of an illness. The capacity to watch (*attaket*) and to reproduce an object is considered a skill by the Kuna. People who are born with such a form of intelligence (*kurkin*), are able to learn how to carve, make canoes and other objects. Imitating entails the capacity to observe someone else working and then doing the same thing.

The emphasis on imitation is applied also to the female activity of sewing *mola* blouses, where reverse-appliqué designs are transmitted from one woman to another via imitation. Creating a beautiful *mola* design, as with making a good canoe, entails being able to imitate another design or another canoe[94]. This act is not thought of as copying, as we might be tempted to interpret it; rather it is thought of as an act of making something anew, showing the personal skill and the specialization of the maker (see above). In the process of making, it is therefore crucial to observe, to watch. This enables the maker to transform the mental image into an artefact. The skill to make canoes, sew *mola*, carve *nuchu* and make baskets, points thus to another skill, that of being able 'to see'[95].

This point opens the way to the second motive, present in Miki's story; namely that of his teacher's illness. Eating the heart of an anteater is indeed a very dangerous thing to do, as all Kuna people would agree. As we have seen in the previous chapter, anteaters are great *nelekan* and are among the auxiliary spirits of *nelekan* themselves. Generally eating animal medicines is a dangerous process, which in most cases turns the

[93] Here Miki was referring to the giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*). Interestingly enough, in Piro mythology the anteater is the master of canoe making (Gow, 2001: 104-105).
[94] I have dwelt on more details on the cognitive implications of *mola* making in my undergraduate thesis (Fortis, 2002), suggesting that there are various ways in which a Kuna woman makes her own *mola*, and imitation is just one of them. That was an interesting hypothesis, which now needs to be reformulated, in the light of new data from my Ph.D. fieldwork research.
[95] The Kuna distinguish between 'to see', *takked*, and 'to watch', 'to observe', *attaket*. While the 'ability to see', the 'vision', the 'sight', are called *tala*. A similar distinction, related to the acquisition of knowledge in dreams, is noted by Basso (1987b: 94).

eater into a mad person, dangerous to other people. I heard many stories on this subject and all were pointing to the risk that eating animal medicines entails (cf. Nordeskiöld, 1938: 341).

Eating the body part of such animals is a way of getting its ancestral knowledge, but it is also a rather foolish way of doing it. It is in fact only born seers (*nelekan*) who are able, through many initiation rituals (as we will see in chapter seven), to acquire the 'capacity to see' (*tala*) and to learn from ancestral animal entities. A person who is not born a *nele* will not be able to learn how to master the dangerous knowledge of animals and will be poisoned. A similar case occurred in the island of Aylikanti, where a man some years ago suffered from the illness of Nia (see previous chapter). As often happens, this illness is incurable and is considered a threat to other people as well. Fellow villagers feared the man would become a 'killer of people' (*kia takaler*)[96], and he was condemned to drink a poisonous plant decoction (*ina nusu*). But surprisingly he survived and also recovered from the illness. Moreover, since that experience, he became able to carve wooden objects. He was very good at making tables, chairs and stools and he constantly invented new forms. People told me that he could see these things in his dreams.

These stories suggest that there are various levels, or different ways, of learning to make artefacts. In all these ways it is important to be able 'to see things' (*inmar takket*) before making them, either in dreams or waking life. The capacity to see seems in these cases to go beyond the normal act of seeing, but points to the capacity that some people have to grasp the inner nature of things with their own sight, both in waking life and in dreams. It is, therefore, a more profound form of seeing, which entails a higher grade of perception and probably also the participation of other senses. Moreover, we can see a relation between the anteater, which is a shaman itself, and its ability to pass to humans the 'capacity to see', which is eminently a shamanic skill. For this reason, the ability to carve, which entails the ability to see, has to be considered a specialist knowledge, which can be acquired either through learning from other people or from contacts with animal entities.

Kuna people use the expression *inmar kaet* ('to grasp things') when referring to the capacity to learn. This applies both to learning long ritual chants, foreign languages or to learn things in dreams. It is also interesting to reflect more upon how the learning in

[96] I was told by a Kuna specialist that the noun *kia takaler* derives from the verb *kintakket*, 'to kill', which interestingly also contains the verb *takked*, 'to see'.

dreams occurs, as the material described above points to visual experiences. This is also supported by the learning experience of Kuna seers, as I will describe in detail in the next chapters.

Eventually the learning narrations above suggest a connection between various activities, such as making canoes, carving *nuchu*, building houses, making stools and other objects, all having in common the act of 'giving shape' to something. Below I will suggest that 'giving shape' is the skill that actually links all these different activities together and that carving a *nuchu* is its highest manifestation.

Giving shape

'To carve a *nuchu*' is said in Kuna *nuchu sopet*. The verb *sopet* is also used for a number of different activities such as 'carving a stool', *kan sopet*; 'making a canoe', *ur sopet*; 'weaving a basket', *sile sopet*; 'weaving hammocks', *kachi sopet*; 'moulding a clay brazier', *sianar sopet*; 'preparing fermented drink', *inna sopet* ('chicha' in Spanish, the drink prepared by fermenting sugar cane juice with ground maize); 'building a house', *ney sopet*, and 'making babies', *koe sopet*[97]. What these meanings have in common is that they all refer to the act of 'giving shape' to something.

As it is interestingly pointed out by Lagrou (1996: 223-224) for the Cashinahua, the uterus is the place were substance is transformed into fixed form. Furthermore the Cashinahua use the verb *xankeinkiki*, 'weaving designs', which bears resemblances to the word *xankin*, 'uterus'. Shapes for the Kuna may be created in different ways: by carving out wood, as in the case of canoes, stools, *nuchu* and other wooden objects; by moulding and cooking the clay; by creating a structure using different materials, as in the case of building a house; or through the condensation of bodily liquids, as for the formation of foetuses. I will therefore use the verb carving in this work with the specific meanings that the Kuna give to this activity, which is that of 'giving shape' to wooden logs.

Another term, which I sometimes heard used in the context of *nuchu* carving, was *opiñe*, 'to transform', 'to change' (from the intransitive form *piñe*). This more generic term also applies to supernatural transformations, meaning to change one's shape into

[97] In the case of making babies, as it will be noted below, it is not clear if it is the mother who is said to 'shape the baby', or *muu* the 'spiritual grandmother'. This would be the only case in which the verb *sopet* is not directly attached to a human agency.

another. This is what Great Father did (see myth in previous chapter) when he sent the eight boys to the earth to assist in the creation, 'to transform them' (*masmala opiñali*) into powerful beings. It is therefore important to bear in mind that for the Kuna 'giving shape' is also 'transforming'. Thus I suggest, as with all processes of transformation, the act of carving is delicate and, even thought it does not have many restrictions as with other rituals, must be performed with complete awareness and follow ordered, meaningful steps, which I explain below.

Kuna people hold in high value the process of 'giving shape'. They always regard a finished object very attentively, evaluating aspects such as the balance of proportions within the overall structure, the material used, and small details that may reveal the future duration of the object. The Kuna are also very critical of the work carried out by others and they always note the imperfections that may flaw a new object. For example the edges of a canoe must be neither too thin nor too thick, and the thickness must be consistent. The prow (*asu*, literally the 'nose') must not be too long compared with the stern (*sor*, literally the 'bum'), and the length must be proportionate to the width. If the finished canoe is 'well done' (*nuet imaysa*) it will also be one that will last for a long time and will be carried easily.

Men who are able to weave beautiful baskets, to make canoes, or to carve wooden objects are said to be intelligent (*kurkin nikka*). They are able to 'transform' things, 'to give shape' to objects[98]. The capacity of 'giving shape' is not something that one can just learn. One must been born with such a gift, as Eladio pointed out, and he must have developed his skills through the thorough observation of other older men's activities or, in particular cases, through a personal moment of crisis and suffering. This creative intelligence and the transformational capacity attached to it are highly valued by Kuna people. Expert canoe makers have the same status as ritual specialists. As Beatriz said, besides being a ritual specialist, the man from Paya 'knows also how to make canoes and to weave baskets'.

[98] On one occasion *sopet* was translated in Spanish by a Kuna man as 'sacar la forma' ('to bring out/to extract the shape'). This would contrast with my translation, where I use 'to give' and not 'to bring out'. This opposition between 'adding' and 'subtracting' in visual arts has been taken seriously in ethnography by Goldman in his analysis of candomblé initiation in Bahia. He notes that in Afro-Brazilian ontology it is more profitable to think in terms of subtraction rather than of addition, to understand the process of construction of the person (Goldman, 2007).

The making of a *nuchu* starts in the forest, where the man cuts a branch or a root from a tree, and ends in the house, where he completes the carving. It can be the same man who cuts the wood and then carves the *nuchu*, or it may be two different men. Often, in fact, a man cuts a log and gives it to a carver, asking if he can make a *nuchu* for him, '*sunna pe an-ka nuchu sope?*' Sometimes old men ask younger men, who are heading toward the forest, to cut a branch for them from a particular tree, from which they will make a new *nuchu*.

The first thing that a man does in the forest is choose the tree. Ritual specialists know the properties of different trees and also which ones have to be treated with particular respect. I was often told that it is risky to carve a *nuchu* from the wood of *mumutwala*. One should visit the tree four times before cutting one of its roots, singing brief chants aimed to advise the tree spirit. Otherwise the spirit will get upset and attack the carver. Once a Kuna friend told me that he had carved a *mumutwala*, but then, one day when he was paddling his canoe he suddenly felt really bad and when he went back home he fell ill for some days. He told me that it was the spirit of the tree that took revenge and almost killed him.

Then a man cuts a root or a branch from the tree. I had the opportunity to assist directly in this stage: the men cut a root from an enormous *ikwawala* (Dipteryx panamensis), as branches were evidently too far up to reach. Then he instantaneously marked a part of the log with his machete. When he realized that I was watching him with the deepest curiosity he told me: 'It seems that I'm doing it for fun, doesn't it?' Later on Eladio explained to me that one must know, while carving, which part of the branch or root was closer to the trunk and which side was looking toward the direction where the sun rises (east), when it was still attached to the tree. For this reason when a man cuts a branch from a tree right away he makes an incision in correspondence to the part of the log which was closer to the trunk and which was looking eastward. The incision will remind him, later on in his house, where to carve the nose of the *nuchu*, which is also the first thing he will do. The same process must be followed when a man cuts a whole tree: observing the branches one should be able to foresee the direction the tree will fall. Trees should fall looking upward, in the same position in which humans are buried, facing upward and with the body directed eastward. East, in Kuna *tat nakkuet sikkit*, ' the direction where the sun rises', indicates the place where the house of Pap Tummat is, where the souls of the dead go and is also where the *nuchu* spirits come from.

The analogy between trees and persons is very strong. Sometimes, Eladio told me, the nose and the back of a *nuchu* are already visible on the branch; the nose, *asu*, is a small lump on the wood, and the back, *iarkan*, looks like a straight cut in the bark. In this case the carver will just have to follow the signs on the wood to carve out the *nuchu*. I therefore asked Eladio why the *nuchu*'s head is carved from the lower part of the log, and the legs from its upper part. He answered that *nuchu* in the tree is exactly in the same position in which babies are in their mother's womb: "When we are born" – he told me – "we come down with our head first, then the midwife turns us face up[99]."

The analogy with birth turns out to be widely used by Kuna carvers. The connection with human birth appears even stronger if we think again about the meaning of the word *nuchu*, 'little one', 'young', reinforced by the more familiar *nuchumimmi* the 'young little one'. It is interesting to note how the *nuchu* is treated simultaneously as a powerful entity and as a person to take care of.

Nose – Beauty and power

As Eladio and other carvers stressed, the nose is the first thing marked on the wooden log after it is cut from the tree. It marks the direction toward which the *nuchu* was looking when it was still attached to the tree. The nose is also the first feature to be carved when making a *nuchu*, used then as a reference for carving the head, the shoulders, the arms, the torso and the legs. The last thing made are the eyes.

The nose of the *nuchu* is always a long, thin and pointed nose. Despite the variations in the morphology of *nuchu*, comparing my direct observation in Okopsukkun with the published photographic material (cf. among others, Nordenskiöld, 1938: 424-425; Salvador, 1997: 44, 111, 222-227, 240-241, 333), it seems that the nose is always represented with the same characteristics: it is long, thin and pointed. Other features, such as arms, legs, feet, or clothes may be just sketched, or, like the mouth or the hands, even skipped. Moreover, as Nordenskiöld noted, "(a)ll these wooden figures represent European types" (*ibid*: 345). This can hardly be considered a valid general statement, as during my fieldwork I did not observe any of these European types. Nor can I say if

[99] On another occasion, while speaking about canoe making, Eladio made the point that differently from *nuchu*, for making a canoe the upper part of a trunk is where the prow is made and the lower part is where the stern is. We can also observe that while a canoe is a dead tree, cut down and which interior has been dug out (cf. Kane, 1994: 77), a *nuchu* is a part of a living tree, which is precisely made out of the interior, the hardest part of a tree.

any considerable change in style occurred in the last seventy years. However the exemplars that Nordenskiöld entered in possession of point to the high variability and morphological flexibility of *nuchu* and their adaptability to foreign types. This issue has caught the attention of Taussig (1993), who compared Western theories of mimesis with the Kuna visual system. My aim here is to understand the underlying internal coherent logic of Kuna people, following their category of thought and praxis closely.

The nose is therefore the common thread between all types of *nuchu*, whether they are made to look like missionaries, soldiers, men and women. It is always accurately done and stands out from the whole figure. 'You do not begin from the feet, do you?' Eladio once told me. On one hand this echoes again the importance of the head-down position for babies during childbirth. On the other hand it has to do with supernatural powers, namely, as I will show below, with powers linked to the sight and the sense of direction.

To understand why the nose represents such supernatural powers it is important to introduce another aspect. The nose has great importance for Kuna people as a marker of beauty. It also marks the difference between Kuna and others: *waka*, ('strangers', non-Kuna generally from Panama and Colombia) and *merki*, ('white strangers' from North Amerca). I was always told during fieldwork that white people are beautiful because they have 'long and thin' noses, *asu mattusuli*, opposed to those of Kuna people, which are 'flat', *mattukwa*, and therefore ugly.

Nuchu sometimes appear in the dreams of people as white men or white women. They are said to be either beautiful and elegant, or sturdy and sometimes dressed with military clothes. Interestingly, the chief of the trees, the most powerful of the auxiliary spirits of specialists in healing rituals, is the balsa tree (*ukkurwala*), typical for its pale wood. I was told it was often used as medicine in the past by parents who wanted to have an albino child[100]. *Nuchukana* made of *ukkurwala* always appear to the *nele* in

[100] The topic of albinism has been explored by Jeambrun, who also noted that as among the Hopi the explication of the origin of albinism is given by the analogical thinking that sees the influence of a 'white object' as responsible for the birth of white children. "Ainsi, chez les Hopi, ce sera manger un épi de maïs blanc, avoir un âne blanc, aimer faire le portrait d'Eototo, *katcina* (poupée sacrée) blanche, travailler avec du sable blanc lors de la conception et, bien sûr, dormir avec un homme ou une femme blancs. Pour les Hopi, il faut qu'un des parents ait mange la feuille blanche qui se trouve a l'interieur d'un épi de maïs, avant la conception pour le père, après pour la mère" (Jeambrun, 1998: 905) For the Kuna if the expectant mother dreams of the moon, she will have a white child. She also notes that in comparison with other indigenous Americans, what is unique among the Kuna is that they have a medicine to have albino children (*ibid*: 905).

dreams as beautiful people, with shiny hair and delicate features. But one must not forget that *ukkurwala* is considered the chief of forest trees, the 'captain', as I was often told. It has diplomatic skills and the charisma for conducting other *nuchukana* in the battle against *ponikan*. It is *ukkurwala* that lead *nuchukana* carved from other woods and organize the collective action against evil spirits. As a consequence *ukkurwala* is also the most important among the vegetal auxiliary spirits of ritual specialists. Despite the softness and the lightness of its wood, balsa is the most important wood for carving *nuchu*. In every curing ritual, both individual and collective, *ukkurwala* are carved for the occasion and are often made in different sizes. The most remarkable example of carving, I was told, is created for the occasion of the celebration of the collective curing ritual, the *nek apsoket*, aimed to rid the village of the presence of evil animal spirits or souls of dead people, which brings epidemic or causes collective fright (see Chapin: 1983, 353-365; Howe, 1976a; for a photographic example see Salvador, 1997: 222).

Force and beauty appear thus to be connected in the way Kuna people think about *nuchu*. What is interesting to note here is that Kuna people think about themselves as less beautiful and less powerful than white people. As a Kuna specialist once told me, white people's blood is stronger than Kuna people's blood. In fact, he said, if a white person kills someone he will not feel pain in the heart (*kuake nunmakke*), he will not regret his action. While Kuna people cannot kill because they would suffer terribly for that, they will feel terribly sad. Kuna people were always very eager to express to me on many occasions their detachment from any form of violence, stressing that violent behaviour is an issue of 'the others', be they strangers (*waymar*) or supernatural beings (*ponikan*).

It is interesting to note that while rejecting violence the Kuna also attest their limits in terms of power. But it has not always been this way, as I suggested above[101]. *Nuchukana* and white people are more powerful than Kuna people. The technology of white people is in fact the analogy used most for describing the power of *nuchukana*. I was told that *nuchukana* are like wireless radios that get the signal from far away. They are able to communicate with their fellows on other islands of the Comarca and to receive instructions by ritual specialists, who sing speak to them and ask their help in the curing ritual. *Nuchukana* are also like military radars, able to detect invisible evil presences approaching from a distance. They also have the capacity to hide and approach the

[101] See note 16 in this chapter and note 2 in the previous chapter.

enemy unseen, like soldiers who use camouflage to move on the front line[102]. *Nuchukana* are powerful and beautiful, they appear in the dreams as a beautiful and seductive presence, but at the same time they are capable of violent revenge, inflicting pain or even killing their victims.

Canoes and *nuchukana* – On men's fertility

In the myth of 'the young men of the Father' (see chapter two), it is said that, when Pap Tummat decided that the eight boys had reached the fullness of their knowledge he told them: "*Emiti pe ituet tummat soke. Pemar asu tukku takkensoke*", "Now you have become chiefs. You have pointed noses, you see". He then went on to name each one of them with personal names, giving them individuality and so beginning their process of transformation into powerful beings. Previously in the myth, Nia, the devil appears, standing on the prow of a canoe: *asu tukku*, on the 'point of the nose' of the canoe.

I argue that both the point of the nose and the prow of the canoe are linked to the sense of direction. The nose always points forward, in the same direction that one is looking. The prow of a canoe, its 'nose', is always pointed toward the place one has to reach. The nose of a *nuchu* is carved on the side of the branch looking toward the direction of the rising sun, *tat nakkuet sikkit*, where the canoe of the sun rises every morning and where heaven, the house of Papa, is.

Kuna cosmology has always been described by scholars as conceiving the world as composed of several layers below the earth and several layers above (cf. Nordenskiöld, 1938: 357). A thing that has not been noted is that there is a strong relation between the east, where the sun rises and the realm of the underworld (*pillipakke*). The Kuna through the trajectory of the sun, which passes through the underworld in its night travel coming out again in the morning, conceive the circularity of the world. East is therefore where different dimensions merge, and this is made evident by the appearance of the sun. It is where the celestial house of Pap Tummat is, where the souls of the deceased travel to; it is the entrance to the underworld; and it is also, if looking from the mainland, where the island is and where people live. Therefore, from the perspective of

[102] The knowledge most Kuna middle age and old men have of military technology is more accurate than that. It derives from their long experience in the military bases of the Canal Zone as wageworkers. Many Kuna men worked in the Panama Canal Zone from the sign of a contract between Kuna authorities and Canal administrators until the Canal has been devolved to Panama in 1999 (See Howe, 1998 and Margiotti, 1999).

a *nuchu*, still attached to the tree, looking eastward is being able to look through all the domains: the underworld and its spirits, the surface inhabited by human beings, and the celestial house of the dead.

As I said above the last thing that is created in a *nuchu* after it has been carved, are the eyes. Once they are made, by making little holes and sometimes applying small beads, the *nuchu* is ready 'to be given life' through the chant of the shaman. The eyes represent the power of the sight (*tala*), which is one of the most remarkable features of *nuchu*, as well as for *nele*. Through its sight a *nuchu* can see what happens in the underworld, and he can thus move through the villages inhabited by animal entities and the evil spirits. It can find out who has abducted the *purpa* of an ill person and where it is been kept, in order to bring it back. It can see which animal entities are haunting a village causing the spread of an epidemic. It can see within the human body to discover the pathogenic elements that cause an illness. At the same time *nuchukana* constantly observe human beings. They see what goes on in the everyday life of the village. They observe the members of the family in which they are staying. The sight and the sense of direction stand thus for the capacity of *nuchu* of moving between the different cosmological levels and of seeing what happens in each one of them.

When Kuna people indicate a direction they do it by turning their head toward it. The prow of a canoe is called its 'nose', and it gives the sense of direction because it is always pointed toward the place to be reached[103]. The crocodile is said to be the canoe that transports the abducted soul of the victim into the underworld village of the chief of animals. When a ritual specialist is making a medicine intended to have an effect on a distant person, he must face toward the direction where the person is, no matter what the distance is. When a botanic specialist, *ina tuleti*, cuts the bark from a tree, he takes four pieces, one from each of the four cardinal points.

As Garibaldo del Vasto explained to me after the narration of the myth of the young men of the Father, such present-day practice for collecting medicines in the forest goes

[103] The use of anatomic terms to refer to parts of objects is quite widespread among South American indigenous people. Erikson has noted that that Matis often use the terms head, feet, bottom and nose, which "[…] semblent aptes à indiquer une position, voire une direction, plutôt qu'une quelconque resemblance formelle entre une partie du corps et la partie de l'objet décrit, […] ils indiquent une orienation, interne, *sui generis*, puisqu'elle permet de décrire la directioalité intrinsèque à la morphologie de l'objet […]" (1989: 289-290). See also Isacsson on the Emberá concept of 'vaginal nose' and is synestetic implications (1993: 124-127).

back to what the 'eight boys' did during the creation of the world. They looked in the four directions while Pap Tummat made the earth whirl, (*pippirmakke*). Through the rotational movement the earth completed its generation. It became solid, from previous states of liquidity ('the earth was just juice') and softness ('it was tender like rubber'). The boys assisted in the transformation of *purpa* into *sana*, 'body', 'flesh'. They observed the rotation, which stimulated the solidification of the earth by looking in the four main directions. This explains how sight and sense of direction are linked as two important features of *nuchu*. For instance, once a Kuna man showed me a *nuchu* that he had just finished carving: interestingly it had four faces, looking toward the four directions. I asked why, and he told me that it was because *nuchu* are able to look in every direction, they are able to see everything everywhere.

As the myth explains, the process of solidification of the earth corresponds with the first woman, Pursoso (herself a transformation of Nan Tummat, Great Mother), getting pregnant and giving birth. It is Great Father who makes the earth whirl, triggering the process of solidification. This process is explained as the condensation (*kuamakket*) of *purpa*. *Kuamake* literally means 'making the core'. *Sappi e kua*, is the 'hard core of the tree', the inner and hardest part of the tree. Not all trees have *kua*, and interestingly enough, trees that have *kua* (*sappi kua nikka*) are used for making canoes, *nuchu*, or as the main poles of the house[104]. *Kuamakket* describes the birth of the world as seen by the eight Father's boys; the coagulation of bodily liquids in the women's uterus; and the creation of the hard wood of trees.

If we consider how in canoe making and in *nuchu* making the wood of trees is treated differently, we can now see how making *nuchu* is the closest male equivalent to making babies. As a matter of fact, tree trunks are hollowed when dugout canoes are made, getting rid in this way of the *kua* ('core'). Whereas, when making a *nuchu* it is the *kua*, the hard wood, that is carved, symbolically but also materially referring to the moulding of the 'flesh' of the tree.

In her beautiful analysis of marriage exchanges in Gawa, Munn describes the role of men and women in the transformative process of making canoes. The 'artifact-making ability to work on wood' is given to men by women, who hold the productive knowledge (Munn, 1986: 140). The raw material, wood, is metaphorically identified to

[104] Also when a botanic specialist moulds the boiled leaves mixture into small bars, which will be then sun dried, the operation is said *kuamakket*.

women's internal bodily fluids. Furthermore, in the formation of babies, women give the internal body substance, blood, while men contribute giving the external bodily surface. "These ideas about the body connect the paternal contribution with a formative action that suggests parallels with the male role in canoe building in which men construct female-marked raw materials (homogenous substance) into a named, shaped artifact" (*ibid*: 143).

What interests me here is the 'artifact-making ability' of men and their capacity to shape 'female-marked raw materials'. Kuna people hold that male semen (*purpa*) and female vaginal liquids mix and coagulate within the uterus. The form of babies is then shaped through the action of *Muu*, the supernatural grandmother. The same term *muu* indicates also the uterus. It is therefore not clear whether the transformative capacity for making babies is passed by *Muu* to the woman, or it is always ultimately held by the deity (Margiotti, personal communication).

What is interesting is that *Muu*, the supernatural grandmother, is the origin of transformative capacities. *Muu* lives in Sappipe-neka, the village where the chiefs of trees also live. As Chapin reports: "[…] Mu had many granddaughters. Her granddaughters and she give life to babies who descend on the earth; they give Kurgin and refresh their minds. […] Her [granddaughters'] names were: Mu Sobia, Mu Sobtule, Mu Sobgwa, Mu Sichina, Mu Koloba, Mu Parba, Mu Ibebayai, Mu Wagarpuilibe" (1989: 39, my translation). The name of the first three granddaughters of *Muu* suggests an interesting similarity with the name given to Nan Tummat in the myth of the creation of the world (see previous chapter). It is the prefix *sop*-, which makes me think of the verb *sopet*, 'to give shape'. Pursoso, or Pursop (as she is called elsewhere), is what she is called in the myth when the earth is being created. The name is likely to be composed by *puna*, 'girl', and *sopet* 'to give shape'. Thus she is the creator deity, who through her bleeding vagina, which had been previously cut open by Pap Tummat, gives birth to all living creature in the world. The deities giving life to babies today thus retain the original 'life giving'/'shape-giving' capacity of Pursoso.

Interestingly activities of 'giving shape' are carried out in the everyday life by Kuna men, who are responsible for the production of canoes, stools, baskets, houses and *nuchu*. While women are dedicated to 'making designs', a different activity expressed

by the Kuna term *narmakket*[105]. In fact they make *mola* blouse designs, by sewing together layers of coloured fabric panels, creating complex and beautiful designs. The skills of 'giving shape' and 'making designs' are originally held by *muukan* deities and guarded in Sappipe-neka. The original design is known to be made by *muukan* deities when they draw on the *kurkin* ('caul', but also 'brain') of foetuses. So, having thus far considered the nature of 'giving shape' for Kuna people, I will describe in the next chapter the significance of 'designs' and their role in social life.

[105] Lévi-Strauss has noted that masculine art is centred on sculpture, while feminine art includes weaving, plaiting and drawing, comparing the art of the Northwest Coast Indians and the Caduveo art from Paraguay (1972: 256).

Chapter 4

The shaman and the anteater

The general aim of this chapter is to provide a description of how the life cycle of Kuna seers begins, focusing on their personal relationships both with their kinspeople and with non-human beings. I will start here by considering the early stages of the life of *nele*, the Kuna seer ('clarividente' as they say in Spanish); namely from his birth to his childhood. I will focus on two relevant issues, which Kuna people always stressed when speaking about *nele*: first, one has to be born as a *nele*; second, young *nelekan* are delicate and fragile creatures, whose dreams are particularly active and filled with vivid nightmares[106]. How do these issues provide an insight into Kuna socio-cosmological thought? How does the perception of fear, and the way it is experienced by young seers, help us to understand how Kuna people think about the relationship between human beings and the supernatural?

In order to answer these questions I will provide accounts on the birth of *nelekan*, and their dreams and suffering during childhood. I will explain how the Kuna interpret these issues as signs of supernatural calling. This will provide the grounding for the understanding of some aspects of the Kuna concept of personhood, which are described in the following chapters. Moreover it will also provide the first step in describing how Kuna people work collectively for the initiation of young *nele*. As I will describe in the next chapter, the relation between a young *nele* and his mother is crucial and, I suggest, this may provide a key towards the interpretation of female shamanism among Kuna people. Later on, in chapters six and seven, I will deal with the complex relationships

[106] The first issue has already been noted in previous ethnographies (see for example Nordensköld, 1938: 80-81); Nonetheless no attention has been paid to the life experience of the *nele*, which I argue provides interesting features for the understanding of how Kuna people think of seers and of the relationship between humans and the supernatural.

that extend between the *nele*, his kinspeople and supernatural entities. I will argue that looking at the constant threat to which the parents, particularly the mother, of a young *nele* are exposed, it is possible to understand the nature of shamanism among Kuna people.

The idea for this chapter has been initially provided by the aim of considering the emotional dynamics of shamanism. I draw here on the groundbreaking work of Overing on the aesthetics of community in Amazonian societies (1986, 1989, 2000, 2003), and on the analysis of Santos-Granero (1991) of the moral use of power among the Yanesha. Among others, Belaunde (2000) has contributed to this topic by addressing the issue of fear, a subject that has been overlooked in Amerindian studies. She has suggested how fear among the Airo-Pai of the Peruvian Amazon is caused by the expression of un-mastered emotions by people. Thus she argues, it is extremely important to teach children how to master their emotions in order to contribute to the creation of conviviality. Moreover, Gow (2005) has suggested looking at fear as a transformational emotion of getting to know powerful beings in Piro lived experience, from early childhood to adulthood. He has also pointed out that the continuous experience of fear of shamans is the first step in learning how to use fear to master hallucinations and eventually to cure ill persons. It is thus through looking at the 'emotional content' of shamanic experience that I will explore how Kuna young *nelekan* are considered different from normal babies and consequently initiated to become seers.

Fear is a key emotion in the life experience of Kuna seers. Kuna adults say that young *nelekan* experience intense nightmares and are very frightened by them. Adults thus teach them to master their dreams and control their fears in order to become powerful seers. Thus, manifestations and conceptions of fear seem to frame the problem of the 'ontology' of being a seer among Kuna people. The Kuna case shows the importance of the comfort provided by social relationships in the formative process of shamans. Young *nelekan* become able to overcome fears and suffering through the support provided by members of their family together with the help of ritual specialists.

Speaking of experiential states for Kuna people, as well as for other Amerindians, means speaking about the body and about relations. As some Amazonian scholars have argued, emotions and the body go together in the social life of indigenous people and

have therefore both to be seen as relational states (cf. Taylor, 1996, Overing and Passes, 2000). It is my aim here to address the problem of the fear experienced by young *nele*, caused by scary nightmares, following the explanations that Kuna people have given me. Namely I was told that *nelekan* are different from other babies and that this is visible at birth by looking at the caul covering the baby's head, or part of the body. Overwhelming attention is paid looking at the newborn's head, as the presence of designs on the caul, as well as the complete absence of design, may tell much about the nature of the baby. I will therefore argue that a theory of designs is needed to understand what it is to be a seer as well as to shed light on relevant issues relating to what is to be human for Kuna people.

Birth

I will start by making a few preliminary remarks, which will help in framing the problem of *nelekan* and the way they are perceived by Kuna people. These remarks will also introduce some points that will be treated in the next chapters and in general will help to place the figure of the *nele* in its lived context.

At birth, a *nele* is in great danger from life. All newborn babies are regarded with compassion by their kinspeople and thus helped to survive and to grow up. Kuna people say that newborn babies are helpless, they lack physical coordination and need the love and care of their kinspeople in order to survive. *Nelekan* are said to be particularly fragile when they are born. They need to be treated with special attention and bathed promptly in plant medicines that help them to survive. This is because, I was told, powerful spirits seek the company of young *nelekan*; they are attracted by them. But on one hand young seers are not yet resistant enough during the early stages of life to bear the closeness of powerful entities. Therefore they are frightened when they meet spirits in dreams. On the other hand, they do not know how to deal with the trickiness of powerful beings, because they have not yet undergone shamanic training. Therefore they may be easily deceived by powerful beings, resulting in their unconscious complicity in the killing of their parents.

It is commonly held by Kuna people that *nelekan* are dangerous for their parents. "A *nele* can kill his parents", Kuna people used to tell me. The dynamics and reasons for this will be properly addressed in chapter six. It is however interesting here to bear in

mind that Kuna parents are generally frightened at the idea of having children who are seers and they often try to avoid this. This fear does not stop at parents but in some way it is extended to the whole of Kuna society. My hypothesis is that there is a fear for shamans that has led Kuna people to create strategies for 'making' shamans able to master their powers and thus to become 'less dangerous' both for themselves and for the rest of their kinspeople. These strategies aim to mediate the relationship between a *nele* and the supernatural world, and to reinforce his ties with human beings. Among these strategies I suggest one is the collective initiation, another is the association with *nuchukana*, which act as the spirit guides of a *nele*, and lastly the obligation for *nelekan* to get married, lest they will not be able to associate with powerful spirits.

Firstly, a *nele* is taught to master his dreams. He will then be able to transform his fears into powerful knowledge through repeated initiation ceremonies (see chapter seven). Since early childhood many people are involved in the formation of the *nele* and may help in various ways, by curing his headaches, giving him strengthening plant medicines, interpreting his dreams, or advising his parents. Moreover, I was told that a young girl is chosen to bring fresh water for his medicinal baths everyday to the house of the young *nele*. Ideally then she will become his wife. This process is what I describe as the Kuna collective strategy of making shamans: the *nelekan*[107]. This may start from before the birth of a *nele*, right after it, or during his childhood. Key figures in this mediating process are grandparents and the master of chants (*api sua*). Below I will explain the first steps of this process, namely the recognition of a *nele* at birth and the Kuna theory of pre-natal designs.

Kurkin with designs

When a Kuna baby is born the midwife, *muu*, attentively observes the white remains of the amniotic sac, the caul, on the baby's head, called *kurkin* by Kuna people. On

[107] It emerged during my fieldwork that *nele* are not able to harm other people because their supernatural actions are mediated by their spirit helpers, *nuchukana*, who do not deliberately act evilly against human beings. There are no sorcerer *nelekan*, strictly speaking, as we may encounter among other South American indigenous people (cf. Harner, 1972; Fausto, 2001; Whitehead and Wright, 2004). People who become sorcerers (*kia takkaler*) are not born as *nele*. I was told to be clear about this distinction during my fieldwork, as it used to become blurred when Kuna people spoke about it in the past, either referring to oral memories or to myths. I heard narrations of evil *nelekan* who acted as sorcerers and accused of killing their enemies. In most cases the stories ended with the sorcerers, who, once discovered, were eventually killed by their fellow villagers or by another seer.

these remains, as well as on the placenta (*achu*, 'jaguar')[108], there are designs. It is in those very few moments after the birth, before cutting the umbilical cord, that the midwife looks at the designs and comments on them. She will then tell the grandmothers what she has seen on the baby. These designs give good hints about the nature of the baby and about its future. The Kuna say that the designs on the newborn's *kurkin* are drawn by the spiritual grandmothers, *muukana*, who are responsible for the formation of foetuses and for the delivery, (*muukana kurkin narmakke*, 'the grandmothers draw designs on *kurkin*')[109]. All newborn babies have designs on the white remains of the amniotic sac on their heads, but not so with newborn *nelekan*, who are recognized at birth for their white, immaculate *kurkin*, without any design. In order to understand the reason for the *nele*'s lack of designs at birth I begin with describing what Kuna people mean by *kurkin*.

The Kuna term *kurkin*, beyond 'caul', also means 'brain', 'intelligence', 'skill' and 'hat' (cf. Nordenskiöld, 1938: 363-368). Considering the multiple meanings of the term *kurkin*, it appears there is a connection between what is visible on the surface of the newborn baby's head, the remains of 'amniotic sac', or the 'hat', and what is inside the baby's head, the 'brain'. *Kurkin* means in fact both 'hat' and 'brain'. The 'hat with designs', *kurkin narmakkalet*, describes thus a relationship between the external surface of the body and its internal part[110]. But what precisely is the role of designs in this meaningful tension between the inside and the outside?

[108] The question of whether the designs on the newborn's head are different or have different meanings from the designs on the placenta is still obscure to me. What is indeed true is that for the Kuna placenta and newborn baby are the same thing until they are separated by the cutting of the umbilical cord. The implications of the placenta as a 'jaguar' are analysed by Margiotti (Ph.D. thesis).

[109] See previous chapter for a general description of the role of *muukana* in childbirth.

[110] Lévi-Strauss has noted that "[i]ndeed, in American Indian thought and probably also elsewhere, the hat has a function of a mediator between up and down, sky and earth, the external world and the body. It plays the role of intermediary between these poles; it can either unite or separate in different instances" (1995: 8). Gell refers, in the introduction of his book on tattooing in Polynesia, to the psychoanalytic theory of Anzieu, who observes "[…] that the very organ with which we think, feel, know, and experience – the cortex of the brain – is embryonically a development of the surface of the early foetus, an introverted and reticular 'skin'" (1993: 29). The hat for the Kuna is a symbol of ritual status and mystical power. Old wise men, *sappin tummakan*, wear a hat when they go outside their house. It is normally a black brimmed hat, purchased in Panamá, which symbolizes their status. While hats made of woven vegetal fibres are worn by *kanturkan*, the ritual specialists singing in the female puberty rituals. Furthermore male *nuchukana* are almost always carved wearing a hat. During their supernatural battles against pathogenic entities the hat is used as a powerful weapon. When the spirit of the *nuchu* takes his hat off a cloud of intoxicating smoke comes out of it, knocking down the opponent.

First of all, the designs on the babies' *kurkin* at birth, show a link with some animals, like the jaguar or the snake[111]. If a baby is born with the 'jaguar design', midwives would say that he is born 'on the side of the jaguar', *achu sikkit*. If he has the 'snake design', or if the remains of the amniotic sac hang around the newborn's neck, he would be on 'the snake's side', *naipe sikkit*. In both cases Kuna people agree in saying that when the child grows up, he would be in danger of attracting these animals, with the due lethal consequences. Children will therefore be bathed in special plant medicines, during childhood and early adulthood, so that this dangerous link may be broken.

Firstly, it is interesting to note the analogy that the Kuna make between human clothes and the skin or the fur of animals, both are identified by the same word: *mola*. For example, the skin of snakes and the fur of jaguars are both called, *e mola*, 'its clothes'. The foliage of trees are 'their clothes' as well[112]. The aspect that animal and human clothes have in common is that of covering their bodies. Human clothes, snake skin, and tree foliage point also to the possibility of changing one's clothes. Furthermore, women's clothes, newborn's cauls, the skin of snakes and the fur of jaguars have one remarkable aspect in common: the possibility of being covered with designs. The fur of jaguars and the skin of snakes are covered with designs, which Kuna people say are beautiful (*yer taileke*). What is interesting here is that the beautifully designed skin and fur of these animals are the manifestation of their power. They show the power of transformation of these animals, which is the most dangerous power that the Kuna may ever conceive. Jaguars are able to transform and take on human appearance and get close to human beings in dreams, in order to seduce them and to abduct their souls or to drive them crazy. They may either kill their victims or transform them into one of their kind, a predator of humans (*kia takkaler*) [113]. Snakes are said to be

[111] Considering the limited information on the types of designs at childbirth I can just say here that I heard only about jaguar and snake designs, *achu* and *naipe narmakkalet*. I do not know if there are others. It seems though relevant that the only ones I heard of are these two animals, since the Kuna highly fear them and consider them beautiful. Nordenskiöld states that "An Indian can have more or less *kurgin* for hunting and fishing, though the *kurgin* for each kind of hunting and fishing has its definite place in the brain. They speak of *kurgin* for tapirs, peccaries and so on" (1938: 363). Nonetheless he does not make reference to particular kinds of design.

[112] Interestingly the bark of trees is called *e ukka*, 'its skin'. It would be interesting to explore further ethnographically the distinction between skin and clothes.

[113] See chapter two for an analysis of how the Kuna people think about snakes and jaguars and their supernatural powers, and for a description of human killers.

immortal, because they shed their skin[114]. When a snake bites a person the illness is extremely difficult to cure, because it keeps on transforming within the human body. It may even disappear for a while, but it will come back sooner or later. Also trees are associated with immortal powers. They shed their skin too and they are the primary source for giving health and strength to human beings, via medicines obtained from their bark, leaves, vines, roots and sap. Also tree entities are able to transform. For this reason Kuna ritual specialists as well as *nelekan* seek their help as spirits familiar in curing illnesses. Moreover, as we have previously seen, trees posses the ancestral knowledge of the creation of the world. They know the evil transformations of animals and demons and are thus able to trick them on behalf of human beings.

Given this, it is thus possible to understand the meaning of *kurkin*, as the first designed clothes of babies; their 'hat with designs'. Yet *kurkin* is what lay inside the head; it is the brain. As I have shown above, the meaning of *kurkin* conveys the idea of a relationship between what is in and what is outside the human brain. I would argue that this relationship is in fact activated by designs. On one hand, designs on the newborn's *kurkin* show the inner capacity of the baby, its 'intelligence' as Kuna people often say. On the other hand they show the capacity to attract wild animals.

Designs make the 'openness' of the human brain possible; they make it porous; from birth they enable, the bi-directional inside/outside movement. This inside/outside relationship expresses on one hand 'receptivity', the 'capability to learn'. It expresses the capacity to 'grasp things' (*inmar kaet*) with the mind. If a newborn has 'beautiful designs on the *kurkin* at birth' (*yer kurkin nikka kwallulesa*), he or she will be very intelligent, capable of learning many things, or gifted, as some Kuna put it. They are children who will be good at school, with a talent for learning foreign languages, or myths and ritual chants, or whatever subject they decided to study. On the other hand, having beautiful designs on the *kurkin* at birth expresses the capacity 'to transform things' (*inmar opiñet*). It is the capacity to create designs for women and to shape forms

[114] In many Amazonian mythologies the origin of designs is linked to the anaconda, as, for example among the Brasilian Cashinahua (Lagrou, 1998, 2002), the Peruvian Shipibo-Conibo (Gebhart-Sayer, 1986) and the Wauja of the Upper Xingu (Barcelos Neto, 2004). Its paradigmatic transformative capacity is linked to its power to create new designs endlessly. Anaconda is therefore thought by these people as the creator of designs who taught human beings how to draw them. Among the Kuna, although snake designs are considered beautiful and attract people's curiosity, the myth of the discovery of designs I heard does not mention serpents explicitly.

for men. It is also the generative capacity of giving birth for men and women[115]. This capacity is in some way the other side of 'receptivity'. It is the capacity of producing, of making things visible to others; a movement from inside to outside of the human body. It is the expression of one's inner creative forces (*purpa*, 'soul', 'semen', 'menstruation').

This double capacity of inward 'receiving' and of outward 'transforming' represents the two inseparable sides of being a human for Kuna people and it is beautifully expressed in their discourses and practices about *kurkin*. But what happens when the *kurkin* is without designs?

White *kurkin*

In the case of a newborn *nele*, Kuna people say that the baby has an immaculate white *kurkin*. Some people also told me that when a *nele* is born he is completely wrapped in the amniotic sac; as in a plastic bag, they said. Or, using a Spanish expression "Nació con la camisa", "He was born with the shirt on"[116]. Another version I heard was that when a *nele* is born the midwives recognize him by the fact that he is covered by four layers of amniotic sac and he has a shining light (*ispe*) on his forehead. What is striking in all cases is that the *nele* has no designs on his *kurkin*. His 'amniotic hat' is immaculate.

However this does not mean that *muukana* have not drawn designs on the *nele*'s *kurkin*. In the translation made by Pérez of the 'Song for curing *Nele* when he has a headache', "it is told how *Mu* had perfumed *Nele*'s *kurgin* with certain plants and had made it fine as well as how *Mu* gives *kurgin* to *Nele*, so that he can have the power of seeing the animals which are his friends, among which can be noted saw fish, rays, turtles of different kinds, alligators, sea lions, sharks, dolphins, etc." (Nordenskiöld, 1938: 542)[117].

[115] Cf. chapter three on the 'capacity to see' and 'to give shape' of *nuchu* carvers, and their relation to fertility.
[116] This was also described by Nordenskiöld, following the information given by his Kuna informant Ruben Pérez Kantule: "When a child is born with a 'victory cap', that is, is born to be a *nele* this child has gotten from *Mu kurgin* for being able to associate in dreams with spirits and in this way the ability to be a Seer. With certain medicines one can however vitiate the *kurkin* when one does not wish the child's capacity for being a *nele* developed. This one always does if the father of the child born to be a *nele* is living because this man may die if the child's *kurkin* is allowed freely to develop" (1938: 367).
[117] The whole song follows, with the Kuna text and its Spanish translation (*ibid*: 542-551).

What I would suggest is that the designs on the *nele*'s *kurkin* are invisible to normal human beings at his birth; even to midwives, who are specialist in reading designs on the caul. This would also point to a difference of perspectives, which would entail the separation from a normal human perspective and the perspective of the seer. Thus visible designs allow for the sharing of perspectives between human beings. Invisible designs create different perspectives, meaning that the *nele* and his adult kinspeople have different outlooks on the world. The *nele* will be able to develop his own perspective on the world, seeing animal transformations and sharing their perspective upon the world; normal babies will not, and will stick to the partial capacity to see, shared by all other 'normal' human beings.

Considering what I have described above about *kurkin*, it seems that newborn seers do not carry the sign that every human being normally does. Human beings, when they are born, have on their *kurkin* the mark of ontological alterity, which expresses both their capacity to learn and create, and their human mortality.

A *nele* does not have any design on his amniotic sac. At birth, he thus lacks, in some way, one of the first signs of humanity. His nature is thus liminal and ambiguous. His relation with cosmic forces is not visible to others, as it is not manifest in designs. But as every Kuna person knows well, the *nele* attracts spiritual entities living in the world; he is 'desired' (*apeleket*) by evil entities that seek his company since his birth. He is potentially able to establish powerful relations with them and he is destined to become a seer and to help his kinspeople.

The birth of a *nele* was always described to me as a highly dramatic and powerful moment in the life of the community. It is a delicate moment, in which both close and distant kin are emotionally involved with their fears and expectations. The news spreads quickly around the village and may reach other villages in a short time.

Considering the intrinsic 'openness' of children who are born with a designed *kurkin*, the lack of designs at birth of a *nele* would seem to suggest a relative 'closedness'. The bi-directional flow that permits human beings to perceive and act into the world (with all due risks), is not inscribed by designs on the newborn *nele*'s head. As many Kuna told me, the intelligence of a *nele* is often 'blocked' (*kurkin etusa*) when he is born. This is why when he grows as a child he starts suffering severe headaches and having nightmares. The condition of 'closedness' is directly linked to experiencing fear and

suffering, with the consequent risk of dying. In fact *nele* children attract spirit beings, but at the same time, their condition of relative 'closedness' does not permit them to see spirits in their 'original form', which is that of a person. Instead *nele* childrin see transformed monstrous forms, as visions in dreams, which they cannot bear. They are therefore terrified and so wake up deeply shaken. Kuna people explain that in this way supernatural entities feel kept at distance by young *nelekan* and so they get angry with them. If a *nele*, because of his fears, does not establish a relationship with the approaching spirits, they will try to kill him in revenge.

This presents an interesting problem: why, if *nelekan* are to become seers, able to see and to move beyond the limits of normal people's vision, their initial condition is portrayed by their adult kinspeople as one of 'closedness'? Why, if *nelekan* are by birth able to associate with powerful entities, is their 'capacity to see' them limited?

This is an unsolved problem for me and I have not found a solution at this point. Nonetheless I intend to suggest a way to explore this stimulating question. Namely, I suggest starting from the initial condition of relative closedness to understanding the peculiar powers of the *nele*.

If we intend closedness as 'distorted vision' or 'partial blindness', we can see how it is responsible for the fear and suffering of the young *nele*. The main characteristic associated with Kuna seers is their powerful sight (*tala*). This is their capacity to see within the human body and into other dimensions of the world. This potential is present at birth and must be developed during the seer's life with the intervention of ritual specialists, who activate the shamanic sight by 'strengthening' and 'opening' the seer's brain. If the young *nele*, who is still untrained, sees monstrous creatures, he cannot stand their vision and therefore withdraws from their presence. A *nele* has thus to make the scaring visions of spirits, familiar, in order to then establish a relationship with them and to cultivate his own powers. A *nele* needs to be 'opened up' in order to permit the flow of relations with the powerful forces of cosmic alterity. This is made through ritual practices, and in many cases, I was told, it is a matter of survival. If the ritual opening of a *nele*'s brain is not collectively performed, sooner or later he will die, because of the jealousy of the supernatural entities (see chapter seven). Conversely, all other human beings must be 'closed' to cosmic transformations, in order not to incur the risk of getting illnesses or being killed by animal entities.

Thus, to sum up, we can say that being born with visible designs means that a baby needs to be closed in order to survive and to develop human skills. Whereas a baby who is born without visible designs (or with invisible designs) needs to be completely opened in order to survive and to develop shamanic skills. Visible designs are thus the precondition of humanity; invisible designs are the precondition of shamanism[118].

Designs

In what follows I will take inspiration from Gow's analysis of the designs made by Piro people in Western Amazonia. Two points are relevant for the present discourse. Firstly, following an idea proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1960; 1972) in his analysis of Caduveo/Kadiwéu face painting, Gow suggests that bodily designs mark a relationship between the surface of the body and its inside. Developing this idea further he says that "[t]he primary function of designs is the domestication or 'taming' of visual transformation through the definition of the surface of a body" (Gow, 1989: 16). Secondly, he suggests that designs are the transformation and elaboration of the embodied experiences, namely those relating to bodily fluids and fertility. Designs are thus the manifestation of embodied experiences of Piro women (Gow, 1999: 243-244).

I do not have enough space to enter into details about the different kinds of designs in the Kuna lived world here. Nevertheless it is important to consider that creating designs is a very important aspect of the everyday life of Kuna women. They learn how to sew their beautiful colourful blouses (*molakana*) with designs from puberty and to make beadwork (*winni*), to adorn their calves and forearms. They then progressively increase their skill by observing their older kinswomen (cf. Salvador, 1997; Fortis, 2002). Sewing an incredibly complicated and colourful *mola*, and wearing it, along with a fabric skirt (*sapuret*) and a foulard (*muswe*) printed with designs, is what makes a Kuna woman beautiful (*yer taileke*) to the eyes of everyone else, especially to men[119].

[118] Cf. Rosengren (2006: 808), paraphrasing Viveiros de Castro (1992: 61) "… one can say that it is the separation from the spirits that is the precondition and reason for Matsigenka shamanism." Moreover, among the Araweté "[w]hile they are still small, children are often made to undergo a shamanic operation that 'closes the body' […] or 'seals it off'. Its aim is to permit the parents to gradually resume their activities once again and to prevent the child from suffering 'flesh ache' (Viveiros de Castro, 1992: 183).

[119] See also Overing (1989) about beauty and body decorations, as the outward manifestation of the inner creative capacities of Piaroa women. Kuna men conversely wear 'white people's' clothes, apart from ritual occasions in which some men wear Kuna shirts made of red fabric and hats woven with natural

It is interesting to note that, while women work at making designs to beautify the body, men, as I have shown in the previous chapter, devote themselves to plastic arts, such as making canoes, carving *nuchukana*, or weaving baskets. Men produce containers for food and persons (baskets and canoes) and trees' souls (*nuchu*), while women decorate the surface of human bodies. If 'giving shape' (*sopet*), as we have seen in the previous chapter, is the transformation of young men's fertility; 'making design' (*narmakket*) is related to women's fertility and the control over their bodily fluids. A young woman begins to learn to make *mola* roughly after her first menstruation, then she refines her skills in order to be able to sew beautiful designs when she gets married and has children. The most skilled and active *mola* makers in Okopsukkun were women in their thirties and forties, spending much time sewing and tirelessly making new *molakana*. I was told when a woman becomes older and has grandchildren, she has less time for sewing and has to work more in the kitchen, preparing and distributing food for all her kinspeople. Moreover her sight weakens and she can no longer sew during the night by the light of kerosene lamps, an activity which, on the contrary, is happily carried out by younger women who enjoy sitting around lamps, chatting, laughing and making *mola*.

Young women also love to wear their most beautiful *mola* when they are outside the house, such as in the gathering house (where they also sew) or when they go to the telephone post in Ustupu. New *molakana* are also especially sewn by women for puberty ceremonies, during which kinswomen tend to wear *molakana* with the same colours or with the same design. On the contrary older women, who spend most of the time at home, wear simpler *molakana*, made out of two colours and only with geometric designs. Nonetheless they always observe younger women sewing and do not hesitate to comment on their work or give advice.

Transformations

Following the first point made by Gow I will contend that being born with visible designs is, for Kuna people, a sign of the future inability of seeing transformations (and thus to transform); while being born with invisible designs means that the *nele* will be

---

fibres. This suggests a particular kind of relationship between Kuna people and 'white people', *merki* (cf. Gow, 2001: 124-129).

able to see transformations (and thus to transform). Bearing designs on the caul is a sign of intelligence, which means being able to develop human cultural abilities; being born with a white caul is a signs of clairvoyance, which means to be able to develop shamanic abilities. Therefore designs seem to provide the body with stability and fixation (Lagrou, 1998), against the possibility of metamorphosis, in order to provide the definition of 'a specific humanity' (Vilaça, 2005). The visibility of designs on the newborn's caul provide thus his adult kinspeople with a sign of the humanity of the baby and allow them to include him in their sociality, nurturing him and allowing his body to become a healthy human body. With the *nele* it is a bit more complicated.

I come now to the subject of monstrous visions of *nelekan* during their dreams. Nightmares, together with headaches, are the typical signs that a young child is a *nele*.

I will now use an ethnographic example, which describes the case of a Kuna child, who was not directly considered a *nele*, but whose capacities were closely assimilated to those of young seers by his kinswomen[120]. Transcribed below is part of a dialogue that took place in Okopsukkun in April 2004. The participants were Raquél Morris, a Kuna grandmother and my host, her daughter Nixia, her daughter-in-law Nepakiryai (who was at that time pregnant with her third child), and a woman *nele*, Prisilla, who had come to visit Nepakiryai. The 'visit' took place in the following way: Prisilla sat in front of Nepakiryai, placed a brazier in front of her, put some dried cacao beans in the brazier cup and started smoking a pipe with tobacco. She remained, eyes closed, smoking her pipe for about five minutes. The conversation started after Prisilla revealed her diagnosis:

> Prisilla: Your baby may be a *nele*. She has good *kurkin*. She is coming with *ispe* ('glasses'). That is why you are seeing glasses in dreams.
>
> Nixia: Yes, that may be true. One relative of Nepa's father is a *nele*.
>
> Raquél: It is also true that Adam (Nepa's second son) used to wake up often during the night. He was scared; he used to sleep badly because he dreamt of monsters.

[120] Kuna call these children *ner yopi*, which means 'like *nele*'. They are said to be very intelligent because they have 'good *kurkin*' (*yer kurkin nikka*). They in fact are able to perceive transformation and have contacts with spiritual beings in dreams. The difference with *nele* seems to reside in the fact that they were born with designs and cannot thus ever change their point of view, they cannot learn transformations. Further research is needed to clarify the shades of differences between 'good *kurkin*' with designs and 'blank *kurkin*'.

Prisilla: That happens to babies who have good *kurkin*. Their brain works a lot during the night. What they dream of are actually *nuchu* (tree entities), not *nia* (demons). But to see them without being frightened, they have to bathe with special medicines.

Raquél: Adam was bathed with the wrong medicine.

Nixia: Also when Kanek (Nixia's second boy child) was a small child, he used to wake up scared at night. He had nightmares. A *nele* from Ustupu (the neighbouring village) told me that he was ill, that he was born with the 'jaguar illness'. That *poni* (evil entity) was the cause of his nightmares. So they bathed him two times with medicines, to cure him. Then Remigio (a medicine man from Okopsukkun) visited him and said that he was not ill. On the contrary, it was his brain that was working hard during the night. He told me that this is what happens to very intelligent children, with good *kurkin*. Kanek has always dreamt a lot since he was a small child and sometimes he tells me that he has fought with a monster. Sometimes he uses unusual words, like those spoken by grandfathers in the gathering house. It is said that gifted children begin early to say words that their peers do not know. They learn them in dreams. Sometimes they are vulgar words, which refer to how babies are born. They already know how men and women have sexual relations, and they ask their parents questions.

I will introduce here the concept of transformation as a useful in understanding the link between 'closedness', nightmares and monstrous visions. These conditions enable the young *nele* to perceive what other children do not, i.e. transformations of powerful beings.

Changing the external appearance is one of the common features of Amerindian spiritual entities. For Kuna people, as well as for many Lowland South Americans, powerful entities are able to transform their bodies on purpose and to change into various monstrous as well as beautiful figures. Spiritual entities that live in the universe are able to freely change their outer physical appearance, maintaining their inner self (subjectivity) unchanged. The universe is thus seen as a constant flow of changing bodies and mischievous appearances, which easily trick human beings.

As has been argued by Lima (1996) and Viveiros de Castro (1998), changes of the external appearances of beings correspond to changes of their point of view. Beings of a different kind see themselves as different and beings of the same kind see each other as

the same. To see beings of a different kind as the same, one has to change its point of view. Animals see humans as animals and vice-versa. To see animals in their inner (unbiased, real) form, which is that of a person, people have to become one of them; they have to transform their external appearance, their body. This is what shamans do, in order to communicate with animal and tree entities. For example Kuna people say that jaguars and sea turtles appear as beautiful girls to the *nele* in dreams. So he is attracted by their beauty and their seductive ways, but has to be careful before making love to one of them[121]. Demons (*nia*, *kalutor*), on the other hand, use to assume human appearance in waking life, disguising their black, hairy and ugly form. Thus they can deceive unlucky people walking alone in the forest, approaching them disguised as a seductive woman, a friend or a relative. As a result of such an encounter, the tricked person risks not being able to recognize the demon as a demon, thus losing his capacity to distinguish between humans and non-humans, and so becomes a dangerous ally of the predator demon, chasing humans as his prey (cf. chapter two).

The two different examples suggest the transformative capacity of *nelekan*, who change their point of view in dreams and see jaguars and sea turtles as beautiful women. While normal people, who are not able to see the inner forms of demons, are easily tricked by their beautiful outer costume. Furthermore, the Kuna make a general distinction between animal and tree entities on one hand, and demons on the other. The outer form of animals and trees is the one they wear on the surface of the world (*olopilli*) inhabited by human beings, while their inner form of people is the one visible in the underworld (*pillipakke*) villages, where they used to live. On the contrary the inner appearance of demons is monstrous. But they approach humans, both in dreams and in waking life by dressing up in human robes.

Young *nelekan* are not yet capable of changing their point of view and cannot see animals and trees as persons, but they can see their transformations into demons. In fact the Kuna say that tree and animal entities are able to transform into demons assuming their terrific aspect. Herein seems to lay the difference between the dreams of young *nelekan* and those of other Kuna children. Kuna children are prone to be tricked by demons, which appear disguised as young friends in dreams (similarly to the above

[121] Once Rotalio Pérez, a Kuna friend and *nele* told me that the *nele* has to be careful in choosing his spiritual partner because she will be his wife and he will have to meet her always in dreams (cf. chapter seven).

mentioned case of the adult wandering alone in the forest). They are not able to see demons in their inner ugly form, so they fall prey to their evil intentions (cf. Gow, 2005)[122].

This difference explains the ambiguity expressed in the above dialogue, about whether the nightmares of young Kanek should be considered illness or rather a manifestation of intelligence. When young *nelekan* are approached by tree or animal entities, they perceive their transformative aspect. The monstrous transformations of these entities are an intermediary state between the human and the arboreal or animal form. In fact Kuna people explained to me that animals and trees are able to transform and look like demons while demons are only able to take the appearance of people. So what children *nele* perceive in their nightmares is the transformation of animal and tree entities. Thus they get scared. Fear is a signal that the young boy is confronted with powerful presences. Fear is therefore perceiving transformations without being able to change one's point of view. Fear, I would argue, is for the Kuna the experiential state of getting to know alterity. It shows the potentiality of the child *nele* to change his point of view and to experience a different perspective of the world. Adult *nelekan* are in fact the only ones among the Kuna who see powerful beings in their original form, that of a person.

As other Amerindian shamans, *nelekan* are able to master transformations, that is to transform themselves. They do it in dreams and when they visit an ill person[123]. They are thus able, once initiation is completed, to voluntarily change their point of view of the world in order to interact with animal and tree entities and to avoid demons. This enables them to obtain supernatural help in diagnosing and curing illnesses and to learn ancestral knowledge from these entities. *Nelekan* are also, and most importantly, able to restore their human point of view, before getting 'lost in transformation'.

[122] I heard of cases in which children were said to meet *ponikan* (evil animal entities) in their dreams. That caused their involuntary complicity in predation acts upon fellow humans. In one case I heard the story of a young girl who used to meet little friends in dreams. From them she learned to sing lullabies for babies, which she used to sing during the day. But one day the entire island, where the village was, turned upside down into the sea. This was caused by the evil spirits who found a human ally in the little girl. Now if you go by canoe close to the place where the island was, I was told, you can hear the sound of the rattle and the distant singing of lullabies.

[123] I was told that in the past *nelekan* were able to transform into animals, such as jaguars or snakes, in waking life, and able with their body to penetrate into different dimensions of the world. Nowadays this capacity is said to be discontinued, because both of the lack of 'real *nele*' (*nele sunnati*) and because of the control that ritual masters have on their *nele* pupils. Another explication that I sometimes heard was that *Pap Tummat* (Great Father) decided to limit these powers to prevent excesses and sorceries.

Blankness - Reflection upon oneself

To conclude I will put forward a few points. What I have defined above as the relative 'closedness' of the *nelekan*, appears also to be a condition of 'fluidity' that characterizes Kuna seers since their birth. Their bodies are not in fact 'defined' by pre-birth designs and so are not fixed as the bodies of other children (cf. Gow, 1989; Lagrou, 1998). Designs on the caul of normal babies convey the stability of the human body, they enhance its outward appearance, and they give to it its first visibility. It is not the body of the newborn that is regarded with curiosity, but its designs. Conversely, the body of a newborn *nele* is not equally visible to the eyes of his human kinspeople. It does not carry the beauty of designs, which the Kuna express with the exclamation: '*yer taileke!'* 'very visible!' This would explain his capacity of transforming, and changing his point of view, which he will be able to achieve later on during his life.

What is interesting to consider here is that a young *nele* is in a condition of reflecting upon himself. His receptivity is not 'open' in the same way as that of other children. His perception is directed inwards rather than outwards, as that of normal youngsters. His condition of suffering and experiencing fear forces him to withdraw from social relationships. On one hand he is not able to enjoy the company of his peers, because he is often ill[124]. On the other, the young *nele* cannot be too close to his parents. He cannot call them 'mum' and 'dad' (*nana* and *papa*), because treacherous spirits are listening to him and are ready to kill his parents, as I will describe in the next two chapters. He develops therefore a solitary tendency, which is improved during the long periods of seclusion for his shamanic initiation. These features give him the capacity to look beyond the limits of human world, and to stop frames from the flow of transformations within the universe.

Kuna people use a particular expression to describe the act of reflecting upon oneself: *tukkin sii*. It literally means 'to sit looking at one's own belly', with the chin touching the chest. It refers to the action of directing one's own thoughts towards oneself. On one

[124] I have however to stress here that the condition of the suffering of young *nele* is not permanent. As I observed in the case of an eleven-year-old boy, he suddenly began to have strong headaches, which worried his family members. Then his maternal grandmother decided to call a specialist (*api sua*) in medicine for curing *nelekan*. Before this occurrence, he had sporadic headaches and was only reminded from time to time not to stand in the sun for a long time. See next chapter for a fuller description of this case.

occasion a Kuna friend told me about a son of his brother, who was a *nele*, and died very young. The explication my friend gave was that the child was responsible for his own death, because he directed his powers against himself (*tukkin imaysa*, 'he did it himself'). This to me seems the extreme consequence of not being open to the world, which may cause the self-destruction of a young *nele*. Thus the importance stressed in Kuna discourses of mastering one's own powers through the help of other people.

There is an interesting parallelism here, suggested by the use of words through which Kuna people describe physical as well as relational states. One of the animals that *nelekan* choose as their familiar spirits (*tarpakan*, sing. *tarpa*), is the *ukkuturpa*, the 'silky anteater' (*Cyclopes didactylus*). Even though I have never seen one, this animal was described to me as moving very slowly on trees (as the sloth, *pero*, Kuna people said), with long nails, and always assuming a characteristic posture by crossing its arms 'in front of itself' (*tukkin sae*). It covers its face, I was told, as if it were 'tied up'. Its name in ritual chant language is *Oloetiñapippiler*. *Olo* means 'gold' and is the prefix for many Kuna names. *Etinnet* means 'to tie'. *Pippiler*, derives from *pippinele*, which is composed by *pippi* (*pippikwa*), meaning 'small', and *nele*. Its characteristic posture evokes, without forcing much Kuna description, a condition of self-reflection and meditation, and is connected to the solitary nature of this animal. Kuna people told me that the *ukkuturpa* is a wise person ('doctór' in Spanish), it knows many secrets and its knowledge is precious for the *nele*. It is a powerful creature and especially revengeful, thus hunters must strictly avoid catching it, otherwise it will haunt them and their future generations.

Young *nelekan* have the capacity to see transformations, but they also suffer from loneliness and limitation. Growing up and developing their powers they will become able to see beyond transformations. They will be able to see the real forms of animals and to see how evil spirits transform in order to enter human bodies as illness.

It seems therefore that young *nelekan*'s 'closedness' is relative, in the sense that they are 'closed' to normal human development. They do not develop human abilities and relationships in the same way normal people do; while they are completely and excessively open to cosmic transformations. They see beyond what normal people are able to see and their capacity to see has not the limits of the latter. At the same time, normal human beings' 'openness' is based on the closure to the perception of cosmic transformations, which they only perceive as illnesses and misfortune. As Harner stated

for the Shuar, "The normal waking life is explicitly viewed as 'false' or 'a lie', and it is firmly believed that truth about causality is to be found by entering the supernatural world or what the Jívaro view as the 'real' world, for they feel that the events which take place within it underlie and are the basis for many of the surface manifestations and mysteries of daily life" (1972: 134).

A *nele* starts from a position of loneliness and separation from other people, but as a Kuna man once told me: "One cannot become a powerful *nele* alone. One cannot associate with animal spirits by one's self. To seek powerful knowledge alone is dangerous, because one would become mad and kill himself."

The transition from a condition of relative 'closedness', self-reflection, and suffering to one of cosmic 'openness' is crucial for becoming a powerful *nele*. The shift is from seeing transformations to becoming able to transform, to change point of view. As I mentioned above, young *nelekan* are dangerous for their parents. Given thus the double aspect of danger, self-destructiveness and parent-destructiveness, is therefore crucial that young *nelekan* are made safe. This is obtained by both the compassionate love of grandmothers, who take care of the young seer and listen to his dreams, and through the intervention of ritual specialists, who protect the parents, especially the mother during pregnancy, and lead the initiation of the child.

The young *nele* is thus progressively taught to become familiar with his dreams through the telling of them to his grandmother. He passes from dreaming of monsters to dreaming of young friends. Then, when the child grows up, the ritual master (*api sua*) is contacted and starts to take care of the child, giving him medicinal baths and *nuchukana* carved especially for him. Then, when the *api sua* decides, the initiation ceremony is set up, and the first step for becoming a 'real seer' (*nele sunnati*) is ready to be undertaken. Before turning my attention to this point, I will describe in the next two chapters first the figure of the mother of the *nele* and the problem of female shamanism, and second the reasons why the parents of the *nele* are likely to be killed by their son's auxiliary spirits.

The view from the island to the mainland


The bridge to Ustupir

La centrál – The main path in Okopsukkun

A narrow path between the kitchen and the dormitory

Rotalio weaving a bag on the patio

Olopayti weaving a basket

Getting news and waiting for a drink

Inaekikiña cleaning crabs for the meal

Aurolina (at the back) and her sister-in-law Elasia sewing *molakana*

Alejandrina sewing a *mola* on the patio with her mother and one of her daughters

Adjusting the *winni*

The *nuchukana* belonging to Beatriz

Mikita (Miki's eldest daughter), her nephew and her *nuchukana*

Three of Miki's *nuchukana*

Garibaldo del Vasto and his grandson


One of Miki's *nuchukana*


Male and female *nuchukana* belonging to Rotalio

Rotalio's *nuchukana*

Some of Garibaldo's grandchildren

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

Chapter 5

From the perspective of the mother

While the previous chapter focused on the birth of *nelekan*, concentrating on the visual appearance of newborns, this chapter focuses on the pregnancy of the mother of a *nele* and postulates an hypothesis on how Kuna women become seers by acquiring the capacity to see from their unborn *nele* children. As I anticipated in the previous chapter, Kuna people agree on the fact that a son *nele* represents a life threatening danger for his parents. Both parents could die as soon as the *nele* is born and become able to see and establish relationships with animal entities. My concern here is with the risk for the mother, which begins earlier, namely since she becomes pregnant.

Below I will explore the effects that the recognition of this danger produces in the lives of Kuna women who bear a child *nele*. The reasons for this danger will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter. By analysing the manifestations of this life threatening pregnancy I will describe in this chapter how Kuna people help the mother of a *nele* to survive, by protecting her in various ways. These ways are generally aimed at preventing the baby from developing his capacity to see as a *nele*.

First, dreams are a way of telling if the foetus is a *nele*. Second, the mother is protected by two means: either by making herself invisible to the animal entities attracted by the *nele* foetus, or by 'obscuring', 'sealing', or even 'stealing' the powerful attributes of the *nele* foetus: its *kurkin*. I will describe all these instances and their possible outcomes for both the mother and the child. I will eventually focus on the case in which the mother ends by 'stealing' the *kurkin* of her unborn son, as it seems an explication of how women become *nelekan* among the Kuna.

As it has been argued recently by Colpron (2005) there has been and still is a widespread tendency in Amazonian ethnographies to consider shamanism as a masculine role. She points out that the dichotomy, based on Euro-centric biological assumptions, of the man producer and the woman reproducer, has long-since influenced and biased studies on shamanism in Amazonia. She thus procures to give the counter-example of Shipibo-Conibo women shamans, arguing that there are no differences between men and women in the apprenticeship and practice of shamanism, and that women are able to combine motherhood with shamanism (*ibid*: 96).

The Kuna do not conceive the capacity to bear children as a 'biological' characteristic of women[125]. This is rather a capability acquired during a woman's life through the development of social skills (Overing, 1985a, 1989), and enhanced through the use of plant medicines. In short, women are not born with the innate capacity of having children, but rather they acquire this capacity through teaching by older kinswomen and thanks to the repetitive use of plant medicines given by older kinsmen.

Instead what Kuna men stress in respect of women seers, is their powers of seduction, which men do not have (cf. Perruchon, 2003). Women are therefore considered able to become more powerful *nelekan* than men, by virtue of the fact that they can attract ancestral beings and learn from them more qickly than men and even sometimes without undergoing initiation. Differently from the Paracanã, who prevent women from acquiring shamanic capacities through dreaming (Fausto, 2001: 341-342), Kuna men do not conceive of women seers in a competitive sense and, I shall add that there are more male *nelekan* than female *nelekan*. What is interesting is the different way that men and women become *nelekan*, and it is to this aspect that attention is given below.

Dreams

"It is dangerous for the mother, for her health, if the baby to be born is a *nele*." This was told me by an old Kuna woman and it expresses well the general concern that surrounds the birth of a *nele*. The small creature is extremely powerful and represents a threat for its parents and particularly for its mother. It is generally held that a woman, when she expects a *nele*, has a difficult and painful pregnancy. She feels very weak

[125] A Kuna woman once told Margherita that one of her kinsman, who was homosexual, became pregnant but he could not give birth normally because he had no vagina, so he had to have a caesarean (Margiotti, personal communication).

throughout the pregnancy, suffers of severe headaches, has periods of fever and is prone to fainting. Usually an older kinsman (often the woman's father) evaluates the symptoms, and also asks his daughter what she has been dreaming. When all the signs lead to thinking that the foetus may be a *nele*, it is often suggested that the mother take medicines in order to prevent the baby from being born as a *nele*. In general it is her parents who take care of the pregnant woman during gestation. Her mother gives advice about how to deal with pregnancy, while the father, or another older kinsman who has specialist knowledge, deals with the problems related to pregnancy, such as those caused by a *nele* foetus. As a general explanation I was told that a *nele* has huge power and this affects the mother who bears him[126].

Along with the physical symptoms mentioned above, the dreams of a pregnant woman help in foretelling if the baby is going to be a *nele*. Some 'canonical' dreams (Basso, 1987b), function as revelatory signs of the innate powers of the baby. Dreaming is an experience through which the dreamer can see and interact within the immaterial dimension (*ney purpalet*), which is neither visible nor accessible in waking life, except for seers. *Kaptakket* means 'to dream', and is a compound verb formed by *kabe*, 'to sleep' and *takket*, 'to see'. As noted in chapter three, in reference to learning to carve wooden objects, the action of 'seeing' as crucial to the incorporation of specialist knowledge, either in dreams or in waking life. As Basso notes, "During dreaming the visual experience of a concept is associated directly with the acquisition of knowledge, 'seeing' – rather than 'watching' – being a form of 'understanding'" (*ibid*: 94). Through dreaming people can see what happens at the level of *purpa*, the immaterial dimension where humans, animals, trees, and all kinds of entities interact with each other. During dreams the *purpa* ('soul', 'immaterial double', or 'image')[127] of a person leaves the body and wanders around in the world, meeting *purpakan* of other beings. Therefore during dreams a person is able to see what happens to his or her own *purpa* as it interacts with other beings. People may also learn about what is going to happen either to themselves or to other people, by seeing them interacting with other *purpakan*. Or, as Basso puts it

[126] A similar statement about the power of shaman foetuses is contained in the Piro myth about 'The birth of Tsla (Gow, 2001: 104). The same motif is also contained in the Carib myth, 'The frog, the jaguar's mother' (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 219). In both myths the foetus is responsible for making the mother lose the right path, ending up in the jaguars' village.
[127] Cf. chapter two, note ten.

"[…] dreamers learn about themselves by literally seeing their *akua* ['interactive self', as she translates it]" (*ibid*: 94).

During particular moments of a person's life dreaming becomes more intense and more revelatory regarding one's transitional status. For a woman this happens particularly during pregnancy, especially as childbirth approaches. Pregnancy is the period, in a woman's life, in which she partakes in the *purpa* of her baby. Namely, by containing another person, she has two *purpakan* within her, which makes her more alive and more powerful on one hand, more attractive for otherworldly beings on the other. She is constantly in contact with the supernatural dimension, since her baby lives in between the two dimensions; between the physical world and the house of *Muu*. The contacts between the mother and powerful entities becomes even stronger when the baby is a *nele*, because, as Kuna people put it, animal entities are attracted by it. Therefore when a woman expects a *nele* her dreams contain particular signs that reveal the nature of the baby. She dreams of encountering beings and of receiving particular gifts from people, who are evidently from the cosmic domain. Below is an example taken from a conversation between me and a Kuna woman, who told me about a dream that she had when she was pregnant with her son:

> "One day I dreamed that I was amidst cocoa trees [*siawalakan*], there were also sweet basil plants [*pisepkana*]. A man came to me and told me that he was from the headwaters of the river. He gave me a pair of glasses [*ispe*]. When I told this dream to the specialist, he told me that my baby was going to be a *nele*."

I have chosen this example because all the elements of the dream are symbolically relevant. However in most cases single elements appear individually in women's dreams. Nonetheless each element, alone or grouped with others, leads toward the same conclusion: the baby is a *nele*. At the same time the mother, through her dream, learns something about herself and her future. By being pregnant with a *nele*, to a certain extent, the mother participates in her son's supernatural powers. What is the Kuna interpretation of the scene in the above dream?

First, of all they are scenes 'seen in dreams' (*kaptaileke*). Dreaming is the primary condition in which a person comes into contact with the supernatural. As we have seen above, during dreams a person's soul leaves the body and wanders thorough other dimensions of the world. Dreaming is considered by the Kuna, similarly to other

Amerindians, the privileged field of shamanic experience (cf. Kracke, 1989; Fausto, 2001). *Nelekan* meet their auxiliary spirits and they travel in the underworld in dreams. During dreams they also learn how to recognise illnesses and how to cure them.

Secondly, the man from the headwaters of the river represents a powerful entity. The headwaters of rivers are considered by Kuna people as a place where powerful creatures live and where people fear getting too close because of the risk of been pulled in by treacherous spirits. I was told that *saipa* lives here. *Saipa* is a creature also known by the Kuna as 'river siren', similar to the 'sea siren' (*ansu*). Both creatures are half fish and half woman and rarely show themselves to human beings. As I suggested in chapter two, evidence suggests that the sea siren could be the manatee (*Trichechus inunguis*) and the river siren could be the neotropical river otter (*Lutra longicaudus*). Most importantly, *saipa* as well as *ansu* are among the potential auxiliary spirits of the *nele*. For instance, I was told that the famous Nele Kantule, who lived in Ustupu, learned many things by travelling in dreams to the river Puturgandi, where he used to meet a *saipa*.

Then it comes to the glasses (*ispe*). Kuna people use the same word *ispe* to refer to spectacles and to mirrors. The ambivalence is worthy of note. On one hand, spectacles are intended as a sight-intensifier[128]. They clearly and explicitly refer to the powerful gaze of the *nele* and to his capacity to see beyond the limits of the visible. They point to his capacity to see plants and animals in their real form, which is that of a person, and to see within the human body, in order to recognise illnesses. On the other hand, mirrors are intensifiers of light. They refract as well as enhance the intensity of light. A *nele*, as I was told, may be born with a shining light on his forefront, showing the intense power reflecting through his body. Mirrors produce and reflect luminescence, which is one of the ways animal and tree entities manifest themselves to human beings (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2006). This could explain why, among the 'ingredients' for the medicinal baths

[128] Lévi-Straus (1982: 134) has noted the widespread representation in the Americas of 'cylindrical eyes', made by rolling out various materials, depending on the context. He also suggested that these objects have pre-Columbian origin, as archaeological findings in North America would support. "According to the Tlingit myths, Raven, the trickster, before leaving the Indians, had warned them that upon his return to earth, no one would be able to look at him with the naked eye without being turned to stone. Henceforward, one would have to espy him through a tube made of a rolled-up leaf of skunk cabbage. Thus, when La Pérouse's vessels were driven ashore in 1786, the neighboring Tlingit thought that these great birds, whose wings were the sails, were none other than Raven and his retinue. They hastily made up their curious telescopes. Equipped with protuberant eyes, they believed that they had thus enhanced their visual power, and now dared to contemplate the astonishing spectacle that presented itself to their sight" (*ibid*: 131).

of training *nelekan*, glasses and light bulbs are used with the aim of strengthening their capacity too see.

Moreover, Severi noted that the pictographic representation of the contagion between a human being and an animal is that of a spirit looking at its own image in a mirror (1993: 165). The ill person sees the reflection of his own image in dreams, only when his *purpa* had been 'contaminated' by an animal entity, when it becomes 'other' from itself. Maybe this could be related to the state of the pregnant woman, who, expecting a *nele*, perceives the alterity within herself. She perceives the 'contamination' between her unborn child and powerful spirits, and this 'contamination' indeed affects her also.

Finally cacao beans, (*siakwa*), are ususally burned in braziers by *nelekan* when they 'visit' a person. The smoke produced covers the face of the *nele* and enhances his sight. Cacao beans contain properties that help cure and sooth headaches and are burned during almost all curing rituals. Sweet basil, *pisep* (*Ocimum micranthum*), along with other sweetly perfumed leaves are added by *nelekan* to their bathing water. They perfume themselves before going to sleep at night and this attracts the *nuchukana*, their familiars, which come to visit them during dreams. Moreover sweet basil, along with other aromatic plants, such as *achuer yala* (*Lippia aff. Americana L.*) and *kokke* (*Hyptis suavolens L.*) are used by botanic specialists (*ina tuleti*) before going to the forest to collect plant medicines. *Nelekan* perfume their bodies before approaching the plants, asking for permission to cut a part of them, to help an afflicted person. Both cacao and sweet basil have an important function in the ritual praxis of *nelekan*. The first, through smoke, enhances the communication with the supernatural and acts by establishing a contact and a communication between separate realms. In this sense burning cacao can be understood as an enhancement of the sight of the *nele*, it helps him 'to see' within the human body, to see the *purpa* of a person. While the second has a seductive function, working as an attractor that men use when they go hunting or when they want to seduce a woman; botanic specialists use perfumed plants before they go gathering medicines in the forest; and *nelekan* and chanters bathe in aromatic plants when they want to attract their auxiliary spirits, the *nuchukana*[129]. Communication between separate realms and attractions of supernatural entities are both key features in the mastering of *nele*'s skills. The capacity to see is a skill that a *nele* has to master in order to learn from the supernatural, and it is necessary in order to establish contact with powerful entities. On

[129] See Perruchon (2003: 315-345) and Colpron (2005) for a discussion on the relation between shamanism and seduction.

the other hand, the capacity to attract or seduce is a key feature in establishing an agency within the supernatural world and makes the difference between *nelekan* and laymen. The *nele* is the one who has an agency in dreams and throughout his life he learns how to master them.

The interpretation of dreams is an important part of Kuna life. Dreams, by showing what is not visible in waking life, can both help to predict future events and to understand the underlying causes of certain manifestations in daily life (cf. Harner, 1972: 134). In the case of a pregnant woman her dreams may thus show if the baby has particular powers. Given the risks that the mother of the *nele* is exposed to, it is important to correctly interpret her dreams. It is a chief preoccupation for Kuna (grand)parents to help their daughters to prevent the risks incurred by the powers of *nele* foetuses. As soon as the parents of a pregnant woman discover that she is expecting a *nele*, they act to prevent this occurrence in the ways I describe below.

As I observed in Okopsukkun, there are people who are renowned for their ability to interpret dreams. These are normally older men or women, who learned through their life long experience of dreaming. Often these people told me that they learned by observing the relation between their dreams and what then happened in waking life. They then become able to interpret other people's dreams. Depending on their individual knowledge some Kuna grandfathers and grandmothers also become able to interpret dreams (*kabtakke otuloket*) and are thus attended by younger people, bewildered by their own dreams. The word used for 'interpreting' is *otuloket* and indicates the action of 'unfolding the meaning' of a discourse and it refers particularly to the interpretation of metaphors. Dreams as well as mythical chants are interpreted by a specialist. Their meaning is 'made alive' to the listeners[130]. "The link between dreaming and interpretation is metaphorical" (Basso, 1987b: 96). As it has been suggested by Howe (1977; 2002 [1986]) and Sherzer (2001 [1983]), mythical chants are performed by the *saylakan* ('chiefs') in the gathering house using a metaphorical language. After the performance of each chant an *arkar* ('spokesman')[131] interprets the meaning for the audience, who, especially in the case of younger people, do not understand the language of chants. Although the register is different, the language of

[130] The same word (*otuloket*) is also used when a ritual singer (*api sua*), sings to 'revive' a new *nuchu*, which means calling its *purpa* from the underworld.
[131] Interestingly the noun *arkar* seems to derive from the verb *arkaet*, 'to open'. He would thus be the one who opens the meaning of chants.

curing chants is metaphorical. In both cases only people who have learned specialist knowledge are able to associate particular images evocated by words with their meanings.

A mother in disguise

The dreams of an expectant mother are thus a way to diagnose her state and to ascertain whether the baby is going to be a *nele*. Once this condition has been established some precautions need to be taken in order to protect the mother. There is in fact one thing that scares Kuna mothers, and consequently their parents, namely that of the birth of a *nele* and this seriously threatens their lives. The general assumption is that the baby attracts powerful entities, which, once the baby is born, always try to kill the parents. I will explain the reasons for this in the next chapter. During her pregnancy the mother is victim to the uncontrolled power of the foetus and is sometimes overwhelmed by it, especially when the delivery moment approaches.

On more than one occasion I spoke with Aurolina Tuny, a Kuna woman of around forty years old, mother of the young Inaekikiña, almost twelve. For two months Margherita and I lived in her house, where she was living with her parents, her sister, her husband, their children and their first granddaughter. Aurolina told me that when she was pregnant with Inaekikiña, her third child, she was often ill with fever and used to have strong headaches. Her mother's brother, a botanic specialist (*ina tuleti*), told her that maybe it was because the baby was a *nele* and gave her and her husband plant medicines. These were meant to protect them, as Aurolina told me, from the attacks of the potential 'auxiliary spirits' (*tarpakan*) of their unborn baby[132]. For the preparation of the medicines, among other plants, her uncle used genipap (*sapturwala*) leaves, which have the propriety of making people invisible to spirits[133]. Taking these medicines and

[132] I call the 'auxiliary spirits' of the *nele* potential because clearly at this stage he has not established any power relation with them yet. Nonetheless the potentiality of this particular relationship is in itself a relationship.

[133] The black dye (*sichit*) produced using the genipap fruit is also used in other ritual occasions. In some curing rituals, children's bodies are completely painted with black genipap in order to make them invisible to pathogenic entities (as described by Chapin, 1997: 239-242). Also during the three day long female puberty ritual (*inna suit*), the secluded girl is entirely painted with black genipap dye. Whereas on a more daily basis genipap dye is used to trace a black line along the nose of women. In this case the aim is to make them beautiful (*yer taileke*) to the eyes of men. Piro girls make similar use of the genipap black dye. Before the beginning of the public ritual "[…] the secluded girl constantly blackens herself with

bathing in water mixed with forest plant medicines, will 'disguise' the parents of the *nele*. Aurolina used the expression *purpa otukkuoe*, meaning that the medicines 'will disguise her soul'. After this treatment they will not appear recognisable as his parents to supernatural entities.

It is interesting to compare this with the Piro use of black genipap dye during shamanic curing sessions. "When a person drinks *toé*, his or her close kin paint their faces black with *huito* paint, and avoid working. The face paint prevents the drinker from recognizing them" (Gow, 2001: 137). Piro people explain that the drinker of *toé*[134] (*Brugmansia* fam.) sees his or her kin as white, rotten tree fungi. "The taker of *toé* 'knows everything', and therefore sees Piro people's mortality, their general condition, as the ugly pallor of their faces." And as Gow concludes, '[a] kinsperson in *toé* hallucinatory experience no longer acts like a human, but like a malign powerful being. What Pablo told me about having 'no body' refers to the world as seen by the drinker. The drinker becomes a powerful being, like the mother of *toé*, and so experiences the world through the perceptual apparatus of a powerful being" (*ibid*: 137).

The case of the *nele* foetus differs indeed from that of the Piro drinker of *toé*. The foetus is not supposed to have an independent agency yet, whereas the drinker of *toé* is an adult person who already has an established knowledge of the world. Moreover he has a social human body, which has been 'created' through the loving and nurturing actions of his kinspeople, which also makes him a 'loving' and 'mindful' person (Gow, 2000). It is the metamorphosis of this body and the shift in the 'perceptual apparatus' of the drinker, that creates a danger for his or her kin. He or she is not able any more to see them as his or her own kin and thus, from his or her powerful condition, inflicts their future fatal illness. What instead happens with the *nele* foetus is that he is still devoid of the 'perceptual apparatus' of a human being, that is, a human body[135]. Indeed, he is also devoid of 'love' and 'memory' for his kin. It seems thus likely that the *nele* foetus is conceived by the Kuna as a 'refractor', or a 'mirror', who makes visible his kin to powerful cosmic beings. It causes its parents to be seen and thus to be victims of evil beings. The *nele* foetus is actually an intensifier of the condition of connectedness that his mother (and also his father) suffers during pregnancy.

---

huito. This is an image of invisibility, as the girl renders herself coextensive with the darkness" (Gow, 2001: 162).

[134] *Toé* is the Spanish name for a plant from the *Brugmansia* family in the Ucayali region of Peru.

[135] The relevance of the body in Amazonians' social organizations and its collective creation as a human body has been addressed by many scholars (see Seeger, Da Matta, Viveiros de Castro, 1979; Viveiros de Vastro, 1979; Vilaça, 2002; 2005).

If, as I will explain below, during every pregnancy a woman is more open to the cosmos than in normal conditions, I would argue that this state is intensified when she is carrying a *nele*. It was because of the need to escape from this over-intensification of contact with cosmic entities that Aurolina and her husband took *saptur* medicines when they suspected that their son was going to be a *nele*. But this had a consequence. In fact, as Aurolina told me, now Inaekikiña does not ask her for any food or drink. Instead, when he is hungry or thirsty he asks his grandmother. That, Aurolina thought, was the consequence of the medicines she took during pregnancy that prevented her from establishing a maternal relation with Inaekikiña and to be seen by him as his mother.

For the Kuna, as well as for many other South American indigenous people, the period of pregnancy and that after the birth (known as 'couvade') of a child is regarded as particularly delicate, and both the father and the mother have to deal with many restrictions and precautions. The primary aim being to ensure the birth and the growing up of a proper human baby, which is not a given fact for most Amerindians[136].

Kuna people aim, through their pre and post-natal restrictions, both to prevent the baby from assuming animal characteristics and to protect the mother (and in the case of the *nele* also the father) against cosmic evil agencies.

On one hand, in the pre-natal stage and right after the birth of a child there are many restrictions aimed at avoiding contact between the mother and the father with these animals that would contaminate the baby. The mother stops going to the forest and has to avoid eating game meat, particular kinds of fish, and strictly avoids eating and touching octopus, which is said to cause the baby to remain stuck within the womb and so does not descend during birth[137]. These practices are mainly intended to prevent the baby from being born with animal qualities. By the same token, the father has to avoid killing jaguars and snakes, which would cause the baby to be born 'on the side of the

[136] Pregnancy is also treated as a potentially dangerous state for other people. For example people bitten by snakes have to avoid closeness with pregnant women until they are completely cured, lest their condition worsens. Moreover, pregnant women, as well as men who have recently had sexual relations, are strictly avoid participating in all curing rituals, which would be rendered ineffective, as well as putting the lives of their ritual masters under threat.

[137] In general Kuna people in Okopsukkun did not eat octopus at all. As many people were curious about our eating habits, they often asked us if we ate octopus, reacting surprised when they knew that we did. In fact the Kuna do not consider octopus 'proper food'. They often commented that Colombians eat octopus, sharks and crocodile tails; all animals that are strictly avoided for their dangerous properties. Basically they claim that one acquires the properties of the animal one eats and in the case of sharks and crocodiles one would begin biting one's kinspeople. Divers in Okopsukkun used to catch octopus to sell it, along with lobster, crabs and Queen Conch meat ('cambombia' for Panamanians), to a Panamanian trader who travelled weekly in a small airplane from Panama City.

jaguar', or 'of the snake' (see chapter four). He also has to avoid seeing all kinds of anteaters and sloth, which would cause the baby to be born with an illness called *ipkuk*[138]. What the parents do and what they eat has a direct consequence in the formation of the body of the baby. They have to carefully avoid contaminations from animals that would make their baby not human, and they reckon that some animals are more evil and powerful than others. Not accidentally, these animals are the ones that may be the auxiliary spirits of *nelekan*.

On the other hand a pregnant woman spends most of her time at home. She does not go to the forest and restricts all of her movements to the minimum. This is done so as she is not seen by evil animal entities. The condition of invisibility is important in order to protect the mother from the predatory intentions of these animals. During pregnancy, as noted above, she is more open to cosmic agencies and thus more exposed to their predation. When a woman is pregnant Kuna people use the following two expressions *kurkin nikka kuti* ('she is with *kurkin*'), and *poni kuar kuti* ('she has an illness'). Both expressions point to the condition of openness to alterity. The *kurkin* is the 'hat' that connects the human body to the external world (see chapter four) and namely to cosmic alterity. To be with a *poni* suggests that the foetus is never seen fully as a human being, but as I shall describe below, it is still part of a non-human environment.

A pregnant woman needs thus to adopt a 'low profile', meaning that she has to hide from the gaze of predators. This is also reflected in the way Kuna women dress when they are pregnant: they stop wearing *mola* and *winni*, and instead they wear loose shirts, or just bras when they are at home. Even though the first thing that came to my mind was that her *mola* blouses and her *winni* beadwork would not fit when a woman's belly grows and her arms and legs swell, this is not the reason why she stops wearing them. I saw in fact many women adjusting the size of their blouses and beadwork, according to their new size. But this was never done during pregnancy. I suspect that this has to do with the condition of invisibility that a woman aims to achieve when expecting a baby. She does not want to be 'very visible' (*yer taileke*) as she would normally like to be. Thus she stops wearing her beautiful *molakana* and *winni*, preventing the gaze of men, and of cosmic entities, from being attracted by the sight of her beauty.

[138] This was sometimes translated as 'epilepsy' and described as an illness that manifests sporadically during a person's life and can be transmitted through generations.

Kuna people say that babies come from outside the world inhabited by humans. They say that babies come from *muu neka* or Sappipe-neka, the house inhabited by the spiritual grandmothers (*muukana*) and by the masters of trees (*sappi ipkana*)[139]. *Muu neka* also means in ritual language 'maternal womb', while in everyday language it indicates the maternity house, situated near the shore of the island towards the open sea[140]. The maternity house is one of the places that a *nele* would visit during his dreams in order 'to learn'. As was described to me more than once, it appears in dreams as a house surrounded by various types of animals. These animals wander about outside the house, waiting to steal human babies.

All these elements point to the coexistence of separate domains interacting with each other and to the immanence of the supernatural in Kuna cosmology. The separation between domains is a matter of perspective and not a fixed, unchangeable border. Kuna people acknowledge that during certain moments of the life of a person, or during particular ritual events, this separation becomes less and the connection between human beings and the cosmos increases. One of these moments is when a woman is pregnant, hence her efforts to become invisible. My aim here has been to show how this connection becomes even stronger when a *nele* is conceived and therefore how additional precautions have to be taken, such as in the case of Aurolina and her husband, who hid themselves through the use of *saptur*.

As it has been pointed out in the previous chapter, the lack of designs on the *nele*'s *kurkin* at birth shows his 'invisibility' to his adult kinspeople; but by the same token it shows his 'hyper-visibility' to cosmic entities. This is a problem of perspective. What happens instead with normal children, is that their designs at birth often show the link with some particular animals. The midwife assisting the birth is able to read and interpret these designs[141]. Thereby the baby's kinspeople are responsible for calling a

[139] Cf. chapter two and three for a description of both kinds of entities.
[140] Okopsukkun is the only village in Kuna Yala that still has a *muu neka*. However, women from Okopsukkun have the choice to give birth there, followed by Kuna midwives, or in the health centre of Ustupu, where Panamanian and Kuna midwives work together. The *muu neka* and the health centre are only a few metres from one another.
[141] Here the point becomes slightly more complex, because not all illnesses, as above, are diagnosed at birth. Sometimes in fact the link with an animal may be discovered by ritual specialists in the course of the life of a person and then it is treated. This points to an interesting issue regarding the nature of the *kurkin* as the place where designs (bearing the sign of the relationship with animal predator) are written. I shall discuss this point later on in this chapter, for the time being noting that people's brains (*kurkin*) is the place where relationships with cosmic alterity take place first. It is the physical locus of the

botanic specialist (*ina tuleti*) to provide the right medicines to break the link between the baby and the particular type of animal. The baby will normally be bathed for a specific amount of time (normally eight days) and then will be 'seen' by an adult *nele* to verify the results of the medicine. This operation is phrased as 'closing the path' (*ikar opurret*), impeding the animal entities from finding their way to the body of the baby. Normal children are thus made invisible to animal entities after their link to them has been seen by adult kinspeople. By the same token, *nele* children, who already are visible and who refract their parents' images to animal entities, need to be rendered opaque in order to protect their mothers and fathers.

Sealing the *kurkin*

I shall now explore another way in which a pregnant woman tries to make herself invisible to cosmic alterity. This is done by 'sealing the *kurkin*' (*kurkin etinne*) of her *nele* foetus. In this way the foetus is prevented from acting as a 'mirror' and so cause his parents to be seen by evil entities. By closing his *kurkin* he will not be able to establish contact with animal and tree entities. The 'sealing' of the *nele*'s *kurkin* is thus meant to prevent him from being born with the qualities of a *nele*. This, however, will have negative effects on the child.

Aurolina's father, Reinaldo, told her when she was pregnant with Inaekikiña to take special medicines in order to 'seal the *kurkin*' of her unborn son. Thus a botanic specialist was contacted and Aurolina took plant medicines. This prevented her son from becoming a *nele*. "This is why", Aurolina explained to me, "Inaekikiña left the school before finishing the primary education", pointing to the fact that he has always been a lazy learner. This is also why he is not able now to see *nuchukana* in dreams and thus he is not able to learn from them. Inaekikiña's uncle, Uigiño, Aurolina's youngest brother, added to our conversation once: "Ina gets scared when he dreams of *nuchukana*, because he is still too young. He has to grow up to become a real *nele*, to talk to *nuchukana*."

---

encounters with supernatural forces. This of course reminds us again of what Lévi-Strauss (1995: 8) pointed out about the role of the hat in connecting divided domains.

When I knew Inaekikiña through my permanence in his mother's house, he was always a smiling and quite boy. He did not go to school and therefore hung around the house during the mornings, waiting for his father to return from the forest with plantains, manioc or wood for the fire. Sometimes he went off fishing with his uncle or his brother-in-law. Sometimes he organized fishing expeditions with his peers, with whom he also played football on the path in front of the house, or other games as they pleased. He never seemed very willing to follow his father Roysito into the forest. His attitude toward work seemed playful and his trips to the sea or into the forest were aimed rather at enjoying the company of friends, like the other boys of his age. Nonetheless his attitude has never been forced by his older relatives. Inaekikiña had a close relationship with his grandmother Aurora, Aurolina's mother, with whom he spent a lot of time at home, at times helping with house chores. She used also to send him to buy things from the small shops ('tiendas') in the village, or to buy kerosene at night for topping up the lamps of the house. In general he was a happy and tranquil boy like most of his peers. All discourses about being a *nele* I used to hear seemed to me detached from Inaekikiña's experience.

One day, during the last month of my fieldwork, he suffered an extremely painful headache. He remained at home, lying in his hammock for three days, eating a little and visibly in pain. Aurora had no doubt that the cause of her grandson's pain was the fact that he was a *nele* and his 'intelligence had been closed' before he was born. She told me that her grandson was suffering because his auxiliary spirits (*tarpakan*) were forcing the entrance through his *kurkin*. They were upset at being let down by him. Thus Aurora told me that they had contacted a ritual specialist from the nearby island of Mammitupu. The old man, an *api sua*, knew the medicine for initiating *nele* and for healing their *kurkin* (*kurkin ina nerkan-kadi*). All the preparations were made quickly, in order to leave in the next few days, and money, always the critical issue, had to be found soon for paying the specialist.

Aurolina told me that this sort of medicine is very expensive. It may cost between $30 - $40 (a huge amount of money for a Kuna family in Okopsukkun). On top of that they had to buy cigarettes, light bulbs and glasses to be used along with plant medicines. Then I also recalled a conversation I had previously had with a Kuna friend, who told me that the plant used for the medicines for *nele* are very difficult to find and one in particular (*kartup*, unidentified plant) is only to be found in the forest deep

inland[142]. Therefore the specialist has to walk far into the forest and sometimes stay away for days.

Aurolina had said to me in previous conversations that a *nele* is a great problem for his family. Paying for the specialist and for all the tobacco to be smoked during the initiatory ceremony amounts to a large sum of money, which they could never afford. Although if the initiation succeeds the *nele* will pay back the money through his work. This is why they have never bathed Inaekikiña in medicine before. But this suddenly became vital when he started suffering severe headaches.

I shall add also that many people told me that until the recent past the ceremonies for the initiation of a *nele* were supported by the whole community. There was a collective participation in the ceremony, adult men and old women smoked tobacco for days within the prescribed hut and the community took the responsibility of covering all the expenses. It is no longer like this and families have to deal with the economic burden alone. They also have to pay the people who are responsible for the ritual smoking of tobacco during the ceremony. Such expenses are rarely within the reach of an average Kuna family of Okopsukkun. There are normally two solutions: asking someone to lend the money or delaying the initiation of the young *nele* until his condition requires an urgent intervention. In this case they will be forced to ask for the intervention of the ritual master and so also to find the money in some way.

Aurora did not tell me how they eventually got the money. One possibility is that the money came from her husband, Reinaldo and their four sons who were all divers and thus able to earn good money rapidly by catching and selling lobsters to a Panamanian trader. But the fact that, despite the high cost for the operation the money had been found quickly, made evident the relevance of Inaekikiña's problem, which before seemed to me completely neglected by his family members. It seems to me that their behaviour corresponds to the broader tendency of delaying *nele* children's initiation as long as possible to protect the parents.

This behaviour is also in line with the medicines that Aurolina took during her pregnancy to 'seal the *kurkin*' of Inaekikiña. All these practices point to the unwillingness of Kuna people to have *nele* children. In Aurolina's words there was more than just a complaint about money. I think that what was at stake was also, and

[142] The description of this plant, I was told, resembled a pineapple plant, which, instead of the pineapple fruit, amidst the pointed leaves contains a transparent fruit, similar to a shining crystal (*ispe*)!

more importantly, the maintenance of a safe equilibrium; everyone knew, while Inaekikiña was well no one seemed to worry about it. But when he began to suffer, he elicited the compassion (*wile takke*) of his kinspeople, especially of his grandmother Aurora. She saw him in his state of suffering and loneliness and decided that the moment had come to 'open his intelligence' (*kurkin arkaet*), which would have been the first step in his ritual initiation as a *nele*.

Stealing the *kurkin*

I will now consider another case, that of a woman *nele* who told me that she acquired her capacity to see after she 'stole her son's *kurkin*' when she was pregnant. This case is particularly relevant for shedding light on Kuna female shamanism. I will suggest that 'stealing the *kurkin*' of their *nele* foetuses is the way Kuna women become seers. This would explain why many people in Okopsukkun told me that women *nele* are not born as such, but they become a *nele* when they are grown up, or, as some people put it, 'they become a *nele* along the way."[143]

I do not want to make any generalization about fixed gender differences in Kuna shamanism here. I am aware that shamanism is in itself an extremely open and flexible category and does not reflect, as such, fixed local socio-cultural specificities. Moreover, Kuna people themselves consider the role of *nelekan* as one that has changed over time. I was told that in the past *nelekan* were more powerful; they were able to transform into jaguars or snakes; they used to travel physically through the underworld; they possessed the capacity to kill people through sorcery, to cut trees with the power of the mind, or to cause thunderstorms (cf. Nordenskiöld, 1938: 85-87). All these capacities are no longer possessed by *nelekan*[144].

[143] It is interesting to see what Perruchon (2003: 338) says about the Shuar female shamans. "Women could, however, become shamans before marrying and having children, even if there seems to be a difference between women and men in the age of shamanic initiation."

[144] There are also stories about eight mythic *nelekan*, who were extremely powerful and knowledgeable. Each one specialized in a particular type of knowledge; one for instance ventured into the land of the dead, another learned everything about the life of birds, while another discovered how the entire world was composed of five continents. Unfortunately these *nelekan* became 'poisoned' by their knowledge (Overing, 1985a) and started to tyrannize Kuna ancestors. Eventually Kuna ancestors killed the leader of these *nelekan*, Tiegun, with the help of the young *nele* Kuani. Other versions of the 'great *nelekan*' stories have been collected also by Nordenskiöld (1938: 278-322), Chapin (1989: 128-166) and Wakua, Green, Peláez (1996: 87-99).

The presence of women *nele* in the past seems to have been more widespread than in present times (*ibid*: 82). I am sure therefore that the situation I observed during my time in Okopsukkun is the transformation of previous conditions. The life of Kuna people has changed much since they lived in small, semi-nomadic groups in the forest. The figure of the *nele* was more that of a political leader, responsible for the survival of the whole group (cf. Overing, 1989). The *nele* was the one who decided where it was safe to move the village and he was responsible for good hunting by the men (cf. Århem, 1996). Moreover women had a more direct relationship with the forest and its plants, as they used to garden before moving to the islands. While nowadays they spend much of the time in the village (cf. chapter one). In general Kuna people told me that '*anmar tatkan, anmar muukana pulekana*', 'our grandfathers and our grandmothers were powerful', adding that they knew many things and worked much harder than Kuna people today.

I intend also to clarify that the following argument is restricted to the figure of the *nele*, as there are women who possess botanic knowledge, know how to prepare medicines, and know short curing songs. There are also midwives, who are specialized in birth related medicines and in the ritual process taking place after childbirth, involving the cutting of the umbilical cord and the burying of the placenta. Moreover, the wives of curing specialists know how to prepare medicines from plants and they often help their husbands, who sometimes just take the plants from the forest and leave their wives to prepare the medicines[145].

The contemporary role of female *nele* is not dissimilar to that of male *nele*. Even though there are fewer women than men, I was often told that women *nele* are more powerful than men[146]. This is due to the fact that they can learn more quickly than male *nelekan*. As I will explain further in chapter seven, a *nele* learns by seducing an animal partner. In the case of men, this leads to a more or less stable relationship with an animal woman. This is described as a marriage union, where the *nele* has to learn from his 'supernatural' father-in-law. While women *nele*, as Kuna men told me, are more free, they can seduce as many animal entities as they want, and each time they learn something new. Seduction is thus considered their most powerful quality (cf. Perruchon,

[145] The role of women in curing processes is more complex and I heard many old women saying that they knew curing songs but they did not sing them in public because they were ashamed. What this means is still obscure to me.
[146] Fausto (2001: 341) says that the Parakanã conceive women as possessing a more powerful knowledge than men, by virtue of their 'smell of blood'.

2003: 326-327). Women are beautiful and men cannot resist them. Men, instead, have to resort to medicines to seduce women. This situation is both true in human social life and in the relationships with cosmic entities.

When I was in Okopsukkun I was keen to meet a woman *nele* and I knew that there were few of them; but people told me that they were quite old and they 'did not see' people any more. *Tule takket* ('to see people') refers to the capacity of *nele* to 'see' within a person's body, discovering the causes of an illness. Plus, none of them seemed to be keen to speak with me.

Prisilla Diaz arrived in Okopsukkun on April 2004, after having been living in Panama City for some months. I first met her because she used to come to Nixia's house, where Margherita and I were living. She was called 'to see' Nixia and to give her medicines for her pregnancy. One day, after having listened to the experiences of Nixia and her sister-in-law about their pregnancies (see dialogue in chapter four), she explained about her personal experience and how she became a *nele*:

> "When I was expecting my first child I used to dream of glasses (*ispekan*). My father then told me that this meant that my son would have had lots of *kurkin*. He would have been a *nele*. Then he gave me medicines to leave my son's *kurkin* in the grandmother's house (*muu neka*). It so happened that his *kurkin* remained with me and gradually I became a *nele*, whilst my son has always been a dunce at school.

Considering the awareness of Kuna people of the risks that the mother of a *nele* undergoes, it is perfectly understandable that Prisilla's father gave her medicines to 'leave her son's *kurkin* in the grandmother's house'. What adds a new interesting meaning here is that Prisilla claimed that she became a *nele* as a consequence of this.

So far we have seen three types of action aimed at protecting the *nele*'s mother (and his father): making the parents invisible to cosmic entities; 'sealing the *kurkin*' of the *nele*; and 'stealing the *kurkin*' of the *nele*. In the last two cases plant medicines were used to manipulate the *kurkin* of the foetus. The aim, in both cases, was to prevent the foetus from attracting wild animal entities who will see the mother as a potential victim. 'Sealing the *kurkin*', in Inaekikiña's case, or 'leaving it in the grandmother's house', in Prisilla's case, are two actions that work toward the same aim but have different outcomes. The first obscures the baby's lightening *kurkin*, preventing the possibility of

establishing a relationship with powerful entities. The second is intended to deprive the foetus of its powerful attributes[147].

I had few opportunities to speak with Prisilla, after that first meeting, and I soon realized that her status was different from that of other women. She must have been in her late forties or early fifties and she was born in Ustupu, where she had been married to her previous husband, whom she had divorced. She then spent periods in Panama City, living at her relatives'. When she came back she moved to the house of her father's kinspeople in Okopsukkun, where her son was married. She then got re-married to a widower in Okopsukkun and moved to his house. This relationships, however, did not last long and after they split she moved to live on another island.

All these events contrast with the normal life course of Kuna women. Matri-uxorilocality is the usual pattern of residence among the Kuna, although it is not a rule, in case of divorce, or temporary split, it is the man who moves back to his maternal house. Women tend to live with their sisters in their mother's house, and if they move this is normally done by building a new house and making space for the growing number of kinspeople in the original houshold. Also in these cases the uxorilocal residence is the preferred way of living[148].

Prisilla moved from her house and from her village, and then to the house of her new husband. All these things are quite unusual for Kuna women. What I gathered from people's comments was that the reason for her behaviour was because she was a *nele*. Even though, as for all *nelekan*, her credibility as seer was often doubted, being a *nele* was considered the cause for her eccentric way of living. Sometimes she visited Nixia's house everyday, bringing her medicines and giving her advice, then she would disappear for few days, forgetting to bring over new medicines. Her permanence in Okopsukkun, as far as I could observe, saw a rapid increase in popularity and then a sudden decline. Since people discovered that she was a *nele* she was called by many people to make a diagnosis or to help during pregnancy. She was very busy for a couple of months. Then people started commenting that she was not a proper *nele*, that she was not telling the truth (*kakkansae*, 'to lie') and soon she became quite unpopular. This

[147] It is interesting to compare this with what Gow (2000: 57).suggests about Piro female shamans. "Women also become shamans, but they do not, to my knowledge, engage in long shamanic apprenticeships. While this was never made explicit to me, I have the impression that women attain their access to shamanry through miscarried foetuses and children who died in infancy."

[148] See Margiotti Ph.D. thesis for an analysis of the Kuna system of residence and of the fragmentation of residential groups through the time.

caused her split with her new husband and soon I came to know that she had moved to another island, where she began to work again as a *nele*.

The increase and decrease of popularity is quite a common aspect in the life of male and female *nelekan*. I often heard contrasting comments about individual *nelekan* and realized that a *nele* often experiences 'good' and 'bad' moments in his or her life. Often the solution is to retire to private life and stop working as a *nele*. This prevents the *nele* from becoming unpopular, especially because the *nele* is the first person blamed in the case of an unsuccessful cure.

Another common aspect of *nelekan* is that of working in villages other than their own. For instance one *nele* used to come in Okopsukkun from the coastal village of Mansukkun, a distance several hours away travelling by motorboat. He was highly regarded by the majority of people in Okopsukkun and his skills in seeing people's illnesses were considered superior to those of any of the *nelekan* in Okopsukkun and Ustupu. To trust more shamans from neighbouring villages, neither to close, nor too distant, is quite a common aspect of Amazonian shamanism. This is often linked to the possibility that a shaman may also be a sorcerer and therefore liable to be accused when an illness or a death occurs (cf. for instance Harner, 1972). Accusations of sorcery also have the negative outcome of causing social tensions between groups of kin; therefore the sorcerer also "[…] threatens the very possibility of collective life" (Teixeira-Pinto, 2004: 218). It is thus considered safer to call a shaman from another group, preventing the possibility of internal conflicts.

What Prisilla achieved, through her unstable residence, was not to be associated with any specific kinship group. This gave her the freedom to move freely and to practice as a seer without the restrictions of kinship. Besides this reason for possible social conflicts, it must be added that for women seers there is the additional problem of having a jealous husband. Seers meet their sexual partners in dreams, from whom they learn. As noted above the seductiveness of women is regarded as an advantage for shamanic learning, but this also makes female *nelekan* be seen as somewhat unfaithful. Once I was told that a man made his wife *nele* stop dreaming, because he was jealous. But I do not think that the reason is that Kuna men are more jealous than women, the reverse could easily be said to be the case. I think rather that the solution to this problem might reside in the fact that male *nelekan* have permanent partners in dreams, while women change many of their partners. Kuna people say that the behaviour of a *nele* in dreams is paralleled by his or her behaviour in waking life. Although I did not explore

what this means any further, it clearly seems to me a statement that highlights the gender differences between Kuna seers and their implications in social life.

Mutual exclusivities

To conclude, I will dwell on some aspects concerning the *kurkin* as a bodily attribute in the light of what Prisilla told me. If the *kurkin* is responsible for the *nele*'s capacity to see, and if it can be stolen from the unborn child by the mother, what does all this mean?

As noted in the previous chapter, the *kurkin* is the hat made of pre-natal substances. It is the bodily attribute that enables human beings to learn both from the supernatural and from other people. It mediates in the acts of learning and creating. But the *kurkin* is both the 'hat' of the foetus, which will then become the 'brain' of the baby, and the 'amniotic sac', which separates the mother from the foetus. So, as in the above-mentioned case of Prisilla, the *kurkin* was stolen from the foetus and remained with the mother. The son was born without any particular ability, and, as she said, he then "was a dunce at school." The passage of *kurkin* between the son and the mother happened at the level of *purpa*, but it is regarded as a bodily shift, that is the mother retaining something that originally belonged to her son.

This image becomes more powerful if we consider the double meaning of *muu neka*, as the 'house of the spiritual grandmothers' and the mother's 'womb'. The maternal womb and the house of the spiritual grandmothers are the same thing. The foetus is contemporarily living in the mother's womb and in the spiritual realm, where it receives the *kurkin* from the ancestral grandmothers, depositaries of cultural skills. The *nele* foetus causing the mother to be seen by animal entities, also gives her the capacity to see. She participates in her son's powers. The 'capacity to see' is initially experienced by the mother during her dreams. As described above, she sees animal entities as people and sees the mirrors/glasses that are the sign that her son is a powerful being.

Going back to the white *kurkin* of *nele*, it is possible to say that it is an open door to the world of *purpa*, the world of unfixed forms of powerful beings. We can now add that it provides access to this world either for the mother or for the baby. During pregnancy both share this potential access, but after birth only one of them will retain it.

The mother, as in the case of Prisilla, can acquire the *kurkin* of the son, or the son, as in the case of Inaekikiña, can maintain his *kurkin*, even though it had been closed before his birth.

Mother and baby are a (complementary) whole that breaks up after the birth of the baby. But as in the case presented above, this unity may be broken before birth, causing the earlier separation between mother and son and giving the mother the powers of the son. Her capacity to see depends thus upon the incapacity 'to see' of her son. This capacity is exclusive and seems the exact reverse of the previous case described to me by Aurolina: if the *nele* develops his capacity to see fully, if he becomes a real *nele*, his mother will stop seeing altogether, she will die. The capacity to see of one depends upon the incapacity to see or even the death of the other[149].

There is a connection between the two main features that the Kuna ascribe to *kurkin*: 'intelligence' and 'capacity to see'. Both features have been described so far as fairly independent, but what I want to show from now on is their intrinsic interconnectedness. Intelligence is having good *kurkin*, and it entails the capacity to see and to grasp the inner property of things. Intelligence is intended by the Kuna as the capacity to learn, to acquire knowledge. Being intelligent (*nono nueti* – 'good head') means to be able to learn many things quickly. On the contrary, being obtuse (*nono serreti* – 'hard head') means being forgetful and slow to learn things. Indeed intelligence and obtuseness are not unchangeable fixed characteristics for the Kuna. As I stressed before, being born with 'good *kurkin*' means that a person has the possibility to develop particular skills, it does not mean that the person is already intelligent[150]. At the same time a boy who is not good at school, may be sent by his parents during vacations to another village to bathe in medicines to increase his learning abilities.

In the experience of the *nele* it is even clearer how seeing is connected to learning. The learning experience of a *nele* is a purely visual one. Nightmares, as noted in the previous chapter, are the distorted visions of a young untrained *nele*, who will then be trained to transform them into proper visions. Dreaming is a form of knowledge too, and it is connected to shamanic experience, with the only difference that normal

[149] I find the analogy with what in psychophysics are called 'multistable objects' appealing here, these are visual illusions in which a given representation can be seen in two ways, but the two perspectives are mutually exclusive. Such as the example of the Necker cube. The *kurkin* of *nele* enables either the mother or the son to see cosmic transformations, provided that one of them is not able to see them.

[150] Amazonian scholars have stressed the importance of teaching children sociality to develop love, will and responsibility (Overing 1985a; Belaunde, 2000).

dreamers cannot control their dreams and they do not know if what they dream is an 'authentic image' or a 'fake appearance'. A *nele*, once trained, is able to distinguish, because he learned to see the real images (*purpa*) beyond surface appearances.

Pushing the argument presented in the previous chapter further it could be said that the designs on the *kurkin* of the *nele* are invisible to human beings, but are visible to cosmic entities. It is therefore a matter of perspective. What human beings see as white, animal entities see as designed and beautiful. Human beings are compelled by designs (cf. Gow, 1989), while animal entities are attracted by intense lights refracted by mirrors and intensified through glasses (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2006).

The *kurkin* of *nelekan* is what enables them 'to see' and 'to be seen' by animal entities. It is for this reason that an adult *nelekan* will use cacao beans and tobacco smoke to increase their capacity to see and will bathe in water perfumed with sweet basil to attract and seduce their companion spirits. The blank *kurkin* of *nelekan*, beginning from their pre-natal life, is like an open door between humans and supernatural entities. A door that adult Kuna people would often prefer to remain closed. The *kurkin* therefore might be considered as the bodily locus through which relations with alterity take place.

The *kurkin* is thus an attribute of the human body that is possible to manipulate. The head of the newborn is often fumigated by burning cacao beans in clay braziers. This is done to fortify the brain (*kurkin okannoket*) of the babies, to prevent attacks from evil forces. If this action is not performed in the early months of life, the child may suffer from headaches later on, as the result of its *kurkin* being weak (*nollokwa*) or closed.

The *kurkin* of young babies must therefore be prepared by adult kinspeople, for the baby to grow up an intelligent and healthy child. Moreover when a person grows up, he or she may decide at some point to undergo ritual treatment for enhancing their *kurkin*. For example, a man who wants to learn ritual chants or myths may decide to increase his learning capabilities. Most ritual treatments are performed during periods of seclusion, conducted in a different household than that where the man is living. Normally the man moves to the house of the botanic specialists who prepares the medicines for him. It is important that he does not go out during the day. During ritual treatment, the *kurkin* of the patient is treated with plant medicines and is more sensitive to the heat produced by the sun, which could cause pain to the secluded and make the

treatment fail. He can go out for his physiological needs only during the night. He also has to follow a particular diet, avoiding game meat and big fish, and eating mainly coconut and plantain or rice soup. Medicines, depending on the type of goal that needs to be achieved, comprise of plant medicine baths (*ina opet*), which the secluded would pour over his head repeatedly during the day. The water also has a refreshing property, which, as opposed to the heat of the sun, helps plant medicines to have effects on the body of the secluded[151].

The process through which the ritual seclusion and the use of medicines work was once described to me as follows. First a path must be opened for the medicines to work. At this stage, I was told, the brain (*kurkin*) must be softened and should reach a rubber-like consistency; it is the same as when a person makes a strainer (*kuipu*) from a halved calabash. He makes the holes using an awl. Similarly the brain of the secluded is prepared to receive the treatment. The first type of plant medicine used is, intended to make the brain permeable to the action of further medicine.

The secluded enters thus a 'liminal stage', during which he has to follow a strict set of ritual avoidances, a special diet, avoiding the light of the sun, avoiding sex and in general avoiding closeness with any young woman. Then a particular plant, depending on the specific outcome to be achieved, is used for bathing. For example, to increase the capacity of memorizing long ritual chants or myths, a particular vine is used as medicine. Its name in Kuna is *ake pantup* and it is a hook shaped vine, which has the property of attracting things (*inmar kaet*). At the end of the seclusion, another medicine is used to reinforce the *kurkin* of the secluded and to allow him to go back to his normal life.

The *kurkin* is thus a central attribute of the human person, formed by the spiritual grandmothers and worn by foetuses in their pre-natal life. Then it is retained as an internalized body part throughout each person's life. Childbirth is the only brief moment in which the *kurkin* is visible to normal human beings. This brief moment speaks about the crossing of limits between the life of *purpa* and the life of *sana*; the immaterial life of unstable forms and the material life of (relatively) fixed forms. It is a moment in which the baby appears complete to the eyes of the beholders, showing its potentiality, its characteristics, its weakness, and its mortality; similarly to how the Piro

[151] See also the opposition between the heat of the sun associated to madness and the coolness of the moon associated to positive shamanic power among the Piaroa (Overing 1985a).

drinker of *toé* sees his kinspeople when hallucinating: pale and helpless. It shows what will no longer be visible to the eyes of normal people. The *kurkin* will then become invisible and only *nelekan* will be able to see it. It is the full visibility of the newborn and the fact that its kinspeople feel pity for him (*wile takket*), they see him in his helplessness and fragility, that renders the baby able to establish social relationships with its adult kinspeople (cf. Gow, 2000). I was told that in the case of a newborn *nele*, he is regarded with yet more pity, because of his higher fragility and loneliness. He is a child who will never be close to his mother. As Aurora once told me referring to Inaekikiña: "I feel great pain for my grandson, I want him to be well."

Visibility is thus the possibility to establish relationships, in waking life as much as in dreams. 'To see' (*taket*) and 'to be seen' (*taileke*) are equally important for both the newborn and its kinspeople. On one hand adult people see the newborn and recognize important signs about its nature. On the other, the baby, by being seen, receives the love and care necessary to grow up and survive the early stages of its life. Visibility is the precondition for relationships; invisibility is their negation.

What has emerged in this chapter is that for the mother of a *nele* it is suggested she avoid establishing a maternal relation with her son in order to not to be visible to cosmic entities. The precautions taken during pregnancy prelude, and in some way also cause, the future detachment between the mother and the son. The mother will not have to be recognized as the mother of the *nele*, lest she be attacked by animal entities. As a consequence, the severing of the relationship between mother and son creates the possibility for either the son or the mother to become a *nele*[152]. One last bit of ethnography needs to be added here. The birth of a *nele* is a particularly dangerous moment for the mother, because she may die during the birth. I heard once that a woman fainted before giving birth to her *nele* baby, and she was semi conscious during the delivery. Thus she did not see her son when he was born, somewhat suggesting an anticipation of future detachment from him.

There is thus an existential state of suffering and loneliness that emerges looking closer at the birth and life of Kuna seers. Either the son is going to be quite a lonely and

[152] It is of interest here to compare with the Gimi's rites of passage from Papua New Guinea (Gillison, 1997), where the men have to steal the knowledge from women, in order to become adult. They have in fact to overcome the fact that women always see them, by virtue of the fact that they see them when they are born. Men thus play the flutes during their initiation and keep them strictly away from the sight of women. To become invisible to women men thus acquire the capacity to see, their new male knowledge.

suffering boy, with the possibility of seeing other people's perishable condition, or the mother has to put up with her new condition of being a seer, which may entail that she moves from her household, away from her own kinswomen.

Chapter 6

Tarpa or what lies between us

In this chapter I will deal with the major problem that has emerged from the analysis of the birth of *nelekan*, namely that the mother and the father of the seer are bound to die. What are the reasons for this? Why do the animal entities that are the auxiliary spirits of the *nele*, want to kill his mother and his father? What does this tell us about the way Kuna people conceive their relationship with supernatural alteriy?

Answering these questions entails a description of the complex concept of *tarpa*, analyzed in the first two sections of this chapter. I will then deal with how Kuna people conceive the relation between human beings and animals. This, I suggest, must be investigated by looking into myths. Namely, I will take into account one Kuna myth, which describes the killing of the mother of the octuplet mythic heroes, comparing it to other related South American myths. I will finally argue that shamanism is closely linked to what it is to be human for the Kuna. By the same token exploring the human condition, birth and death, and the way they are portrayed in myths leads to a better understanding of Kuna shamanism. This could also mean that shamanism is just one way to explore the ontology of indigenous people and cannot be artificially detached from other spheres of daily life.

The other outside

I first came across a definition of *tarpa* when speaking about *nelekan* with Kuna people in Okopsukkun. *Tarpa* (pl. *tarpakan*) is what Kuna people call the entities with which a *nele* associates in the underworld, his auxiliary spirits, as normally defined in

ethnographic literature on Amerindian shamanism. However, it would be too simple to limit the definition of *tarpa* to this single aspect. I will show below that the Kuna theory of *tarpa* is rather complex. I suggest that generally it points to two issues: a relationship of mediation and help towards the attainment of a specific goal, and an extension of the human body beyond its material limits.

All *nelekan* have *tarpa*. Since his birth a *nele* is approached by his *tarpakan*, which want to establish a relationship with him and take him with them. Having *tarpa* also means that the *nele* has the means to access the supernatural power. *Tarpakan* allow him to establish contact with the chiefs of animals and to learn secret knowledge from them[153]. Once the *nele* has grown up and has undergone his initiation he is able to control his *tarpakan* and to make them work as mediators and helpers in his quest for knowledge. But when the *nele* is still a child, his *tarpakan* are dangerous and uncontrolled forces. They get close to him and try to establish contacts. Kuna people told me that *tarpakan* surround the young *nele*, they are always close to him. For this reason he might see them in his dreams, and, as I described in chapter four, he gets scared by seeing their transformed monstrous appearance.

In some way *tarpakan* perceive the young *nele* as one of their kind, one with whom it is possible to establish a relationship. More precisely, as we will see later in this chapter, they want to establish a kinship relation with the *nele*. The risks for the young *nele* are high, because he is still not strong enough to deal with them, nor is he prepared to master their forces. He also has to learn how to mediate between his powerful allies and his human kinspeople. When he is still young he has not yet developed 'memory and thought' (*pinsaet*), and 'he does not yet know the world' (*ampa ney wichuli*). Thus, he will easily reveal the identity of his parents when his *tarpakan* ask him. But what he does not know yet is that his *tarpakan* want to kill his parents. The reason for this is because they want the child completely for themselves.

It is only by strengthening his *purpa* ('soul', 'image', 'semen') and his *kurkin* ('brain'), through ritual seclusion and with the use of plant medicines under the supervision of an older ritual specialist (*api sua*), that the young *nele* will prepare to meet the *tarpakan*. This strength will be the pre-condition to approaching powerful entities, to make them his *tarpakan*, and to start 'learning' (*nerkue*). This process of

[153] See chapter two for a discussion on the relation between animals and their chiefs.

preparation will continue during the growth of the *nele*, who will eventually get married and have children, both within this world and in the world of supernatural beings. Learning to master his shamanic powers and having a family are two intertwined sides of the shamanic formation of a *nele*; they are both part of the quest for knowledge and important for keeping the *nele* attached to human sociality[154].

As I described in the previous chapter, when the *nele* is still a foetus in the womb of his mother and when he is still a small child, his *tarpakan* are free to move un-mastered around him, listening to his words. They try to discover who his parents are in order to kill them. Thus young *nele* children must not use the terms *nana* and *papa* ('mum' and 'dad') because their *tarpakan* are listening. This is why, as I described in the previous chapter, Aurolina Tuny and her husband took genipap medicines to 'hide themselves' (*purpa otukket*), so as not to be seen by the *tarpakan* of their son, Inaekikiña.

On another occasion Erlinda Harris, a *nele* woman in her fifties, married to a botanic specialist and grandmother of many children told me:

> "When I was young I didn't know the world (*nei wichuli*). When I was already grown up I had headaches. Then I bathed in plant medicines and started to see *nuchukana* in dreams. They came to me. I was not scared because I had bathed in the medicines. Then my parents died. I killed them, because the *nuchukana* asked me if I had a father and a mother, and I did not hide this from them (*an otukku suli*). My parents got ill and died. Also evil entities (*ponikana*) wanted to know if I had a father and a mother."

On a following day I commented on this story to a Kuna friend, asking him to clarify the meaning of it, which appeared to me rather obscure. Why was she responsible of the death of her parents? Who had actually killed them? And why? He told me that *tarpakana*, are evil entities (*ponikana*) that surround the *nele*, they are like soldiers, they have radios with which they hear everything, everywhere. If the *nele* speaks with a *nuchu* they hear him. This is why Erlinda, speaking with her *nuchukana* caused the death of her parents. When she was still young, as she pointed out, she 'did not know

[154] The importance of getting married in both realms will be dealt with in the next chapter. The subject of marriage is always brought up in respect of male *nelekan*, while in respect of female *nelekan*, as described in the previous chapter, it was rather stressed their capacity to obtain more supernatural partners.

the world', she was unaware of the lethal consequences of her acts as a *nele*, nor was she able to control the evil intentions of her spirit friends.

As it has been pointed out in the study of child sorcery in North-West Amazonia, children are not blamed for having caused the death of other people. They are not considered responsible, assuming that their evil acts are not intentional, but rather caused by the control of maleficent forces (Santos Granero, 2004). Differently, child *nelekan* do not directly kill their parents by means of magic, but similarly it is their unconsciousness of evil that permits 'maleficent forces' to kill, through them. Among the Asháninka, orphans and war-captives were the preferred target for witchcraft initiation by demons, because they lacked kinship relations (*ibid*: 276). Among the Kuna it seems that evil entities try to detach the child from kinship relations by killing his parents. In this way animal entities aim to include the child *nele* within their social world, by making him one of their kind, eventually becoming a predator of human beings. As we have seen in the previous chapter this occurrence is carefully prevented through ritual actions performed upon the child's parents, thanks to the loving care and the ritual expertise of both his grandmother and his grandfather. These acts and precautions aim also to prevent the stealing of the baby by animal entities, by including and keeping him within the circle of human kinship relations. At the same time, the couple of grandparents also protect the mother and the father from the *tarpakan* of their son.

Through everyday closeness with his adult kinspeople the small *nele* is taught to master his dreams and to think as a human being (cf. Belaunde, 2000). He has to learn to master his thoughts, in order to become able to understand what he will learn and not to constitute a danger for his kinspeople. He receives more affective care and advice from his grandparents than other babies. This is meant both to compensate for the lack of a close relationship with his parents[155], and to deal with the different knowledge experience that a child *nele* has. I was in fact told that, besides being visited by friends *nuchukana*, who show him how animals look in the underworld, a young *nele* is shown in dreams how babies are born. A friend *nele* once told me that when he was a small child he dreamed that a boy of is age, who used to meet him in dreams, brought him

[155] In the case where both parents are dead (I actually heard of just in one case), this is even more evident; but also in the case where they are alive, as in Inaekikiña's case, the relationship that the young child has with his parents is marked by less intimacy than with other children.

into the *muu neka* ('maternity house'), where he saw a woman sitting on an hammock and giving birth. This dream scared him and he recounted it to his grandmother, who told him not to tell this to anyone, especially to his friends. He has thus to keep silent about his dreams, while his grandmother decided to contact a ritual specialist to get her advice.

Young Inaekikiña was cherished and nourished by his grandmother Aurora. He was always calling for his *muu* when he needed something or when he came back home thirsty after playing with his friends. It was still Aurora with her husband Reynaldo, who promptly coordinated the network of relationships among kin and friends when suddenly Inaekikiña started suffering severe headaches and needed to be cured by a specialist living on another island.

The other inside

Besides indicating the auxiliary spirits of a *nele*, *tarpa* is also used to indicte an attribute of the human person.

"*Tarpa* is what lies between us and it is also what always stays with us, like our *purpa*. If you don't want to reveal who told you something you say: 'my *tarpa* told me this.'" This is the way Nixia Pérez answered my question: "what is *tarpa*?" I already knew at that time what *tarpa* was for *nelekan*, but new meanings were about to emerge. *Tarpa* appears to be not just a concept pertaining to the domain of shamanism but more widely an attribute of the human person, like *purpa* and *kurkin*.

> "We are composed of *kurkin, purpa*, *nika*[156] and *tarpa*. Thought, soul, body and spirit. […] God sent to all of us a special guide, the *tarpa*. It orients us. Like when one

[156] The concept of *nika* has not been described so far. When I asked for the meaning of it I was told that it means 'fuerza' (the Spanish word for 'force'). Also I was told that men and women take plant medicines to increase their *nika*, regularly during their life. That is intended to recuperate and improve their working capacities, which sometimes, for various reasons, might lower. A very good description of *nika* is found in Nordenskiöld's ethnography "'Brave' means, in Cuna, *kántikit*, but is not he same as *niga*; however one must have *niga* in order to be brave. When a person is timid in a serious situation one says *niga suli*, he does not have *niga*. The same thing applies to the one who is shy about appearing and speaking before a large gathering. When a child grows, its *niga* also grows. Before the child has enough *niga* it cannot go alone to the forest. If a person has much *niga* it is a protection against attack by wild animals. All animals also have *niga* and if a wild animal has more *niga* than a person whom it meets, the animal makes an attack. […] (O)ne never says that plants have *niga*. Nor do stones have *niga*. According to what an old medicine man in Ailligandi has explained to Pérez, *niga* is even a protection against certain dangerous dreams, in other words, against certain evil spirits. Through certain medicines one can even develop ones *niga*. A person's *niga* cannot, like his *purpa*, be abducted" (1938: 361). It is also interesting to compare

goes to the forest and hears the cry of *kika* (squirrel cuckoo), he knows that back home something is happening. A drunk person doesn't have *nika*, *purpa* and *kurkin* anymore. They don't work anymore. It's his *tarpa* that leads him back home. If the *tarpa* gets drunk too, he cannot walk."

These words are of Remigio Lopez, a botanic specialist (*ina tuleti*) from Okopsukkun with whom I often sat for long conversations. *Tarpa* is a component of the human person that works as a guide and a helper on different occasions. The reference to the bird *kika*, the squirrel cuckoo (*Piaya cayana*) is interesting, because it brings us back to something that I mentioned in chapter four; namely to the link with animals that is written on people's *kurkin*. Foetuses are connected to the supernatural domain during pre-natal life and transformed connections are retained after birth. *Kurkin*, the person's brain, retains the quality of connecting and communicating with the world of animals and spirits. Thus, during a person's life the brain is the locus of relationships with the supernatural world.

"He had a *tarpa* in his head", Remigio once told me referring to a patient of his, who came to him suffering from a headache and dizziness. Remigio explained to me that the brain has *tarpa*, as well as the soul, and that people pick up every thing with the brain, both the good and the bad. Everyone has this potentiality because the spiritual grandmothers (*muukana*) wrote it on his or her *kurkin* before they were born. In another conversation Remigio told me about the training of *nelekan*, which consists of descending into the various layers underneath the earth, to study the different 'villages of animal entities' (*ponikan kalu*). But, he stressed, "the thing that the *nele* studies first is the human being. Every person is a *kalu* and has his own *poni*. In this way the *nele* learns about the different *poni*."[157]

The theme of the body as an open cosmic unit resonates in Remigio's words. It is true as Isacsson points out for the Emberá that "(t)he human body is a representation of cosmos, it is a cosmological chart and 'manual' to comprehend the principles that reign in cosmos" (Isacsson, 1993: 106). But it is also true that, as Kuna people put it, the

---

the visual representation of *nika* made by Pérez, designed as an halo around the head (*ibid*: 361), with that of the 'crown' upon the head of the Jivaro shaman under the influence of ayahuasca (Harner, 1972).

[157] On one occasion Prisilla Diaz told me: "During dreams I am taught things. This evil thing lies in the body, that other evil thing lies in the body. It's like that. [I learn that] That evil thing is called that. That [other] evil thing is called that. Therefore I can see what actually happens. [I can see] what evil thing is eating you. In this way things are shown to me." She was explaining to me the way in which she learned to see how illnesses appear within the human body. She also told me that to learn this she was conducted in the underworld by *nuchukana* (her auxiliary spirits) and shown the places where animals live.

cosmos is a 'chart' to figure out the human body. The world out there and the world within persons intermingle and the limits become less and less apparent as the Kuna specialist unfolds his knowledge[158]. As it is emerging here, knowledge of the world and knowledge of the human person overlap in the learning process of the *nele*. Nonetheless separation is needed and necessary, and limits must be acknowledged, especially by ritual specialists whose task it is to diagnose and heal illnesses[159].

On another occasion Remigio told me that 'everyone has three souls: the animal one (*inmar turkan*), the material one (*sanalet*) and the spiritual one (*purpalet*)'. When a *nele* 'sees' (*oyoket*) an ill person, Remigio told me, his aim is to discover which animal entity has entered his body. This is a difficult task because many animal entities show up to the *nele* or roar to him. Therefore he has to be able to single out the real one, and not be tricked by all the other animals. The *nele* has to identify the animal that is eating the patient's body. The expression *poni nai*, indicates that an 'animal entity occupies' the body. As emerges from Remigio's words, the possibility of having an animal entity within is immanent in each human being. It is in fact part of human nature itself.

As we have seen in chapter four, to be born with designs is the precondition of being human and may also show that a person is particularly intelligent. At the same time it shows the link with animals; it is the sign on the newborn 'amniotic hat' that is the reminder of pre-natal relationships with some animal entities. As I have highlighted so far in this work the duality of danger and knowledge is at the core of the notion of shamanic power for Kuna people. Now it appears also that this duality is at the core of the Kuna notion of personhood, because everyone is born with the double possibility of becoming knowledgeable and becoming ill, of learning and being predated, of living and dying[160].

---

[158] Another interesting perspective comes from the analysis Viveiros de Castro makes of how the Yanomami experience the spirits (*xapiripë*) as not separated by the realm of visible and material human bodies. He translates this experience in terms of 'different vibrations and intensive and continuous modulations' (2006: 327).

[159] It is interesting the description that Severi makes about the ritual chant performed by the specialist for the curing of madness "that enables to restore the limit, in each occasion of disorder, between the space of humans and that of animals and trees" (Severi, 1981b: 91).

[160] I find here an interesting similarity with the analysis of Taylor on the Achuar conceptions of illness and power. She explains death for the Achuar only as an aggravation of illness and not as a distinct state, while the ritual of *arutan*, through which men seek visions of the dead, is a quest for power and makes the person invulnerable. Both illness/death and self-enhancement consist in the suspension of communication by the person with others. But while healing is 'a return to the self', the enhancement of the self, attained through meeting an *arutan* vision, consists in an "interaction with an entity which is structurally just as 'outside' society as are the foreigners encountered by the shaman" (Taylor, 1996: 209).

As I demonstrated in chapter five *nelekan* have this duality within themselves. By not showing their designs they do not show outside their internal *tarpa*, they do not make their body visible in its complex internal fragility. They do not show their potentiality to learn and their potentiality to die, written in the lines of their amniotic design. *Nelekan* thus have to undergo processes of socialization conducted by their human kinspeople in order to make their internal duality external, to see themselves and to be seen by others as human beings. They have to make visible the design that was not visible at the moment of their birth. Whereas when a layperson is born, this duality becomes external to him or her, by the simple act of showing his or her designs to kinspeople and midwives attending to their birth.

Externalized in form of designs, this duality immediately produces a creative tension, that is the possibility to switch between human and not-human, knowledge and disease, life and death, intelligence and wildness. Thus duality, once it has taken place outside the person, becomes the propelling and creative force of human life. For the *nele*, the lack of exteriorization of this duality in form of designs, creates the possibility for a secret life shared with animals and gives him the capacity to see illness in other people. Once a *nele* has learned to master his internal duality with animal entities, he is able to see how this duality takes place within other people in the form of illness. Illness, can thus be seen as a form of return to the pre-natal internal duality and the loss of separation with animal alterity caused by an act of predation.

The same possibility of becoming ill, as a consequence of animal assault, derives from the possibility of communication between humans and animals. It derives from their pre-natal closeness and the possibility of sharing *purpa*. The possibility of communication and exchange of substances derives from the sharing of properties between humans, animals and trees, which all have *purpa*. It seems likely that *tarpa* is the attribute that enables human beings to establish contacts with animal entities. In the case of *nelekan* it becomes a source of power, while in the case of laypersons it is a source of danger.

'*Tarpa* is what lies between us', as Nixia sharply explained to me. *Tarpa* is what links human beings to animals. It is the supernatural extension of the human self. It is the extension of the person beyond its body. The bird *kika* is the *tarpa* that warns the man walking in the forest that something is going on at home and he should come back. The idea of *tarpa* speaks therefore of a continuity between human beings and animals. Namely it is a continuity between beings acknowledged as different and between which

relationships are always delicate and dangerous, but still necessary and vital. Below I look at a myth that describes the killing of the mother of the octuplets twins in ancient times. The myth, I argue, tells about the danger of the relationship between humans and animals, and the predatory nature of animals.

Ontological predation and dangerous proximity

In what follows I will eventually shed more light on the problem from which I departed, namely the predatory intentions of the auxiliary spirits of the young *nele* toward his parents. Why do *nele*'s *tarpakan* kill his parents? In this section I intend to look comparatively at a Kuna myth and at two myths from Amazonia: one from the Kalapalo, a Carib-speaking group from the Xingu basin of Brasil (Basso, 1987a), the other from the Piro, an Arawak-speaking group from the Bajo Urubamba river of Peru (Gow: 2001). These two Amazonian myths bear various resemblances with the Kuna myth I am going to present and form part of a wider group of myths on the origin of the Sun and the Moon widespread in South America. I suggest that the main point of these myths is the origin of human mortality by an act of predation by animals. More precisely what the three myths have in common is the killing of a woman by animals and the consequent birth of powerful heroes, whose actions will eventually generate humanity as a separate condition from that of animals.

The following Kuna myth was told in 1969 by the same Luis Stócel to Chapin and supplemented with information Chapin received by Horacio Méndez, a chief from the village of Ustupu, in 1970. Presented below are excerpts from the longer original version[161]. The myth tells of Olotwalikipileler who committed incest with his twin sister Makiryai, by making love to her during the night when she was asleep. Makiryai, unaware of the identity of her lover, tricked him one night by touching his face with her hands covered with the black dye of the genipap fruit. When the day after, she discovered the brother with the stained face, he fled ashamed of his act. Trying to find her brother, Makiryai travelled to unknown places, meeting many animal-men on her path that seduced and made love to her. Eventually she saw her brother on a hill top, but before she could reach him he ascended to the sky, becoming the moon.

[161] A similar myth is found among Carib speaking groups of the Guiana and is called 'The frog, the jaguar's mother' (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 219-220).

After almost nine months Magiryai arrived to the river Olokoskun Tiwar and tried to enter a forest of multicoloured nettles (*take*[162]), but she found the path closed. An old toad-woman called Mu Kwelopunayai saw her and took [Magiryai] to her house, which stood on the riverbank. Mu invited her to stay, but warned her that her grandsons, a ferocious group of iguana-men, collared peccary-men, tapir-men and fish-men, would eat her if they found her when they were back in the evening. Mu was skilled in the fabrication of clay pots and jars and hid Magiryai in one of them in a corner of the house.

The grandsons came back at the normal hour, noisily entering the house, and at once started grunting saying that they smelt pineapple. When they asked Mu about it she answered that there was no pineapple. "You are all so lazy that you did not sow anything around here", she told them. The grandsons ran to every corner of the house to find where the smell was coming from but stopped searching when the sun rose. Early the next morning they woke up and went to the garden, and as soon as they left Mu called Magiryai and hid her in the beams of the roof.

The grandsons came back again in the evening and smelt the same sweet odour. "Where does this smell of pineapple come from?" they cried, and started searching. But once more their search was worthless, and when night fell they slept. The day after when they left for the garden, Mu called Magiryai again and hid her behind a beam wrapped with rags like an *aku*[163] When the grandsons came back and smelt the flavour of pineapple and once again began to wreck the house searching for the fruit. Suddenly one of them saw Magiryai's foot poking out of the beam and called his brothers. They all went up to the roof and grabbed her. They took her to the river where they started to devour her. Mu was sitting on the crest of a hill and when she saw what they were doing she shouted at them to leave the guts for her.

Mu Kwelopunayai took the guts and put them in a clay jar above the fire. That broke and she moved the contents into another clay pot, which also broke. Successively seven different types of jars broke, until eventually she used a gold jar (*olomete*) and this one resisted. Suddenly a rooster appeared on the edge and it crowed: "Ibelele, Ibelele". Soon after another bird showed up, a Paaru, which leaped from the mixture and standing on the edge, started singing: "Olele, Olele". Then other birds came out: Suisupi (yellow breast), Malin, Dagir, Olodeengipiler and others.

[162] The plant here referred to with the Kuna name *take* is *Cnidoscolus urens*, and is a tropical stinging bush, which is used by the Kuna for curing rheumatism, stomach ache and by men for keeping children away from the gathering house during night reunions.
[163] *Aku* is a stick with the shape of a small paddle used in the past for weaving hammocks.

> They were Ibelele, Olele, Pu Tule, Kwatkwat Tule, Olowigapipileler, Olosuignibeleler, Pugasui and Olowai-ili. Without losing time Mu Kwelopunayai gathered them and laid them in the hammocks and treated them well, because she understood that they were deemed to be wise and powerful. (Chapin, 1989: 35-36, my translation)

Mu Kwelopunayai took the eight siblings as her own children and they grew up thinking that she was their mother. Incidentally this bears a striking similarity to the relationship between a *nele* and his grandmother and, as we will see below in more detail, suggests seeing the eight siblings as prototypical *nelekan*. But one day Sigli, the curassow, told the eight youngsters that the old woman was not their mother; their real mother's bones had been swallowed by Inaitikilele, the great fish. After that discovery the eight siblings embarked on a long trip around the world in order to find out the remedies to revive their mother. When they went back, Ipelele (the Sun), the wisest among his siblings, cut the fingers of Mu Kwelopunayai, so that she turned into a toad, and this has been her form ever since. Then, Ipelele and his siblings took their mother's bones and put them into a hammock woven by Olowai-ili[164]. Ipelele sang for eight days to revive the mother, but he did not succeed. He tried to do it four times, but every time an animal-man interrupted the ritual and the mother returned to bones. The final time, the mother turned into a jaguar. So the eight siblings got scared and decided to stop their efforts in trying to revive her and buried their mother. Eventually they mourned her death.

Ipelele and his siblings, I was told many times by my Kuna informants, were great *nelekan*. Through their travelling around the world to find the way to revive their mother, they learned many things. They went to Sapipe-neka ('the house of the owners of trees'), where they learned the medicine from the ancestral tree-people (see the myth 'The young men of the Father' in chapter two). They went to the village of *ukkurwala*, the balsa tree, whose name was Olokunipipiler. "This man was one of the most

[164] As Lagrou (1996: 223-224) noted for the Cashinahua, there is an association between the uterus and placenta and the cloth used to carry babies ('cushma'). They share the function of containing the body of the baby**.** The uterus and the placenta are the place within which the baby is formed and, as she notes, the root of the verb to weave designs (*xankeinkiki*) means uterus (*xankin*). For Kuna people the uterus, and more precisely the amniotic sac, is 'covered by designs' (*narmakkalet*), as hammocks are. Moreover, as illustrated in chapter three, the process of the formation of babies, the shaping of their bodies, is expressed with the same verb used for weaving hammocks (*sopet*). Weaving hammocks (nowadays discontinued) and making babies are women's skills. The body of Magiryai is therefore put in a hammock woven by Olowai-ili in order to re-form her body.

powerful of that place: he had eight kurkins and eight nigas." (*Ibid*: 39). They met the masters of trees who were responsible of giving fruit to trees and changing their clothes, their *mola*, their foliage. They were also the guardians of river water. Then they met *Muu* the spiritual grandmother and her granddaughters, the *muukana* responsible for giving birth to babies (*Ibid*: 39).

As the myth tells us, after the killing of the mother the octuplets are born[165]. They are born from the cooked guts of the dead mother and as the grandmother toad immediately noted 'they were deemed to be wise and powerful'. They were eight powerful *nelekan*. Ipelele heads the siblings. He is the wisest, the cleverest and the most cunning. He will then become the Sun, Tat Ipe[166]. Pukasui, his brother, is the archer, the one with the ability to strike enemies, whose skill has no equals; he will then become the morning star. Pukasui is the Kuna name for Venus. Olowai-ili is the only sister among the brothers. She learned the art of making designs, weaving textiles and baskets, making pottery and the culinary arts, and she then taught these to Kuna people.

I want to call attention here to an interesting similarity between the myth of the mother of the octuplets and the life of *nelekan* today. Muu Kwelopunayai's animal-grandchildren killed Makiryai, as today the *tarpa* of the *nele* kill his mother. Ipelele and his siblings were raised by their grandmother. Furthermore, as told in the myth, Makiryai was seduced and made love with many animals before arriving at the house of Muu Kwelopunayai. Are her children conceived by those animals or by her twin-brother? This we do not know. However, what is interesting to note here is that animals in this myth seem to be portrayed as affines. The grandmother-toad is in the position of Makiryai's (grand)mother-in-law, and the animals that kill Makiryai are her brothers-in-law.

With this in mind we can now begin to understand how Kuna people are aware of the risk for young *nelekan* to be stolen by their animal familiars. The *tarpakan* want to kill the mother of the *nele* because they want to steal him. Kuna people, by preventing the death of the *nele*'s mother, try to keep the *nele* among his human kinspeople. The

[165] All being delivered at a single birth, the eight heroes are technically octuplets.
[166] Tat Ipe is the other way in which Ipelele is named in myths. *Ipe* means 'stone', 'master', 'owner'; *tata* mans 'grandfather'. *Tata* is also how Kuna call the sun. For example *tat kae* means 'the sun shines'. On the other hand Ipelele derives from *ipe* and *lele*. *Lele*, or *ler*, means *nele*, 'seer'. It is a suffix for proper names, normally used in Kuna ritual chants to refer to mythic beings (like Olokunipipiler, the master of balsa tree, *olo*, 'gold', *kuni*, unknown, *pippi*, 'small', *lele*, 'seer').

process of initiation operates to control the association with animal entities, by not completely releasing the *nele* to their predatory intentions.

The theme of the duality of knowledge and danger presented at the beginning of the chapter, as emerging from the analysis of the Kuna concept of *tarpa*, assumes here another aspect. In mythic terms, knowledge and power derive from the dangerous proximity between humans and animals. Affinal relationships and predation seem here to frame the problem of the creative yet dangerous tension between humans and animals. Makiryai is devoured by her affines, the animal grandchildren of the grandmother-toad. Mu Kwelopunayai is Makiryai's mother-in-law[167], who does not bother helping when her grandchildren devour her, but ask them to leave her the guts/children. She wants the grandchildren, which she takes and raises as her own. Therefore animals in mythic times, as well as today from the perspective of *nelekan*, stand for affines to humans and the relationship with them is one that entails danger.

Studying the life course of *nele*, it becomes more evident how the relationship between humans and animals is one of predation and affinity. The *nele* is the figure in-between, he is the one that re-creates the bridge between humans and animals, broken in mythic time. As we shall see below, this separation has been operated by the first *nele*, creating the possibility for human social life. Today the *nele* is the one who can turn danger into knowledge. He can manage the risks of dangerous proximity with animal entities, rendering them socially creative[168]. It is particularly relevant in this respect that, as Overing Kaplan (1984:146) tells us, "(…) in-laws are strangers who may eat you". Animals are like potential affines with which there is no reciprocal exchange. Therefore they want to eat humans and steal their children.

The problem of cosmological predation and affinity has been widely discussed in Amazonian ethnography (see among others Viveiros de Castro, 1992; Fausto, 2001) and would deserve more space and attention, which I do not have here. Nevertheless, as has been argued, the relationship between humans and animals in Lowland South American societies is often based on either reciprocal or predatory schemes (Descola, 1992). Rather than fitting with either one or the other model, Kuna cosmology and ritual

[167] However, we could also say that Makiryai's mother-in-law is her own mother, by virtue of the fact that she conceived her children through incestuous relations with her own twin brother.
[168] Of particular help to my analysis here has been Overing's (1986;1989) analysis of the socially creative powers of Piaroa shamans. Her major point is that the shaman, by being able to control the dangerous fertile powers of the creator gods, brings the past into the present and is responsible for the creation of social life.

practices show how the dangers of alterity are made safe. It is by being aware of those risks that the combined actions of various members of the community are carefully undertaken, in order to allow the *nele* to establish a relationship within the sphere of affinal entities, without allowing his ties with humans to weaken too much. In this way the *nele* will learn from his animal affines how to cure his human fellows. He will thus acquire the knowledge and the power to enable the social group to survive and reproduce. Social life is thus possible only through the intermingling of beings of different kinds (Overing Kaplan, 1984).

In the Kuna lived world, relations of hostility with members of other communities, present in oral memories, have now disappeared. Even if I encountered that hostility with neighbouring Kuna communities (such as with the attached village of Ustupu) and with other ethnic groups in Panamá were sometimes phrased by the Kuna in Okopsukkun in terms of differences, these never lead to episodes of actual violence. Violence against other people is feared by Kuna people. The main risk is that violence would turn back into society, destroying it. This is a constant theme in Amazonian ethnography (cf. Overing, 1986; Fausto, 2001), in which the killer is killed (or the eater is eaten) by his victim. Therefore peace and tranquillity are kept within the social group, while dangerous relationships with the outside world provide the creative forces for the reproduction of the group itself. The contradiction between an inward sterility and an outward creativity has been noted, among others, by Fausto, when he says that: "[t]he representation of an internal sterility is subjected to the opening towards the outside in the sphere of shamanism and/or warfare, where predatory relationships between beings of a different kind reign" (Fausto 2001: 320-322, my translation).

Mors tua vita mea – The origin of human mortality

Prominent in the reading of this myth are three relevant points that I aim to analyse in the following sections of this chapter and in the next. Namely, Makiryai's pregnancy ends with 1) giving birth by being devoured by the animals and her guts/children being saved by the grandmother-toad. While, 2) her death is eventually achieved when she is found by her children. When they realize that they cannot revive their mother, they bury her, completing her death with a human social act. The myth seems here to say that one

is dead only when her body is seen and then buried by her kinspeople[169]. Eventually 3) the revenge for her death will produce the separation between animals and humans in mythic times.

Before starting with the analysis of these three ethnographic problems I present below the Kalapalo and the Piro myths in order to add a comparative dimension to my argument.

In the Kalapalo myth (Basso, 1987a: 29-79)[170] Kwatïngï is the culture hero, son of the tree Dyekuku and the fishing bat (*ibid*: 9). He carves his daughters from the wood of a tree, because he does not want to give his real daughters in marriage to the jaguar[171]. So he sends the 'made-ones' to marry the jaguar. Tanumakalu and Itsangitsegu marry Nitsuegï, the jaguar, and Itsangitsegu soon gets pregnant. One day, when Itsangitsegu was about to give birth, she was working in her husband's house. While the jaguar was out, working in the garden…

> […] Itsangisegu was making agave string, agave string, while her mother-in-law *pisuk*, *pisuk*, *pisuk*, swept her son's house.
>
> Then her mother-in-law came closer to her just as she spat out a bit of agave.
>
> "Pïtsuh!" she suddenly went, Pïtsuh!" "Hey why did you start to spit at me, you fool?" She addressed her daughter-in-law most rudely.
>
> Then her mother-in-law tore off a fingernail *tsiuk*, and threw it *toh*.
>
> *Ubom!* Itsangitsegu fell down, she was dying.
>
> *Tsiuk*, her mother-in-law had slit her neck.
>
> (*Ibid*: 57-58)

Then the jaguar came back and found Itsangitsegu dying and he put her up in the roof of the whirlwind's house. In the meantime she gave birth to her two children, Sun and Moon. The children were raised by their aunt Tanumakalu, who pretended to be their mother and did not tell them about the death of their real mother. When they grew up,

[169] Kuna people told me that when a person dies in unknown circumstances and the body is not found, like drowning in the sea, he or she becomes a *kirmar*, a 'ghost', and haunts the living, especially his or her kinspeople. The death is thus imputed to an animal, normally a crocodile, which causes the dead to become a predator, until he or she finds a partner among animal entities, thus retiring to live with them. Thus human beings cannot sanction the death of the person, without seeing the body.

[170] See also Villas Boas (1970: 57-88) for two similar versions by the Tupi-speaking Kamaiurá and the Carib-speaking Kuikúru, both from the Upper Xingu.

[171] Variations of this myth, known as 'The wooden bride', are found in other areas of the Amazon basin (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 215-224).

one day they met their grandmother - the Red-Winged Tinamous - who told them the truth about their mother. So they searched for their mother and found her dying on the roof top. Also their grandfather Kwatïngï arrived, and together they pulled her down from the roof. But, while they were doing so, she died. So altogether, they mourned her (*Ibid*: 68-71). In the Kamaiurá version of the same myth the two boys "(l)owering the body into the grave, they said, 'Now it will always be this way; people die and never come back. They will die only once'" (Villas Boas, 1970:64).

The Piro myth tells of Yakonero, a woman who was married to a jaguar but then left it and married a human. When she got pregnant, one day her son Tsla, still in her womb, made her follow the wrong path in the forest, so again she ended up where the jaguars lived. There, her mother-in-law, Yompichgojru (the mother of her jaguar husband), told her to hide high up in the roof of the house, before her sons came back.

> They arrived and said, 'We smell human meat.' Yompichgojru told them not to kill her. They lined up outside on a balsa log. Yakonero came down to delouse them. Yompichgojru gave her charcoal to chew, rather than have to bite their lice. When Yakonero came to the last jaguar, she had no coal left, and she bit the louse. '*Klaaajjj*', she retched!
>
> Because of this, the jaguars got angry and leapt on to her and tore her apart. Yompichgojru asked for her guts to eat. She hung them up in a *achiote* bush.
>
> After three days, three birds emerged, three little *manacaraco* birds. They were Tsla and his brothers, the Muchkajine. The Muchkajine grew rapidly, in a few days they were men. But Tsla was small, stunted, a cry-baby. But he did miraculous things.
>
> (Gow, 2001: 104)

The three heroes appearing in the three myths, Tat Ipe, Taugi, and Tsla, are considered in their respective mythologies as powerful beings. Following what Gow has argued about Piro twins, and extending it to the three different heroes I argue that they represent the image of the prototypical shaman. "Tsla's society with the Muchkajine has an even odder feature for Piro people: he clearly has 'twins'. Piro people can be twins, but they cannot have twins. A Piro person can be a twin (*gepirutu*, 'one who is two'), but cannot have a living twin. As Teresa Campos, herself a mother of a twin and grandmother of another, explained to me, 'When twins are born, one always dies. If we try to keep both alive, then both die. Only one can live.' Everyone denied this was

caused by neglect, but said instead that it was an intrinsic feature of twinness: only one can live. The surviving twin is a born shaman […] Tsla too is unquestionably a shaman, of miraculous powers, but he is able to keep his 'twins' as living companions. The Muchkajine's 'twinness' with Tsla is marked by an excess: not only do they double Tsla, they are themselves multiple" (*ibid*: 108).

Ipelele and his seven siblings are born each one part of eight living octuplets. The excess here is even more striking. Moreover they are birds at birth, "and hence are born without placentas" (*ibid*: 108). So they do not lose their placentas at birth, as Gow says, and are intrinsically multiplied (*ibid*: 150). Kuna people call a twin *koe tarpokwat*, 'baby *tarpa*'. Although I have never heard about the association between twins and shamanism, a 'baby *tarpa*' would sound as one who has a companion in the other world, one who is able to maintain his original duality during his life, much like a *nele*.

Nelekan are powerful and knowledgeable and have a crucial role in the creation of human society. My point is that they have in common the fact that they are all born through the death of their mothers and they become powerful by seeking to revive them[172]. Ipelele is the master shaman; he leads his siblings in the quest for knowledge, reaching the abodes of the spiritual grandmothers, source of water and human life. Back from his supernatural travels he brings knowledge in the form of chants and the seeds of medicines. He will sow them on the earth for growing medicinal plants and he will sing the curing chants trying to revive his mother. Taugi is the great trickster but also the creator of all kinds of human beings: the Indians, the Christians and the Fierce People (Basso, 1987a: 76-79). Tsla, as seen above, by being born with two twins (the Muchkajine twins) is 'unquestionably a shaman'.

The first point would be that these heroes were born in ways that are monstrous and 'unnatural' from today's point of view. They were born when society still did not exist and intermingling between humans and animals still reigned in the world. They had been conceived through incest, through the union between a woman and a jaguar and between a tree-woman and a jaguar. Human reproduction did not exist yet and fertility was uncontrolled. When they were born, in all three cases, they had to deal with a

[172] Here I find an interesting resemblance with Gow's interpretation of the ontology of Piro shamanism. For Piro, he says, becoming a shaman is motivated by the inconsolable pain and sense of solitude felt by a man in the case of the loss of a child. While for Piro women he suggests that there may be a connection between becoming a shaman and miscarriages (2000: 56-59). In a reverted game of kinship, for Kuna it is the loneliness and the grief over the death of one's mother that move the *nele* to follow the road of knowledge.

situation of chaos, where human social life was neither possible, nor desirable. Yet their birth occurred in a strange way: the guts of the mother are cooked in a pot or hung on an achiote bush. Then, when the twins or octuplets appear, in the form of birds, they are not brought up by their mother, who has been eaten by a fish or jaguars, or hung in the roof top, but by their grandmother or by their aunt.

What is interesting to note here is that when Ipelele is singing to revive his mother's bones, he is interrupted four times by the appearance of a man-animal, whose presence spoils the ritual, each time causing the mother to turn back into bones. But the last time, when she was at the point of being revived, she transforms into a jaguar, thus Ipelele stops singing and along with his twins decides to bury her. This episode probably portrays the first human birth. In fact the transformation of Makiryai into a jaguar (*achu*) and then her definitive separation from her children, is reminiscent of the separation of the newborns from the placenta (*achu*) at birth. Placenta is in fact called 'jaguar' (*achu*) by Kuna people. The separation from the placenta through the cutting of the umbilical chord marks the baby's birth[173]. Therefore the separation of Ipelele and his siblings from their mother seems to be the first human birth, signing the beginning of human life in ancient times.

Following what emerges from the cross-interpretation of these three myths, the fear for the life of the mother of young *nele*, expressed in Kuna everyday discourse, begins to acquire meaning. As Kuna people told me, the 'real *nele*'[174] is the one whose parents are dead. Myths are giving us a key to the interpretation of this statement. The acquisition of *nele*'s powers derives from the actual or threatened death of his mother. The Kuna woman giving birth to the *nele* is a woman about to die. Her condition is portrayed in myths as that of Makiryai, Itsangitsegu and Yakonero, who all gave birth after their death.

Moreover, she does not see her child. These mythical images strengthen once more my argument of the 'lack of visibility' of the newborn *nele*, suggested in chapter five. The lack of designs on his *kurkin* means that he is one that 'is not seen' by anyone, neither by his mother nor by the other women assisting the birth. He does not have

[173] For a proper analysis on Kuna practices and conception of childbirth see Margiotti Ph.D. thesis. A similar case, which provides the initial insight for the treatment of my Kuna material, was provided by Gow's analysis of Piro childbirth (2001: 107-110).
[174] *Nele sunnati* ('real *nele*') means the *nele* who has completed his initiation and has full powers; thus making a statement of 'intensity' and 'grade' of powers and not of truthfulness.

designs that women may say are *yer taileke!* 'very visible!' The *nele*'s powers will then consist of being able 'to see' anyone (humans and not-humans alike). Through his powerful sight and the capacity to master his dreams, he will be able to see what is 'not visible', which means the inner image of human beings, animals and trees. He will be able to see their *purpa*, their 'souls', 'inner image', their image beyond designs, their inner form inside the body.

The second point would be about the origin and conception of mortality. The death of the mothers of the heroes in the three myths is not just a consequence of an act of predation perpetrated by animals, it is also a social occurrence. As we can see in the Kuna and Kalapalo myths, the mother eventually dies when her children see her. As if she was not completely dead after been eaten by animals, she dies when her children discover her, so they can mourn her death. In the Kamaiurá version it is made clear that this represents the first death 'culturally acknowledged', "[…] it will always be this way; people die and never come back. They will die only once" (Villas Boas, 1970: 64).[175]

In Kuna mythology this is also the first representation of death. As the birth of the eight siblings may be seen as the first human birth, the death of their mother signs the beginning of human mortality. When Ipelele sings to his mother to revive her she transforms into a jaguar. This represents the primordial state of never ending transformations. People did not die in ancestral, pre-social time, instead they assumed new forms in a state of uncontrolled fertility. Everything was re-generating and re-birthing, as with Makiryai. But eventually her children decided to leave her dead. In this way they interrupted the cycle of transformation and inaugurated human mortality.

Mortality is thus linked, in its mythic explication, to the emergence of kinship as memory and affect. It is by being seen dying by one's children that one dies. It is the act of mourning and the consequent feeling of grief that makes a person dead[176]. Therefore my argument is that shamanism among the Kuna is propelled by kinship. As I have shown so far in this work the *nele*'s birth entails his mother's death. Moreover he learns

[175] The theme of mortality in Piro mythology is dealt with in the story of 'Tsla swallowed by a Giant Catfish' (Gow, 2001: 86-87). "The 'land of death' from which Tsla and his brothers flee on hearing the bird call is the lived Piro world" (*ibid*: 93).

[176] Among the Kuna, birth and death are not conceived as biological stages. It is through the action of one's kinspeople that one dies and one is born. Birth and death, happens four days after the actual occurrence. As described by Margiotti in her Ph.D. thesis, birth is completed when the baby's placenta is buried four days after the birth; death, when the dead is buried and has been sung upon by the ritual master and mourned for four days by kinspeople.

of the secret of birth in dreams. Thus shamanism has its roots in the experiencing of life's limits: birth and death. It is moved by the recognition of kinship: it is the grief and anger produced by the death of the mother that moves the *nele* to endeavour in shamanic training. It is to avenge his mother's death or to prevent it, that the *nele* learns healing knowledge from animal entities. Thus shamanism is a social phenomenon among the Kuna and has to do with the basic meaning of life and humanity.

Separation as a creative social act

To conclude I intend to introduce another topic: the social consequences of the emergence of shamanism in mythic time. As the myth of Makiryai showed us, Ipelele and his siblings trying to help their dying mother, learned curing knowledge. This explains that the *nele* nowadays is the one who fights against the cause of death. He is moved by the love he feels for his mother, and by the grief produced by her actual or feared death. Therefore being a shaman is not something desirable *per se*. As we have seen, from a young age the *nele* experiences deep fears and suffering, he faces dangerous experiences throughout his life, and, not least of all, he will be at risk of becoming an orphan.

Becoming a *nele*, is not motivated by the self-enhancement of the person alone, but should be seen as an attitude toward life moved by profound existential motivations and sometimes life-crisis moments. Kuna men continue to visit their mother's house, almost everyday when she is alive. At their mother's home they always find a plate of food waiting for them. Losing one's mother at young age is not an idea easily accepted by Kuna men (nor would it be by anyone else). Therefore the actual occurrence or the fear of death of one's mother is the motivation that leads young *nelekan* to endeavour in shamanic training. As Taylor noted, "(t)he integrity of one's feeling of self is vulnerable on two counts. First, it is exposed to the death of others, the shattering of bits of that mirror on which it is dependent – an all too frequent occurrence in the course of an Achuar life, and one that provokes, as its first reaction, intense socially directed anger" (1996: 207).

The grief and the anger that Ipelele, Taugi and Tsla, felt for their mother's death, was directed toward avenging her by killing the animals. Now the grief and the anger of *nele* are projected outside the human social sphere. It is by fighting against the causes of

illnesses that the *nele* avenges his mother's death or protects her, and his kinspeople, against death.

Shamanism nowadays, is naturally connected to the separation between humans and animals, who previously lived together. The work of the shaman is toward the maintenance of social life by keeping outside of it all external destructive energies. But how did the separation between humans and animals take place? How then did social life begin?

After having discovered the death of their mother, in the Kalapalo myth, the Sun and the Moon, began their empowerment. In doing so they generated humanity: Taugi, the Sun, impregnated his mother's sister, who gave birth to the Fierce People, who, in their turn killed the jaguars, avenging their mother's death. Along with the Fierce People, she gave birth to the Indians and the Christians. Each people taking their own path, they will split and become the people of the world (Basso, 1987a: 75-76). The Piro's Muchkajine were the 'first white people'; they left the Urubamba because it was a land marked by mortality (Gow, 2001: 106, 132-133). But before doing so, helped by Tsla, they killed the jaguars, leaving just two exemplars alive[177].

The third point I wish to make is about another aspect that the three myths presented in this chapter have in common: by killing the animals that devoured their mothers, the heroes avenge their death and separate humans from animals. Ipelele turned the grandmother-toad into an animal, by cutting her fingers, and as we will see in the next chapter, he fought against the animals that killed his mother. Taugi, as well as Tsla, killed all the jaguars and spared just one, which will see the jaguar become the lonely animal it is nowadays.

By avenging their mothers' death the heroes achieved another important goal, that of separating humans from animals. By performing this act they created the possibility for social life. Humans and animals separated and the reciprocal relation became that of predation. The killing of the animals, as developed further in the next chapter, is rather to be intended as their transformation. From that moment onward, animal entities lived

[177] The only jaguar spared by Tsla and the Muchkajine is Yompichgojru, the mother of the jaguars. However, "She was pregnant, and her young one was male. From them came the jaguars we have today. If Tsla had killed his grandmother, there would be no jaguars about now" (Gow, 2001: 105).

in villages under the world, separated from those of humans, and assumed animal shapes only when venturing on the surface of the earth.

My point here is that the act of separation is to be seen as the prototypical act of curing that Amerindian shamans perform. The Amerindian shaman is the one who looks after maintaining the separation between humans and animals in the everyday life. Possessing the duality inside himself, being of the same kind with both humans and animals, he can establish kinship ties with both. He is the only one who can manage the proximity with animal forces and render them creative. The shaman is deeply aware of the difference between humans and animals, hence he can work re-establishing the limit between the two domains when circumstances require it[178]. As already stated, what for other people is illness for the *nele* is personal empowerment. By being born mythically through the death of his mother, the *nele* begins his life with an act of predation. Therefore his life will be devoted to avoiding subsequent acts of predation, by keeping the evil intentions of animals away from humans.

In the next chapter I analyse the way in which a *nele* obtains his powers and curing knowledge and how he has access to the powerful knowledge guarded by animal entities. I will explore this topic by looking both at the continuation of the myth of Makiryai and at my ethnographic data.

[178] It is interesting to note how the difference between humans and animals is also present in mythic time, before their separation. Muu Kwelopunayai's animal grandchildren smell pineapple when Magiryai hide in their home. Humans smell like pineapple to animals, meaning that they are food for them. Yakonero's jaguar brothers-in-law smell 'human meat', licking their lips. What is not present in mythic times is the awareness of this difference by humans, who are thus victims of animals' predations.

Chapter 7

Getting married in the underworld

Rotalio Pérez, a Kuna man in his forties, father of four girls and a *nele* himself, gave me a good hint at the reason why the *tarpakan* want to kill the parents of the *nele*. This was never explicitly explained to me by Aurolina or by anyone else. Rotalio talked to me extensively about his experience since he realized that I was interested in learning about *nelekan*. His accounts were based both on his life experience and on his knowledge of the Kuna way of life, *tule ikar*, as Kuna people say.

Rotalio was born a *nele*, but never succeeded in developing his own powers. His 'intelligence was sealed' (*kurkin etusa*) and he could never actually 'see people' (*tule take*) for diagnosing illnesses, nor 'see animals' (*inmar take*) in dreams. He told me that this was the consequence of the wrong medicine he was given by a ritual master when he was doing his initiation during childhood. So he could never succeed in 'opening his intelligence' (*kurkin arkae*) nor to 'strengthen his sight' (*tala kannoget*). But there is a further consequence to this, which is that he could die at any moment. The *nele* who cannot see his *tarpakan* cannot establish any kind of relation with them. Rotalio explained to me that the *tarpakan* want to receive the visit of the *nele* and if he does not visit them they become upset and they want to kill him. "When you marry – he told me – you have to go to your wife's house, don't you? If you don't go there every day, your father-in-law gets angry with you. How could you not visit your wife's house!"

This remark introduces an important issue concerning the shamanic experience of *nelekan*. "The *nele* is the one who has a spouse in the underworld" (*nele negurba ome nikka*) or "he has a wife in his dreams" (*kap-ki ome nikka*). Both were common expressions used to explain to me the relationship a *nele* has with animal entities. To have a 'wife in the underworld' is the goal that a male *nele* tries to achieve in order to

learn. His marriage will in fact give him the possibility of establishing a fruitful relation with his supernatural father-in-law, the 'chief of animals', (*poni sayla*, or *poni errey*), who will teach him the secret knowledge.

For women *nelekan*, Kuna people say that they do not get married to supernatural entities, instead they just seduce as many of them as they can in order to learn something different each time (cf. chapter five). By seducing and making love to animal entities they directly obtain their knowledge. Women can thus obtain many auxiliary spirits, whereas men have to establish a fixed relationship with one auxiliary and can hardly change it in order to learn from someone else.

Separation from animals

Before describing the relationship between a *nele* and his *tarpakan*, as the key feature for understanding present day Kuna shamanism, I wish to show how myths account for battles and alliances between humans and animals during ancestral times. The myth presented below shows how these alliances are intended as a way to gain power against the enemies, and end up with the separation between human beings and animals.

Ipelele (Tat Ipe, the Sun) and his siblings are seeking revenge for the killing of their mother by the animals, grandchildren of Piler, the husband of Pursop (cf. chapter two). Tat Ipe, who is associated by the Kuna to wit and strategic skills, realizes that they need to use their intelligence to win the battle against the evil. Two episodes illuminate this issue. In the first case, following to the death of Makiryai, Tat Ipe decides to give his sister Olowai-ili as a spouse to Olourkunaliler, the master of thunderstorm. He wants to establish an alliance with Olourkunaliler in order to receive his support in the fight that he plans against Piler and his five sons, the chiefs of animals. Thus, Tat Ipe and his siblings celebrate the marriage between Olowai-ili and Olourkunaliler by putting them in a hammock together, with hot embers beneath[179]. The second episode proceeds as follows:

[179] Marriages today among the Kuna are celebrated by putting the bride and the groom in a hammock together, which is then swung by children and people attending the ceremony. Beneath the hammock firewood is lit, and this symbolizes the collective work of a man and a woman in gathering and cooking food, or, following another version, "the children that they will have will not be born blind." (Prestan Simón, 1975: 93). The marriage between Olowai-ili and Olourkunaliler already had this cultural trait.

When Piler saw that Olourkunaliler had been recruited by Tad Ibe [Ibelele] and his fellows, he worried and called all his sons. They realized that their opponents had the advantage and that they had to attract one of them onto their side to compensate for the loss of Olourkunaliler. So they decided to send Olobagindili, the daughter of Kuchuka [one of Piler's sons], dressed in an elegant dress, painted with achiote and deliciously perfumed, in the direction of Tad Ibe's house, to make one of them fall in love, and so attract him to the family of Piler.

When Tad Ibe saw Olobagindili he wanted to marry her. He was not motivated by her beauty, rather he thought this a way to gain entrance into the family of evil and so learn its secrets.

[…] Tad Ibe, during his stay on the earth, got engaged to various women, who were the daughters of evil spirits (*ponikan*). He did so to learn the secrets from their fathers, in order to fight the evil they possessed more effectively. […] It is known that when an Indian marries an American girl he gains entrance into the United States and learns all that the Americans know.

[…] Tad Ibe and his brothers decided to kill Piler's grandchildren. Pugasui said that that he would strike them with his bow and arrows, but Tad Ibe told him that he would rather face them by using his diplomatic skills. With this aim they organized a chicha [fermented drink] ceremony and invited Piler, his sons and his grandchildren.

[…] Tad Ibe was the kantule [ceremonial singer], and he tried to teach those assembled how to celebrate the ritual. When they brought him the chicha he said: 'Itomargwele' [let's try it], before drinking. Piler's grandchildren looked at each other in surprise because they had never heard such a word and did not understand it. Then Tad Ibe told them that they had to yell to awake the chicha: 'yor yor yor sio ko'. Again they were surprised, because they could not understand what was going on.

[…] When Tad Ibe saw that all were full of chicha he went to the entrance and put an akwanusa [magic stone][180] on the ground. He knew that soon they would all fight against each other and compete among themselves. In a short while, Oloaligiña and Oloidikaliler were fighting in the middle of the house producing a great confusion with their huge force. Oloailigiña went toward the door to urinate and fell over the akwanusa. When he stumbled Tad Ibe kicked him and sent him flying onto the patio. When he stood up he started kicking his legs on the ground and snorting angrily. Then Tad Ibe told him: 'From now on people will call you Moli [tapir] and Siluga Asu (nose of 'siluga', a tree). Then Oloidikaliler went out stumbling through the door and

[180] *Akwanusa* are stones used for medicine and which can also be the auxiliary spirits of *nelekan*. *Akwa* means 'stone', *nusa* means 'mouse', 'rat'. Chapin defines *akwanusa*: "(a) polished agate found in the rivers and used as cooling medicine. It is the principal figure in 'the way of *nusa*' (*nusa ikala*), which is used to recover abducted *purpakana* and refresh them" (1983: 556).

fell over the akwanusa. Tad Ibe kicked him hard and he fell into the river with a great plunge. 'From now on', Tad Ibe said, 'people will call you Timoli [manatee] and Soilagwak (warty nose; the plant of 'soilagwak' is covered by warts)'.

[…] Then, all the grandchildren of Piler fell over the akwanusa because of their drunkenness, they were sent away from the house and were transformed into animals. Some of them fell on the ground, others were kicked into the trees, others fell in the river and others went into the sea.

(Chapin, 1989: 59-62, my translation)

What Tat Ipe achieved in the narrated episode is a double goal: first he gets into Piler's family by marrying one of his granddaughters, and then he transforms Piler's grandchildren into animals with the help of *akkwanusa* (the magic stone used by shamans). The myth concludes with all the animals being sent into the fourth level under the earth (*pillipakke*), through a whirlpool (*pirya*). That is where they still live today, congregated in their villages (*kalumar*), where each species is ruled by its own master (*sayla*, *errey*). Furthermore, the narration at the end of the myth reveals how Pukasui kills Olopakintili by shooting her with an arrow. Then Tat Ipe's siblings tell him that 'from then on he could only see his wife in dreams' (*Ibid:* 63).

By transforming Piler's grandchildren into animals Tat Ipe performs an act of 'creation' as well one of 'separation'. He 'creates' animals, which were humans before. Viveiros de Castro says about Araweté's cosmology that animals were 'created', as opposed to gods, humans and spirits who have always existed (1992: 71)[181]. Therefore Tat Ipe creates animals by fulfilling his thirst for revenge for his mother's killing. In this way he also reaches another goal, that of separating the human condition from that of animals, thus creating the precondition for human social life. Social life is today conceived by the Kuna only as opposed to not-human a-sociality.

[181] In Viveiros de Castro's description of mythic time creation we find interesting similarities with the Kuna myth presented in this chapter. "Created animals used to be humans long ago. During a great maize beer festival, *Ñã-Maï* ('Jaguar-God,' brother of *Miko ra'i*, 'Opossum's son'), seeking revenge for the death of his mother at the claws of the monstrous jaguar *Ñã nowï'hã*, transformed all the human guests into the animals of today: harpy eagles, vultures, jaguars, giant river otters, howler monkeys, capuchin monkeys, saki monkeys, agoutis, collared peccaries, tapirs, curassows, toucans, deer, guans, pacas, and anteaters. *Ñã-Maï* transformed or 'created' them with the help of his *array* (shaman rattle) and tobacco. Then he transformed cultural objects of vegetal origin into various fishes: the serving vessel made of cockerite palm spathes turned into the trairão; the *tupe* mat turned into the matrinxã; the fire fan, pestle and so on turned into other species of fish. *Miko ra'i*, for his part, transformed the smoke of a bonfire into mosquito and other insects pests" (*Ibid*: 72).

Kuna people constantly draw on the source of knowledge and fertility that is located in the supernatural world, inhabited by animal as well as tree entities. Both give people the capacity to be fertile and to produce cultural objects as well as other human beings. Trees are the main source for improving bodily substances and they are associated with birth, rejuvenation and reproduction. Animals provide hunting skills and ritual powers and are considered to be the primary cause of human mortality and illness.

Human social life is based on kinship, which is based upon the mastering of fertile forces and emotions through memory, thought and love (Gow, 1991; 2000), and upon the reproduction of culture and the protection against supernatural enemies through shamanism. Animality is a condition that lacks kinship and culture and has more to do with unrestrainable appetites, predation and uncontrolled reproduction (cf. Overing, 1985a; Londoño-Sulkin, 2000). Therefore, by creating diversity, separating humans from animals, social life becomes possible. Birth and death become the limits of life as Kuna people experience it today. From the moment of this separation human beings had to be born as well as having to die in order to live in the world. The human condition was bound to birth and mortality and the main cause for the latter are precisely animals, which seek revenge for their removal and transformation. The human temporary condition of being alive is possible through the separation from the animal condition, which nonetheless means a constant struggle and negotiation with animals, entailing danger, illness and death. Life is difference, separation and fertility; death is identity and non-fertility (Overing Kaplan, 1984: 131).

As Kuna people told me, when a person dies, he or she goes to the house of Papa and starts living with his or her partner and the animals that man has hunted during his life. They will look the same, will live alone as a couple and will not have children. Life becomes a sterile identity in the afterlife and the absence of danger and conflicts stands for the absence of life as reproduction.

As Rotalio told me, 'the *nele* is the one who marries in the underworld'. He marries the daughter of one of the chiefs of animals (*poni sayla e siskwa*), which, as the Kuna myths tell us, are the grandchildren of Piler, transformed into animals and sent under the world by Tat Ipe and his siblings. Today the *nele* seeks to study the nature of *ponikan*, in order to learn their secrets and to protect his human kinspeople against their predatory powers. Knowing how an animal entity looks, how it behaves, what it eats, provides the *nele* with the knowledge to diagnose illnesses in human persons. Thus the

nele, by getting to know animal entities closely, learns how to cure people from their evil actions or even to prevent them. In order to do so, the *nele*, re-enacts the primordial alliances between Tat Ipe and Piler: he marries the daughter of a Master of Animals. By entering via marriage into the underworld villages of animals, the *nele* gains access to the knowledge of the enemies[182]. It is only by knowing how animal entities live, that human beings can survive in the world, and it is the task of *nelekan* to provide this security. But how does the young *nele* venture in the underworld to get married to the daughter of a chief of animals?

Opakket – Crossing to the other side

The initiation ceremony for young *nele* is called *opakket* or *nel-opakket*, which means 'to cross', 'to traverse'. The ceremony is led by a ritual master, *api sua*, who knows the long chants that may go on for up to eight days[183]. The *api sua* sings his chants (*ikarkan*) during the night, while the *nele* is asleep. Through this singing (*namakke*) he guides the *nele*'s *purpa* in the underworld in order to meet his spirit helpers. Various *nuchukana* are carved especially for the occasion. Normally two couples of balsa wood (*ukkurwala*), formed by two men and two women, are made[184]. They will be the guides of the *nele* in his travels in the underworld domains of animal entities. Other *nuchukana* may be brought by the *api sua* and the other participants to the ceremony. An enclosure

[182] Speaking with a Kuna man at the end of my fieldwork, he told me something that initially surprised me, but now makes more sense: "If you really want to learn our language well and our culture, you have to marry a Kuna woman" he told me. Recognizing my serious attempt to learn about his culture, he was telling me that if I wanted to really succeed in my learning, I should do something more than just ask questions and observe. Now I find his position more realistic and meaningful, and a smart statement about the limits of anthropological research.

[183] The same *api sua* also leads the collective curing ceremony called *apsoket*, ('to converse'), performed in cases of epidemic or when the soul of a dead person haunts the village (cf. Howe, 1976a). There are many similarities between *opakket* and *apsoket*, and they basically follow the same ritual structure. Even thought I could not observe either of the two ceremonies, I heard many descriptions of them. The first leads to the marriage between a *nele* and a daughter of a chief of animals; the second aims to send the animal entities that attacked the village for some reason back under the earth, so re-enacting the primordial separation between humans and animals. These similarities are highly intriguing and should be explored further analytically.

[184] It is interesting to note that the Murui-Muinane used to make wooden statues representing human couples. The woman was put at the bottom of the house and the man at the entrance. They had two types of statues called *janare* and *janane*. The *janare* acquire the personality of the owner of the house, who with the help of the statues will remain awake, protecting the household from sorcerers. The *janane* statues are created in numbers of four, two representing the couple of mythic heroes, the other two the owner of the house and his wife. These statues are responsible for advising the owner when the house is attacked by the *janane* spirits in dreams (Yepez, 1982: 56-62).

(*surpa*) is built within the house. Inside it the *nele* will lie in a hammock, surrounded by the wooden statues.

Beside the *api sua* and the *nele* other people are involved in the ceremony. They are normally old women (*muukana*) and married men. Their task is to smoke tobacco and burn cacao beads in clay braziers. Old women smoke tobacco pipes and cigarettes and sit inside, along the cane walls of the house, outside the *surpa*. One man is called the *sianar takketi*, 'he who looks after the brazier'[185], and his task is to maintain the embers that burn the cacao beans, by means of a woven fire fan. Another man is the *war ueti* ('tobacco smoker'), generally a middle-age man, who smokes long, roughly rolled cigars (*war suit*)[186]. He keeps the lit end of the cigar transversally and carefully in his mouth and blows, producing a great amount of smoke, onto the heads of the *api sua* and the *nele* and onto the *nuchukana*. The *api sua* lies in a hammock beside the *nele*'s within the *surpa*.

During the day the *nele* bathes with plant medicine water and never goes outside the house. When the night comes the *api sua* starts singing with his rough, low toned voice, while the *nele* falls asleep. He sings for many hours and pauses only every once in a while, when the *war uedi* blows tobacco smoke on his head. Outside, the old women, sometimes accompanied by some men, quietly smoke their pipes or cigarettes and collect the ashes in small gourds. They are called *inna opanneti*, 'those who move the chicha'. The smoke (*ue*) of tobacco is in fact the refreshing drink, unfermented chicha (*inna*), for the *nuchukana*, which gives them the energy to work hard and to protect the *nele* during his cosmic travels. On the other hand, the ashes (*pur*) of pipes and cigarettes are the alcoholic chicha (*inna*) offered to animal entities, which makes them happy and drunk[187]. I was told that *nuchu omekan* (women *nuchu*) bring the chicha and offer it to

[185] The name *sianar* (brazier), derives from *sia* ('cacao') and *narret* ('to smoke'). 'Smoking with cacao' is exactly the main use for a *sianar* in ritual occasions. However *sianar* may be used by old women for more mundane tasks, such as going to the neighbour's house at dawn to ask for some embers (*sokun*) to light up the fire again.

[186] *War suit* ('long tobacco') is used in all Kuna curing ceremonies (individual and collective), in the puberty ceremonies and in the *nele*'s initiation ceremony. It is always smoked by another person other than the ritual specialist, and the smoke is intended to reinforce the spiritual power of both the specialist and his auxiliary spirits. This is the only way in which locally produced tobacco is consumed. The cigar, made with roughly rolled tobacco leaves, is long around 30 cm. and closed at the end with a string. People in Okopsukkun do not cultivate tobacco any more, so they buy *uár suit* made by the Kuna living in the inland Bayano region.

[187] The difference between unfermented and fermented *inna* in everyday Kuna life is that the first is made with dry maize powder chewed by women, mixed with water, boiled and drunk before it ferments. While the second is made with sugar cane juice and dry ground maize, boiled and left to ferment in clay pots for a few weeks. The first is refreshing and drunk on an everyday basis, offered to visitors to the house and

animal entities. They have cheerful manners; they dance and sing while bringing the chicha to *ponikan*, as Kuna women do during puberty ceremonies. For this reason *ponikan* are thrilled and drink what they are offered happily, ending up jolly drunk.

Through his chants the *api sua* guides the *purpa* of the *nuchu* and that of the *nele* in the oneiric exploration of the villages of animals in the underworld. During the first days of the ceremony, or better said, the first nights, the *nele* is guided by the *api sua* and escorted by *nuchukana* close to the proximity of the animals' villages, so they can observe their places without been seen[188]. This first 'survey' helps the *nele* get used to the new world he is discovering, and most of all to learn about the appearances of animals. In fact, in their underworld homes, animals look like persons, even if in different ways from Kuna people[189]. Then, progressively, night-by-night during the ceremony, the *nele* will be conducted closer to animals' villages, until he is able to see animal women, to get close to them and to chose the one he prefers. To make the right choice is crucial, in fact there is always the possibility of being deceived by entities that are not the real *tarpa* of the *nele*[190].

Here I make a clarification. Kuna people make a distinction between *nelekan* born with the possibility of seeing animals, who they say that are borne with 'a *tarpa* that is written upon' (*tarpa nasisa*), and *nelekan* who cannot, and have therefore to resort to the help of *nuchukana*. This is a distinction by birth, and leads me to add a reflection on the point I made in chapter four, where I described the absence/invisibility of designs on newborn *nele*'s *kurkin*. At the point reached thus far, it seems more likely that a *nele* is born too with a link to some particular animal. This means that he has a design too,

---

brought by men when they go to the gardens. The second is alcoholic and it is drunk during puberty ceremonies only. See Viveiros de Castro (1992: 119-129) for a similar distinction among the Araweté.

[188] This moment reminded me of the description of the pre-battle ritual conducted by the Parakanã, where the shaman could see the enemies without being seen by them (Fausto, 2001: 277-285). This also suggests the relevance of the intensification of shamanic vision in dreams. In fact the *nele* also receives the smoke of tobacco spiritually, which increases his vision and gives him the capacity to see in dreams. He will also smoke tobacco while performing his diagnosis to increase his waking sight (cf. Wilbert, 1987: 162-171).

[189] I obtained few and always rather general descriptions of how animals look in the underworld. Although everyone agreed that they look like persons, sometimes people hinted at peculiar aspects that a particular species has. For example the woman-turtle (*yauk ome*) was said to be beautiful. Although I did not directly enquire about animal supernatural appearances (which nonetheless remains a task that I hope to carry out in the future), I collected remarkable designs of the villages (*kalumar*) of animals and of demons. The designs were made with colours on a notebook by a botanic specialist who came from another island and left as a gift to his host in Okopsukkun, also a botanic specialist, who allowed us to take pictures from them.

[190] The possibility to be deceived by fake auxiliary spirits appears also in Crocker's description of the shamanic possession among the Bororo. "Only a wise and experienced shaman can distinguish neatly among all the horde of *bope* that come crowding in, drawn by the odour of tobacco and cooked food, and tell which among them is really his familiar" (Crocker, 1985: 222).

although it is invisible to other people. This design must be discovered in order to find out what his *tarpa* is, his auxiliary spirit. This would reinforce the argument about the 'invisibility' of the *nele*'s designs, compared to the 'visibility' of normal babies' designs. Although it was never made explicit to me, it seems that the *api sua* is able to find out what the pre-destined spirit companion of the *nele* is as if he were able to see his design. By listening to the *nele*'s dreams, and by reading other signs[191], the *api sua* is able to help the *nele* to choose the right auxiliary spirit, the one that is truly looking for him.

Animal women are beautiful, Rotalio told me. They are gorgeous women, and each one tries to seduce the *nele*, but he has to resist until the right one come along. For this reason the *api sua* gives advice to the *nele* during the days of the ceremony, telling him how to recognize each animal-woman. Also *nuchukana* stand beside the *nele*, to help, guide and protect him along the way.

> "*Nelekan* bathe for eight days to cross to another village. Not just another village, but to go into the village of *ponikan*, to get in there. *Nuchu* is my guide, it accompanies me. Look, when you came here you asked me: 'Rotalio when are you going to Panama?' I thought: 'How could I go, I have no money.' You helped me: 'Don't worry, I'll take you'.
>
> The first time I went to Panama when I was young, I was innocent, I didn't know anything, I stayed still. 'Where is my uncle's house?' I thought. I didn't know. So I looked for a person who could bring me to my uncle's house. So the *nuchu* brings me into the house of *ponikan*. To see the house in their village. To see how they live: do they live like us? How did God create these *ponikan*? Are there rivers? What do *ponikan* have? Are they like us? Are they different?"
>
> […] *Nuchugan* have telephones, as the *waymar* [strangers], but we do not see them. In dreams they begin to look like soldiers. As the soldiers have their own weapons, they have theirs. So they bring me to the village of *neilu kalu* [unspecified supernatural village]. The *nuchu* tells me: 'This is *neilu kalu*, this *poni* is *ansu* [siren], this is *achu* [jaguar], he is *tain* [crocodile]. They are alive. I see them, but my face is

[191] Kuna specialists divide headaches into many categories and associate each type to a spirit illness. By studying the symptoms of the *nele*, the *api sua* is thus able to discover which is the origin of the headache; therefore which animal causes it. Moreovere, I was told that in the past midwives were able to distinguish between different types of *nelekan* at birth.

hidden. My body doesn't show up. The *poni* do not see me. Just my eyes show up. The *nuchukana* are protecting me.

Then during the night I wake up and I feel weak, because my soul went out. When I dream my soul goes out, but my body stands still. My soul is working. Therefore the *api sua* asks me: 'Hey Rotalio, which *tarpa* do you want to get close to? There is *ansu*, *achu*, *tain*, *akkwanusa* [magic stone]. There are many *tarpakan*. There is *ukkuturpa* [silky anteater], *pero* [sloth], *akkwanukku* [porcupine]. These are doctors [*nelekan*].

Look, now I live here, I got married to Alejandrina and I have four daughters. *Nelekan* are always married to two women. One lives spiritually. If you don't get married you don't know anything. You live alone, you don't think, you don't do anything. When I am married, one day my wife tells me: 'Today I don't have wood, let's go get it. Today I don't have coconut. Today we haven't eaten; tomorrow you'll go fishing.' If I live alone no one is going to tell me so, are they? My mouth eats alone. Now I have four mouths. Spiritually a *nele* always gets married. This is my *tarpa*, it is said, like my wife. Only the name changes: *tarpa*. This is my wife.

Look, I got married to Alejandrina. Her father was a *kantur* [singer in puberty ceremonies]. Here we have his maracas and his flute… I don't know where they threw them! I got married to her and moved here. My father-in-law told me: 'Rotalio you live in my house, so you will learn to be a *kantur* like me.' He taught me. How did he teach me? Look, I got married to Alejandrina, Roy's daughter. He had eight disciples, but they didn't live in his house, as I did. Who did he teach more? Me, because he thought: 'When Rotalio is a *kantur*, they'll always eat meat.'"

Reflecting upon the scene described by Rotalio, it appears that approaching the village of animal entities for the first time represents a great danger. The *nele* is escorted by his guides and helper spirits, the *nuchukana*, which hide him and allow him to see, without been seen[192].

The first days of the initiation ceremony of the *nele* are in fact dedicated to the slow and careful exploration of the underworld. The *api sua* sings his long chants, guiding the *nele*'s *purpa* and the *nuchukana* in their supernatural exploration. Knowing in detail the supernatural geography of the territory around the village is one of the skills of the

[192] Rotalio says: "Just my eyes show up." This reminds me of the description that Harner makes of the spirit helper of the Shuar bewitching shamans. "The curing shaman, under the influence of *natemä*, sees the *pasuk* of the bewitcher in human form and size, but 'covered with iron except for its eyes.' The curing shaman can kill this *pasuk* only by shooting a *tsentsak* into its eyes, the sole vulnerable area in the *pasuk*'s armor" (1972: 159).

api sua. As testimony to this, one day I had a long conversation with one of the two *api sua* present in both Okopsukkun and Ustupu at the time of my fieldwork. He illustrated to me the supernatural topography of the place. He nominated the various places (called *kalu*, for instance the one nominated above by Rotalio: *neilu kalu*) where animal entities live in the surroundings of the island, both in the sea and on the coast. Each place has its proper name and is associated with one, or sometimes more, animal species.

Kalugan are specific topographic places, located in specific places on the sea or in the forest. The exact location and the name of the majority of *kalumar* (pl.) near to Okopsukkun are known only by specialists, and more specifically by *api sua*. Nevertheless the location of some *kalu* is known by the majority of adult people, as in the case of a place located on a hill top in front of the island called Sarsip kalu. It is known by everyone in Okopsukkun the place has supernatural powers and is inhabited by demons (*kalutor*).

All *kalumar* are dangerous for people to get close to. They are inhabited by either demons or animal entities. If the person passing by, cuts a tree branch inaccurately, or even worse, if he decides to open a new garden there and cuts the trees, the entities living in that *kalu* may get upset and attack him and his family. In some cases, the evil entities disturbed by the inattentive actions of people, may even decide to attack the entire village. This is the case in epidemics, when people and especially children start suffering from diarrhoea and high fever. In these cases an *api sua* and a *nele* are called and a collective healing ritual (*apsoket*) is performed to send evil entities back into their *kalu*[193].

Besides the *kalumar* inhabited by animal entities and demons, there are *kalumar* in which the chief of natural phenomena, like thunder, wind, storm, and earthquake, reside. Each one has its owner, who decides when to liberate its energies. There are also

[193] In the the long chant (*apsoket ikar*) performed in this ceremony, the *api sua* demonstrates his skills of remembering with precision the names of all the *kalumar* and the inhabitants he knows. This is meant to guide his auxiliary spirits (*nuchukana*) to fight back evil entities, while a *nele* observes in his sleep how the mystical battles goes on. There is a strong resemblance between this ceremony and the initiation ceremony of the *nele* (cf. note five in this chapter). In both the knowledge of the *api sua* serves as a guide for the *nele* and the *nuchukana* in the underworld. Through his singing he directs them into the invisible dimension of the cosmo, while they perform the actual battle against pathogenic spirits. Thus, I suggest, *nuchukana* and *nele*, being respectively the hand and the eyes of the *api sua*, may be regarded as his *tarpakan*, his extension in the underworld. During my fieldwork I collected good data on the performance of this collective healing ceremony. Unfortunately I do not have enough space here to dedicate to the proper description of this ritual, which is highly complex and involves the participation of various ritual specialists and the members of the community. Moreover, I was told that in the past, before opening the many new gardens in the forest, people celebrated the *apsoket* in order to get rid of the potential enemies and to advise the trees about what they were going to do (cf. chapter one).

kalu in which cultural skills are contained. They have been created by Pap Tummat and could be visited by culture heroes (like Tat Ipe and his siblings) in ancient times, and who went there to learn cultural skills and then taught them to Kuna people. The Kuna today call other *kalumar* 'administrative *kalumar*' and they have huge and wonderful buildings with "offices with lots of people that execute the will of God in relation to the earth" (Herrera and de Schrimpff, 1974: 208). One of these *kalu* is called Kaluibakki and, I was told, it is the place where all the *nuchukana* present in every house in the Kuna territory gather every day. There they organize gatherings, telling each other the relevant facts that happen in each village and in each household. In this way every *nuchu* is updated about the news from other communities and can reveal this information to its *nele* owner.

What is interesting is that each *kalu* can be represented graphically. Depending on the animal chief or demon residing in it, the *kalu* is represented with particular features, which help to identify each specific *kalu*. The name of each *kalu* will also be the one of the animal living in it. For instance *moli ipekun kalu*, is the *kalu* of tapir (*moli*). There are different types of *kalumar*; some that are part of the local topography, and thus they differ from island to island, and others that are shared by all Kuna, regardless of where they live. The latter form part of a more fixed tradition, linked to mythology; the former change with the time and may disappear after some years.

Moving slowly towards the underworld *kalumar* means that the *nele* progressively conduct the ceremonies in order to see animal entities more closely. In this way he gets used to the sight of them and learns how to cope with the closeness of their vicinity without being frightened. It is important to stand the presence of *poni*, to be powerful and courageous enough not to run away and thus wake up, so erasing the progress made thus far. The ceremony is called *opakket*, 'to cross', because the *nele* actually crosses the space between humans and animals, reaching the place inhabited by the latter. *Opakket* stands for the completion of this process, when a *nele* has successfully gained entrance into the house of the master of animals.

As I described in chapter four, the sight of *ponikan* in dreams scares young *nele*. It is for this reason that *nelekan* have to take plant medicines during their childhood, before they undergo their initiation ceremony, in order to strengthen their *purpa*, their *nika* and their *tala* (their 'soul/immaterial double', their 'bodily force' and their 'sight'). Thus prepared and fortified, the *nele* is able to see animal entities and to approach them

during the initiation. The strengthening of the body and the guidance of the *api sua*, as a ritual master, are therefore essential in the completion of the initiation of the *nele*. Moreover the supernatural companionship with *nuchu* is a further help and represents a security for the *nele*. *Nuchukana* are in fact the spirit protectors of humans par excellence. Their knowledge of animals and demons is precious once the *nele* has established a positive relationship with them.

The process of *opakket* was also described to me as 'learning'. So prepared, guided and accompanied, the *nele* 'learns' (*nerkue*), or literally he 'becomes a *nele*'. He learns about animal entities, their behaviour, their way of life, their powers, their tricks, their transformations. But first and foremost he learns how to 'change his point of view'. Moving toward animals' villages, the *nele* learns how to transform himself and to adopt another point of view. By becoming able to see animal entities in their inner and real forms, the *nele* learns how to adopt their perspective, becoming eventually and momentarily one of them. By seeing animal-women as beautiful women he has transformed himself in order to be seen by animal-women as a man. But what needs to be stressed here is the importance for the *nele* not to be trapped into an animal perspective, which means that he has to maintain his human agency within the animal world. In this task he is helped by the *api sua* and by *nuchukana*. He has to be able to return to his human form and to maintain his human intentionality.

As Rotalio brilliantly explained to me, a man alone does nothing. It is only when he is married and starts having children that he starts learning how to do things properly. It is the aim of working for one's family and for one's kinspeople that makes a man learn. As explicitly told me, this is also true for the *nele*: he learns by helping his kinspeople, therefore he should live with them and become a sociable person. As shown in chapter four, Kuna people strongly emphasize that a *nele* must not learn alone, otherwise he will become mad. This, they pointed out, contrasts with the practice of shamanism in the old days, when many *nelekan* became too powerful and used their knowledge against kinspeople. It was God who limited their powers to the extent that is visible nowadays[194].

For Tat Ipe, learning about medicines was motivated by the will to revive his mother, and marrying Piler's granddaughter was a way to see evil from the inside. The reason

[194] Piro people talk about olden day shamans as jaguar shamans, who lived alone and used to transform into jaguars, to kill animals and practice sorcery (Gow, 2001. 123-124).

why the *nele* undergoes the whole initiation and associates with animal entities is to cure his human kinspeople. This reason is important and it is stressed constantly by Kuna people that a *nele* is good for the community, helps people and could not harm anyone. A preoccupation underlies this statement and for this reason the *nele* is accompanied by the *api sua* and watched closely both during his initiation and his future life. Social relationships and kinship maintain the *nele* and keep him attached to human intentionality during his entire life and prevent him from losing his 'love' and 'memory' towards his kinspeople. Power and knowledge for their own sake are discouraged in Kuna social discourse and practice and rituals, such as shamanic initiation and the killing of witches, aim to control the emergence of uncontrolled individual authorities.

It is the *api sua* that judges when the moment has come and the *nele* is finally ready to enter the village of animal entities. It is the *api sua* that lets the *nele* in, by means of his chants, to complete the crossing and to unite with the daughter of the Master of Animals.

Marriage and reciprocity in the life of *nele*

The *nele* must therefore be prepared for the first close encounter with his future spouse, which should never happen before a certain time[195]. Furthermore, the meeting between the *nele* and *ponikan* must not happen empty handed. The permission for entering the village of animals is given by their master in return for the marriage of the *nele* with one of its daughters. The meeting with the master of animals must happen when the *nele* is prepared to marry one of the daughters and has already made his choice. Therefore the *api sua* asks him, when he wakes up between his dream-travels, which animal-woman he likes most. He also tells the *nele* about the qualities of the different animal-women, so the *nele* can make his choice.

What is important to note is that in the first sages of the initiation ceremony animals are depicted as enemies. They must not see the *nele* otherwise they will kill him. This relationship will change once the *nele* marries the daughter of the *poni*, even though it

[195] My Kuna informants varied in their opinion about this issue. Some of them told me that the *nele* really encounters *ponikan* when he has completed the initiation ceremony four times. Others argued that every time the *nele* meets a different *poni*, so the more ceremonies he undergoes, the more auxiliary spirits he has and the more powerful he is.

will always remain a precarious relation, as we will see below. The *nele* must be prepared to establish a friendly relationship with *ponikan* at the first actual encounter. For this reason something must be offered as a sign of friendliness and a denial of animosity when *nele* and *ponikan* meet up. Therefore what mediates this encounter is the offering of chicha (*inna*) to *ponikan*. The fermented chicha offered to *ponikan*, as I mentioned above, is the ashes produced by old women smoking tobacco during the ceremony, and it is carried by women *nuchu* in the spiritual dimension. By drinking chicha animal entities get drunk and become happy and generous, and this calms down any aggressive attitude against the *nele*. "If the *poni* are drunk, they are happy – Rotalio told me – and they do not want to kill the *nele*." On the contrary they become benevolent with him, who, they soon realize, is going to become part of their family.

The first resemblance here is with the myth presented above, where Tat Ipe and his siblings organize a chicha ceremony to celebrate his marriage with Piler's granddaughter. Fermented chicha (*inna*) is collectively drunk by Kuna people during the female initiation ritual. Three different rituals are held during a girl's life cycle: during the early days of life, for the perforation of her nasal septum (*iko inna*); after her first menstruation (*inna mutikkit*) and for the name-giving ceremony, when the ritual cutting of her hair is performed (*inna suit*).

Puberty ceremonies, especially the *inna suit*, were, and in some cases still are, the moment for combining marriages among the Kuna (Margiotti, personal communication). This issue is clearly shown also in the myth presented above, where Tat Ipe and his siblings decided to celebrate a chicha ceremony to organize his marriage with Olopakintili. Puberty ceremonies and marriage unions are thus linked in both mythic discourse and daily Kuna practice. These are occasions were the whole village get together and when unrelated people find it easier to talk together and spend time laughing and telling stories. It is therefore completely acceptable and even expected that families agree upon the marriage of their children during these festive moments.

Kuna people explained that in the past, when arranged marriages were more diffused than today, the parents of the bride, having chosen the potential husband for their daughter, used to ask for the agreement of the parents of the groom. Both sets of parents thus met during the three day ritual of *inna suit* and agreed to their children being married. It is said that the jolly atmosphere of collective drinking eased the meeting between potential affines. When the parents of the groom agreed for their son to marry

the girl and thus to move into her parents' house, the father of the bride, together with some male friends or relatives, went to pick up the boy from his house. Sometimes the boy was taken by surprise, completely unaware of the agreement reached by his parents. He was thus lifted by the men and taken into his future wife's house. There he was put on top of her, and both lie on a hammock. The first time he remained for only a few minutes in the house of the girl, sometimes even not speaking with her. Then the second day his father-in-law and his friends took him to the house again where the girl waited for him. They did this for four days and each day the boy stayed longer and spoke more with the girl. The last day he remained for the entire night, and the day after he went to the forest with his father-in-law to collect four trunks for the home cooking fire. With the husband starting to work for his wife's family the marriage was completed and the husband moved into his wife's house permanently (cf. Prestan Simón, 1975: 91-94).

Nowadays despite marriages not being so much the outcome of the decision of the couple's parents as in the past, the practice of 'picking the groom up' (*sui amie*) is still in use[196]. The capture of the boy by the hands of his male affines is done jokingly and the movement of the boy to his wife's house is not sudden, but rather gradual. Old people would always emphasize their initial embarrassment, when talking to me about their first days of marriage. Young couples did not know each other. Especially I heard memories of old men, remembering how embarrassed and alone they felt the first days in their wives' houses.

The graduality of the man moving into his wife's house is due to the importance of knowing each other. Unknown people always represent a potential threat. Eating together, sleeping together, living together are the only ways to become of the same kind, to become kinspeople, as it has been emphasized by Amazonian anthropologists (Gow, 1991; Belaunde, 2001; McCallum, 2001). Similarly also the *nele* moves slowly into the house of his wife-to-be. His supernatural marriage is the mirror of marriages between living people and of his own marriage with his human wife, as I explain below. The *nele* at first maintains his distance from the house of his future wife, and then he progressively gets closer until he eventually moves into the house of his supernatural affines.

The fact that most marriages, especially in the past, took place during puberty rituals is probably linked to the fact that social relationships were eased by the atmosphere of

[196] See Margiotti (Ph.D. thesis) for a description of marriage and marital relations among the Kuna.

happiness and amusement created by the collective drinking of fermented chicha. Relations with potential affines for people are in this sense similar to relations with animal entities. As both the myth in this chapter and that in the previous one show, living beings were all the same in ancient times. Then animals, trees and human beings split, each one moving into a separate place in the world, and started to appear different from one another.

The outcome of this separation, as I argued before, is the creation of human sociality as separate from that of animals. Human beings were also bound to mortality and birth as characterizing their life on the earth. From the end of ancient times therefore the relationship between humans and animals started to be marked by predation and hostility. Death and birth, as I noted in chapter six, are not 'natural facts', but the outcome of a process, which entails human agency as well as a not-human agency. The first is in fact most often caused by animal malevolent agency (even though, up to a certain level, it can be caused by human misuse of medicines and ritual knowledge). The second must be 'completed' through human agency, as the end of a process that starts beyond and before the world of human beings.

Kuna people eat some animals and some animals eat Kuna people. As the grandchildren-animals ate Makiryai (see chapter six) in mythic time, today's animals eat people by consuming their blood and stealing their souls. It is just the form of killing that has changed from mythic to present time, but the threat is still the same.

Separation is thus seen as safety, while proximity and union means danger. It is the task of the *nele* to venture close to animal entities and to establish strategic alliances, to steal their knowledge for the sake of his human kinspeople. On one hand animal entities try to steal the young *nele*, killing his parents, cutting his links with his human kinspeople, as the grandmother toad did with Makiryai's children. On the other, the *nele*, with the assistance and guidance of his kinspeople, of ritual masters and *nuchukana*, plays the game of marriage and alliances cunningly, with the aim of tricking animal entities and stealing their secret knowledge.

Once the marriage alliance between the *nele* and animal entities has been established, reciprocity is implicit between the two domains. Through marriage a relationship of reciprocity between the *nele* and the chief of animals is therefore established. As Rotalio told me it is important that this relationship is constantly acknowledged and looked after. If the *nele* does not visit his family in dreams, if he does not go to his

wife's house, his supernatural father-in-law will strike him to death. The most common cause of death for *nele* is the stroke (*sayla mayleke*), which sees a *poni* attack its victim during dreams, causing him an internal haemorrhage. This is why, I was told, a *nele* can be found dead when he is asleep.

Once a *nele* has started his personal journey towards knowledge, through his initiation, he cannot turn back. Once he has married an animal woman he has to live with her in dreams, in the same way that a man has to work for his wife's family. Moreover, when the *nele* has children with his human wife, so he has to also with his animal wife. The two lives of the *nele* run parallel and he is expected to do the same things by is human family as he is expected to do by his supernatural affines. He has to work for his children in both realms, and this amounts to him living two lives at the same time; one during the day, with his human family; the other during dreams with his supernatural family.

As Rotalio reiterated to me on various occasions, he feared he would die at any moment. He had already told his wife Alejandrina to be prepared for this occurrence. This was beacuse he never succeeded in completing his initiation and thus he cannot see his *tarpakan* in dreams. He cannot meet or speak with them, thus causing a rupture in the reciprocal relationship. Therefore, he told me, they are angry with him, because he never went to visit them. Even though this was beyond Rotalio's will, it enraged his affinal auxiliary spirits, who could thus cause his death whenever they wanted.

Gaining designs

Now I want to explore a bit further what I defined above as reciprocity. Reciprocity is an important aspect of kinship and affinity among Kuna people. Among a couple, reciprocity is what keeps the man and the woman together and structures the extended family. A man who marries into another kindred has to work for his acquired family. He inherits gardens from both his parents, which he will work along with those of his wife, for bringing food to his in-laws' family. This becomes almost compulsory when the couple starts having children and everything that the father does is not for his own family, but rather for his own consanguineous family, is a matter of controversy and sometimes drives the couple apart with the man going back to his mother's house.

Married men are expected to participate in the economic life of the family of their wives. A married man works under the guidance of his father-in-law together with his unmarried brothers-in-law and his co-brothers-in-law. Even if men often work alone and tend to cultivate their own gardens, there are occasions in which sets of brothers-in-law work together, for example when they have to slash and burn trees before sowing an old garden. On the other hand, as Rotalio told me, the father-in-law teaches his knowledge to his son-in-law. This can be whatever the father-in-law is knowledgeable in, like how to make canoes, how to carve a *nuchu*, or ritual chants.

Ritual knowledge is very valuable, and men have to pay for it if they become disciples of a master. I was told that in the past a disciple used to work for his master in return for his teachings. He would harvest crops, or go fishing or help the master to slash and burn trees in his garden. Nowadays, I was often told, it does not work like this any more: people have to pay money in order to learn. Paying money is also the most common form of exchange when a cure is performed. The family of the ill person always pays the ritual specialist with money (apart from a few exceptions in which crops or fish are given, if money is short). Even if the healer is close kin, he has to be paid. To the extreme in which, a man told me that he once paid five dollars to his brother who cured him, and who then gave the money back to him. Otherwise the cure would not be effective.

In all these examples reciprocity and exchange are crucial in the establishment and maintenance of social relationships. Receiving something makes one give something else in return (as between a father-in-law and a son-in-law), or something is given in exchange for a service (as between a curer and a patient). What also emerges is that what is given in exchange or what is reciprocated may vary (work transformed into money), but the relationship persists. It is not because men do not work any more for their masters that the teaching of ritual knowledge has changed[197]. What is always at stake is the relationship itself. In the case of work exchanged for teaching, or money; or in the case the father-in-law teaching in return for the son-in-law's participation in his family's economic life, what is always acknowledged is the relationships between the

[197] Although I must say that the way in which ritual knowledge is taught is different from the way it used to be. But this has to do primarily with technical support, like tape recorders, that are much used to learn chants and myths among the Kuna. Cassettes are used for recording chants and myths and listened to by learners, by night, instead of visiting their master daily. But again this does not change my point that the relationship between master and disciple is still one of exchange.

two parts. Reciprocating or not, or of what is given in exchange, has the meaning of stressing the importance of relationships for the people involved, and consequently that everyone is involved in relationships. Not being able to reciprocate means that a person is becoming other (enemy, animal, or both).

Relationships are immanent within the nature of human beings, as I have argued in the previous chapter in respect of the concept of *tarpa*, and in chapter four in respect of the birth of a *nele*. People are born with the mark (visible or not) of their 'animal companions'. In the case that the mark is visible in the form of 'amniotic designs' the relationship itself is acknowledged and recognized by the kinspeople of the newborn. In the case of the *nele* the relationship is not evident and must be made so throughout his life. Therefore what people are doing, through reciprocity and exchange, is making relationships visible to the eyes of the beholders. Exchanging and reciprocating are forms of acknowledging relationships and making them visible in everyday life. As it has been argued by some scholars (see Overing and Passes, 2000), relationships are at the core of everyday preoccupation towards the constant construction of 'living well' among Amazonians.

By acknowledging the inner relational nature of human beings, people spend a great deal of energy on the everyday dynamics of relationships. This is equally true for relationships between human beings and for relationships with supernatural beings. The meaning of the Kuna expressions *nuet kuti*, and *akkar akkar suli*, respectively meaning 'being well', and 'nothing is wrong', conveys the preoccupation and the value related to a state of tranquillity and serenity as opposed to one of fear, anxiety and disruption. This preoccupation leads to the collective effort of individual members of society co-operating towards the common aim of keeping life on the safe side. However this is not a conservative effort, but rather a creative one, performed within the framework of relationships with the world of non-human, or ex-human beings.

My point is that the final aim of the *opakket* initiation ceremony, is precisely to 'make visible' (*oyoket*) the *nele*'s relationship with supernatural beings. It is a way of revealing to his kinspeople, and to the members of the community, the designs that were hidden at his birth. His lack of design at birth will thereby be compensated by his collective initiation and his relationship with powerful supernatural entities will be acknowledged by his kinspeople: he will be a married to a *poni*.

Indeed that does not mean that the *nele*'s relationship with his auxiliary spirits is completely manifest and known by other people. On the contrary, a *nele* would never speak overtly about it, primarily for fear of the retaliation of his auxiliary spirits. Besides, it is not a topic that would normally be discussed with other people by a *nele*, but rather it is perceived as private and intimate. Once I was told by a *nele* from the neighbouring village of Ustupu, that it was the first time that he spoke about his relationship with his *tarpakan* with someone. He had never even spoken with his father about this. He told me that he found that he could speak with me because he understood that I was studying, but he stressed that these were things that he would not discuss with anyone else. "I wouldn't know how to answer to their questions", he told me[198].

Therefore what is rendered manifest is the relationship between a *nele* and his *tarpakan*. The fact that a relationship has been established, with the help and the supervision of the *api sua* and the 'tobacco smokers', is a guarantee that the *nele* has taken the first step towards becoming a 'real *nele*' (*nele sunnati*)[199]. He will thus become able to see other people's inner design, which means to diagnose their illnesses.

What the *nele* does when he marries in the underworld, is in some way formalizing and making public, his union with animal entities. He establishes a relationship similar, or specular, to his earthly relationship with his own family. By acknowledging the potential threat entailed in his relationship with animal entities, the *nele* establishes a relationship of alliance and exchange/reciprocity with them. This relationship is aimed at being socially profitable for his human kinspeople (and extensively for all fellow villagers) who directly or indirectly participate in the ceremony (and those who have previously participated in the bringing up of the young *nele*). People's participation in the initiation of the *nele* (such as tobacco smokers, cacao burners, etc.) is thus aimed at securing a link based on reciprocity. People say that the *nele* should then feel grateful to his fellow villagers and help them when they are in need, both through individual curing and most importantly when a collective healing ritual (*apsoket*) is performed. Nevertheless, as I previously said, *nelekan* are often criticised and sometimes find it easier to move to another village or to Panama City.

[198] It is interesting to note that a Piaroa shaman would not speak about his relationship with his auxiliary spirits, saying that it would be like 'showing his genitalia' (Overing, personal communication).
[199] A 'real *nele*' is one who has undertaken *opakket* more than once. Ideally in fact a *nele* must undergo the *opakket* ceremony four times in order to complete his initiation and to become 'truly' powerful. This, I was told, used to happen in the past, while now *nelekan* have completed *opakket* only once or twice.

By the same token the *api sua* and the *nele* make the relationship between the *nele* and animal entities intelligible in terms of social categories, i.e. that of marriage. From this logic stems the imperative that a *nele* must marry in this world to be married in the other world, and he must have children 'here' to have children 'there'. Is this an act of reciprocation between human beings and animals? Is the *nele* a mediator between worlds previously united, whose task is that of granting animals what was negated to them in ancient times?

An act of creation

What the *nele* and the *api sua* also do, helped by other people during the ceremony of *opakket*, is perform an act of reproduction of human sociality. They in fact re-enact the ancestral alliance between humans and animals, through which culture heroes transformed animals and sent them to live in a separate domain from that of human beings. Through the marriage of the *nele* with his *tarpa* wife, the primordial alliance with animals is re-enacted, as well as, I would argue, the creation of human social life.

Here I wish to compare once more the Kuna with an Amazonian people, namely the Yawalapíti, as described by Viveiros de Castro (1979). The Yawalapíti pertain to the indigenous people living in the Upper Xingu area of Brazil and are part of the Arawak language family. They show strong similarities in their mythology and cosmology with the Kalapalo, Kamaiurá and Kuikúru, which were object of the myths' comparison in the previous chapter. As Viveiros de Castro notes:

> The demiurge Kwamuty[200] is designated, in myths, by the term – *itsatí* – which also means 'party', 'ritual', and most probably the ceremony of death. This ritual, the most important of the Xingu society, is, as Agostinho (1974) showed, a re-enactment of the primordial creation – its core symbol are logs of primordial wood, truly doubles, *colossoi* of the dead (Vernant 1965) –, being the privileged moment of the public presentation of the youth who just emerged from their puberty seclusion. Therefore it is a ritual that intertwines death and life; the girls who emerge from seclusion are like the first human women: mothers of men (because the exit from seclusion coincides ideally with the first marriage)" (*ibid*: 43, my translation).

[200] Kwamuty, or Mavusinim (*ibid*: 42) is the culture hero, who is called Kwatïngï in Kalapalo mythology (Basso, 1987a).

The primordial condition of proximity (and less differentiation) between humans and animals is described in the Kuna myths as one that generated chaos, conflicts and predation. But it was in this condition that human life generated. More precisely, as the myth of Makiryai tells, it was the death of the mother that triggered the whole chain of events that ended up with the creation of humanity and the emergence of the human condition as bound to birth and death. The death of Makiryai and the mourning of her children constituted the inauguration of human mortality but also coincided with the first human birth, that of Tat Ipe and his siblings.

When a *nele* associates with animal entities during the *opakket*, Kuna people re-enact the association between Tat Ipe and Olopakintili (Piler's granddaughter), that is the primordial association between humans and animals. As that first association had the strategic aim of defeating Piler's grandchildren (the animals), so the union between the *nele* and his animal companion aims to keep animals' malign agency under control.

Keeping an eye on animals' supernatural activities means to have the capacity to intervene in the case where animal entities leave their abodes to attack humans. The *nele*, not being able to rescue his mother against animal predation (see chapter five) associates with animal entities to protect his human kinspeople against further acts of predation. In the same way that Tat Ipe avenged his mother's death. As in the case of the Yawalapíti, where death and birth are at the core of the main ritual, among the Kuna the shamanic initiation ritual re-enacts the primordial association between humans and animals that caused death and mortality, originating life as it is experienced by Kuna people today.

Bringing together the elements analyzed in the last two chapters, I wish now to draw some conclusions. As we have seen, tobacco is at the core of the ritual initiation of *nelekan*. Tobacco smoke and the ashes produced are respectively the unfermented and fermented chicha, the former drunk by *nuchukana*, the latter offered to *ponikana*. The consumption of fermented chicha is therefore a common element between the *nele*'s initiation ritual and the girls' puberty ritual. Both rituals, as I noted above, have to do with marriage. On one hand, puberty rituals constitute the proper moment for combining and celebrating marriages. As the myth in this chapter shows, the first ritual in ancient times was celebrated on the occasion of the marriage between Tat Ipe and

Olopakintili. On the other, the ritual initiation of *nelekan* aims at a marriage between the *nele* and an animal-woman.

Chicha and tobacco are the elements that facilitate both forms of union (marriage between humans and between humans and non-humans), by easing relations that contain a potential threat. Considering the myth above, we are told that the marriage celebrated during the first chicha ceremony served to seal an alliance between culture heroes and animal enemies. Furthermore, a previous marriage had been arranged between Tat Ipe's sister, Olowai-ili and Olourkunaliler, the master of thunderstorm, in order to gain an ally. These alliances had the strategic scope of enabling Tat Ipe to transform Piler's grandchildren into animals. This act of transformation created the precondition for human social life on the earth (that is humans and animals looking different and living in separate domains). Going back a little bit, we have also seen that the transformation of animals was the consequence (the revenge for) of a previous act of predation, that against Makiryai, the mother of the culture heroes. Going back a bit further, we have seen how the birth of culture heroes was the outcome of the death of their mother.

Thus we have a chain of death, birth, marriages and transformations, which seems to create the basic structure for understanding shamanism among Kuna people. But one last issue remains yet to be understood. The Yawalapíti case is in fact illuminating for another reason, besides the one listed above. Considering the Xingu common myth of the death of the mother of the twins, the Sun and the Moon (see chapter six), it makes sense, as Viveiros de Castro states in the passage above quoting Vernant, that the wooden logs, core symbols of the ritual, are "truly doubles, *colossoi* of the dead".

The mother of the twins and her sister were the first women. They had been made out of wood by their father, the creator Kwatïngï, who did not want his 'real daughters' to marry the jaguar. One of the two 'made ones' (the mother of the twins) was the first woman to die, while the other became the mother of all humanity, by giving birth to the 'Indians', the 'fierce people' and the 'white people' (Basso, 1987a). For this reason in the present day Xinguan death rituals, wooden logs are the 'core symbols' of collective rituals, around which the idea of death as an unchangeable state revolves.

Following a Kamayurá myth, the first mourning ritual was set up by the creator Mavutsinim (Villas Boas, 1970: 55-56). He wanted to bring back to life the dead people. Therefore he cut three wooden logs from the forest; he decorated them with "feathers, necklaces, cotton threads, and armlets of macaw feathers" (*ibid*: 55) and then

put them at the centre of the village. While some people started singing to turn the logs into people, Mavutsinim told the others not to look at the logs. Slowly, the days passing, the wooden logs started transforming into 'real people'. When the transformation was nearly completed, he called all the people to come and celebrate the dead people coming back to life. But one man, who had not observed the taboo of avoiding sexual relations during the ceremony, ran among the crowd in the middle of the village. This caused the three figures to turn back into wooden logs again. Thus Mavutsinim concluded (after scolding the man): "All right. From now on, it will always be this way. The dead will never come back to life again when kuarups [the wooden logs] are made. From now on, it will only be a festival" (*ibid*: 55).

This myth, describing the origin of the feast of the dead, is closely related with the myth of Kwatïngï presented in chapter six, and I will argue that it is key to understanding what the *nuchukana* are in the Kuna lived world.

In both the Kalapalo and the Kamayurá myths human figures are made out of wood in order to protect or to restore, 'real people' from death. Wooden statues, or logs, are thus 'substitutes', 'doubles' or 'images' of real people. What is relevant is that in both cases the 'made ones' never achieve the status of actual human beings; they do not lose their status of mythic original beings.

As I have shown, humankind originates from an act of rupture, that is the separation of the children from their mother because of her death. The condition of becoming humans entails the loss of immortality and the necessity of being born, through the separation from the mother. As I argued in the previous chapter about the Kuna myth of the death of Makiryai, this separation becomes irreversible. This would explain why Kuna people say that a *nele* kills his mother (see chapter five). From this perspective we can look at the mortuary ritual of the Xingu as the representation of a loss, which at the same time enables a creation, a birth. The constant regeneration and celebration of human social life.

What interests me now, in the next and last chapter of this work, is what visual forms the representation of this loss acquires in the every day life of Amerindians. The people attending the first mourning ritual in the Xingu remained with three wooden logs. In this sense the Yawalapíti use wooden logs as the 'core symbol' of their ritual. What did Kuna people retain? To answer this question I intend to explore ethnographically in the next chapter the closeness between the Kuna and the Xingu myths, by looking at the

‘core symbol’ of Kuna ritual life: the *nuchu*. With this in mind I turn now to the initial question of this work: what is a *nuchu*?

Chapter 8

What is a *nuchu*?

In this last chapter I want to bring together the threads unravelled so far. Following what has emerged in the last two chapters, where I have compared the Kuna and the Xinguan myths, I suggest that *nuchukana* are the instantiation of ancestral beings in the present for Kuna people. As I have noted in the previous chapter, the carving of wooden logs is linked to the attempt to bring the dead back to life. Even though this is a worthless effort, as it is said in Xingu mythology, it is an operation that is carried out regularly in rituals. Following the example of Xinguan mortuary rituals (Agostinho, 1974), I will suggest looking at the social worthiness of carving a *nuchu*. Namely, Kuna people carve their *nuchukana* with the specific aim of seeking protection from evil beings and to heal ill persons.

Furthermore, considering the fact that *nuchukana* are carved in the form of people suggests that they are 'the image of a person' and therefore their effectiveness and liveliness partly resides in their form. If so, what distinguishes them from real human beings? Reflecting upon this question will eventually lead to considering the two main attributes of the human person that have emerged in the course of this ethnography: the *kurkin* and the *purpa*.

I eventually suggest that one must look at the ambivalence between the de-individualized and generic form that *nuchukana* have, as opposed to the personality and the individual qualities that human beings possess. It is thus the human form that gives *nuchukana* the possibility of momentarily acquiring subjectivity through relationships with human beings.

A curing ritual

Generoso, followed by his assistant, quickly and silently enters the house where I have been speaking with Meliña for a while. She tells me about her seven year old niece, Nekartyli, who has been sick for a few days and is not recovering. Generoso's wife, who is a *nele*, saw her the day before and told the mother (Leobijilda, Meliña's younger sister) that the young girl was the victim of the theft of her soul by a jaguar (*achu purpa sulesa*).

Generoso carries his wooden staff, on top of which there is the carved figure of a person, much like the *nuchukana* that are gathered in a plastic tub underneath the hammock where Nekartyli is laying. Meliña tells me that Generoso had sent over his own *nuchukana* the day before, giving instructions to put them together with the ones already in the house. She is keen to tell me that in her family they have many *nuchukana* because her father, Miki, has made them all. He has always been a skilled *nuchu* carver (*kati nuchu sopet*), especially since he retired from his work in Panama City and was already too old to work in the gardens[201].

Now their *nuchukana*, she goes on, are working together with Generoso's, to help Nekartyli. Generoso, she explains, is an *api sua*, and his *nuchukana* are used to work along with him. He sings to them and he gives them advice (*unaet*). Therefore Generoso's *nuchukana* are now going to give advice to their *nuchukana* too, in order to cure Nekartyli.

Leobijilda comes in bringing a clay brazier containing hot embers, then she sits on the hammock beside her daughter and starts rocking it slowly to comfort and reassure the young girl. Meanwhile Generoso has taken a seat on a chair at the head of the hammock, underneath the rope that ties it to the house poles, while his helper sits beside him. Then he starts singing. His voice is loud and comes directly from the throat, with a stable and hoarse tone. He holds his staff in his right hand and every once in a while puts some cacao beans into the brazier.

His assistant smokes a pipe. Twice during the ritual Generoso stops singing. He lights up a pipe and smokes it silently with rapid puffs. During these moments his helper smokes a long cigar (*war suit*)[202], blowing the smoke four times onto Generoso's face and then onto Leobijilda's face. He repeats this operation four times.

[201] See chapter three where I describe Miki's skill in carving *nuchu*.
[202] It is the same type of cigar used in the initiation ritual of *nele*, in collective healing ceremonies (*apsoket*) and when fermented chicha is prepared for puberty ceremonies.

At the end of the curing session, which has lasted for about an hour and a half, Generoso speaks to Leobijilda. He tells her that he cannot come back to sing the day after, because he has been called for an urgent case on another island, but he will leave his *nuchukana* to look after Nekartyli, while she recovers. Then he and his assistant leave the house, with the same silent and quick pace with which they came in.

This episode is an example of curing performed by Kuna ritual specialists and I observed it during the last period of my fieldwork in Okopsukkun. The cause for Nekartyli's high fever had been imputed to a 'soul's theft' (*purpa sulesa*), and therefore had been cured by calling a ritual chanter, *api sua*. Later on, I had the opportunity to speak with Generoso and he explained to me that on that occasion he sang the *kapur ikar* (the 'way of the Spanish Pepper')[203]. Through this chant he spoke to his *nuchukana*, telling them to travel to the fourth dimension underworld (*pillipakke*), looking into the villages of animals (*ulusumpa*, in the language of chants), in order to find out where the *purpa* of the girl was being held prisoner. He told me that he knows where these villages are and thus guides his *nuchukana* as though he had a wireless remote control. He also told me that his *nuchukana* are already expert too, because they are used to working with him. He used to put his *nuchukana* together with the ones of the ill person, so they act as elder brothers, teaching the others how to bring back the abducted soul.

When he was singing to retrieve Nekartyli's soul, he did not mention her name directly in the chant. Instead he referred to her as *inna ipekkwa*, 'the owner of the chicha'. This expression is used in ritual chants to refer to the ill person, who is in fact the one who ideally offers tobacco smoke to the *nuchukana* in her or his house. The expression, 'owner of the chicha', identifies the person who takes care of the *nuchukana* in daily life, and stresses the attachment between family members and the *nuchukana* that are kept in their household.

When a person falls ill, she or he usually holds one *nuchu*, pressed to the chest, asking kindly for help and for the *nele* to reveal the causes of her or his illness. If one of the *nuchu* is known to be more powerful and more loquacious, this is the one chosen to be held by the ill person[204]. Then, the *nuchu* is sent to a *nele*, who will keep it with his

[203] For a transcription and translation in English of a version of *kapur ikar* see Chapin (1983).
[204] See the description that Beatriz Alba makes of one of her *nuchukana*, at the beginning of chapter three, where she underlines the importance of 'talking a lot' for both the *nuchu* and its carvers. She also added

nuchukana for some days, waiting to meet and to speak with it during his dreams. Thus the *nuchu* will then speak to the *nele* in dreams revealing the causes of the illness of its owner of the chicha. Sometimes, I was told, the *nuchu* of the ill person does not speak directly to the *nele*, but instead it speaks with his *nuchukana*, who will then refer to the *nele*.

For this reason *nuchukana* are treated with respect and amity by members of Kuna families. They are nurtured by the grandmothers, who blow tobacco smoke on them and who wash them with water perfumed with sweet basil, and are addressed by grandfathers when they eat. Therefore, as Meliña told me, it is a good thing for a family to have many *nuchukana*. They protect the house against evil spirits and help the kinspeople who fall ill.

Life of a *nuchu*

At the beginning of my fieldwork it seemed to me that *nuchukana* are apparently forgotten by people, kept on the ground and sometimes in a corner of the house, and no one seems to mind about them. However, I soon realized that *nuchukana* stand right in the middle of the house and even though it seems that no one notices them, once I started asking people about them, I discovered that men and women were keen to speak about their *nuchukana*, telling interesting stories about a particular *nuchu* or a particular event linked to one *nuchu*.

Family members are thus the 'owner of the chicha' for the *nuchukana* who live in their house. This sheds some light on the relationship between family members and *nuchukana*. The former are the carers and the providers of food; they look after their *nuchukana* as if they were friends or visitors, who need a meal and a roof to sleep under. People take good care of *nuchukana*, in case they have to visit them one day. They wash their clothes and see that they are always in good company. As a Kuna friend once told me, *nuchukana* do not like to be alone; they like the company of other *nuchukana*. For this reason it is better to have many of them in the house, so they will be happy and do not look for a better place to live. I have never actually seen a *nuchu*

---

that she often tells her special *nuchu* to be generous and not to hide anything about her state (*an otukku suli*) to the *nele*, in case she is ill.

alone in a house, but rather boxes full of them, one close to the other and kept well tied together.

By the same token, family members, and especially grandparents, refer to their *nuchukana* with an affectionate tone. As I described in chapter three, the term *nuchu* entails a certain grade of intimacy, as when parents refer to their children. Also the ways in which people treat them shows the care and mindfulness towards *nuchukana*. However this does not hide that people are aware of what *nuchukana* are: they are powerful beings. Therefore children strictly avoid playing with them and restrictions are applied when relating to them. Only the grandmother or a young girl can in fact wash the *nuchukana* in the house. I have never seen a mature woman or a man performing such an activity.

A different type of relationship exists between a ritual specialist and his or her *nuchukana*. In this case the relationship is personal. Some specialists have their own *nuchukana* and keep them separated from the others in the house. Others only have a special relationship with a specific *nuchu* among the others kept within the house. In any case, the specialist, a *nele* or an *api sua*, is called the *kana* of his *nuchukana*. *Kana* means generally 'master' and can refer for instance to the relation between a master and his disciples. Kuna people explained to me that the *kana* is the one who is able to advise *nuchukana* and ask them to help him in curing or diagnosing illnesses. In the case of an *api sua*, he is able to speak the language of *nuchukana*, through the ritual songs; in the case of a *nele*, he or she is able to see *nuchukana* and to speak with them in dreams, as we have seen previously in this work.

A *nele* or an *api sua* would normally directly take care of their own *nuchukana* and would also bathe themselves with water perfumed with *pisep* in order to attract their personal *nuchukana*. As with Generoso, ritual chanters often bring along their own *nuchukana* when they go to cure an ill person, and they stress that their relation with their auxiliaries is highly important in the performance of their cure. As with a *nele*, it is important to be close to his or her personal *nuchukana*, the ones that are met in dreams and accompany them in underworld travels. I was told that when a *nele* travels he always brings one of his *nuchu* with him for help and protection.

As well as being personally linked to a specialist, *nuchukana* can also be inherited from people who have died. This is the case of *nuchukana* that remain in the house, when the person who originally carved, or had them carved, dies. I sometimes heard of *nuchukana* being referred to as belonging to a deceased person, usually the grandfather.

However I never heard of *nuchukana* being buried with the dead. In other cases a *nuchu* may be brought by a married man to his wife's house, and added to the *nuchukana* already present there. This would be referred to as the man's *nuchu*, but it would not be said that the *nuchu* stands in the same position as the in-married man, establishing a relation of kinship with the other *nuchukana*.

When a *nuchu* starts to rot, or breaks, or is considered too old, it is simply disposed of. Some people told me that an *api sua*, or a person who knows ritual chants, is asked to sing to the *nuchu* in order to advise it and ask its *purpa* to leave and to go into the underworld. Others told me that a *nele* is asked to ascertain if the *nuchu* is still alive. Other people told me that the *purpa* of the *nuchu* leaves on its own, once the wood has started to rot. They can then throw it into the sea or keep it as a doll for the children.

Images of the dead

In order to understand what a *nuchu* is for Kuna people, I will follow Viveiros de Castro's insight about the wooden logs of the Yawalapíti death ceremony described as 'truly doubles of the dead' (see previous chapter). In a previous article, he described the process of cure as follows: "This [soul's] theft is experienced by the sick person as a particularly intense dream travel (every dream or bout of fever is a soul travelling); it ends when the shaman retrieves the soul with the help of a doll *spirit catcher* (*yakulátsha*; cf. *yakulá*, 'shadow', 'soul of the dead') thought of as the image of the sick person." (Viveiros de Castro, 1978: 35-36, my translation, italics not mine)[205].

I suggest that it is useful to consider the connection between 'double of the dead' and 'soul of the dead' in order to understand what a *nuchu* is for Kuna people. Following this, the connection between what Kuna people conceive as 'image' (*sopalet*) and as 'soul' (*purpa*) should be explored. However different the two concepts are in daily life, I would like to show an interesting link between them. Namely, if one of the meanings of *purpa* is that of 'image' (as previously noted in this work), I shall argue that a *nuchu* is the 'instantiated image' of the soul[206]. I develop this argument further below, throwing

[205] It is interesting to note that the Piro (who are part of the Arawak language family as well as the Yawalapíti) give to the word *yaglu* (similar to *yakulá*) the meaning of 'image'. This refers to such things as figurative drawings, dolls and photographs (Gow, 1989).
[206] The association between 'soul' and 'image' as been suggested by Taylor (1996) in her analysis of the construction of the self through relationships among the Achuar. Also Lagrou (1998) has explored association between the Cashinahua concepts of *dami* ('image', 'figurative design') and *yuxin* ('soul').

another problem on the table: the fact that the 'soul of the dead' is associated, in the process of cure, to the 'image of the sick person', suggesting a relation between the dead and the living, which is peculiar to Lowland South American societies.

As Taylor (1993) has demonstrated for the Achuar, the souls of the dead are floating images devoid of the memory that living people previously attributed to them. By being detached from human sociality, through the active process of living people who forget them, the dead become part of the group of ancestral souls. From this new position the souls of the dead become empowering visions (*arutam*) for the living, giving them new force and a more profound knowledge.

Following Taylor's interpretation, I argue that the *nuchu* is an ancestral soul, which is seen by the *nele*, who seeks its vision to acquire powerful knowledge and to help in the process of curing. Moreover, *nuchukana* are 'instantiated images of ancestral dead', for they are the visual representations of a person devoid of any personal trait, apart from the gender, as I describe below.

Two issues are strikingly similar between the Kuna and the Yawalapíti (as well as the Kamayurá, Kuikúru and Kalapalo) case. Firstly, the first people on the earth in Xingu mythologies were trees, or people made of wood (cf. Basso, 1987a; Villas Boas, 1970; Viveiros de Castro, 1979). Furthermore the creator, for the Yawalapíti, made the primordial human beings by carving wooden logs and smoking tobacco on them to give them life. Thus he created the mother of the twins Sun and Moon (Viveiros de Castro, 1979: 42-43).

As we have seen in chapter two, Kuna mythology portrays the first people as tree-people, the young men of the Father. They were eight boys sent by Pap Tummat to the earth to observe the generation of the world and of all living beings. When the task of learning was completed, the boys were transformed into trees and moved to a village in the sky (Sappipe-neka), were they live now as the chiefs of trees. Today it is from there that they descend to the earth during the night to visit the female trees, to whom they make love. This is what makes female trees in the forest shine with dew in the morning, and beautiful with their green foliage. This also enables trees to have children, who are brought into life by Kuna old men in the form of *nuchukana*.

As I have described in chapter three, the act of old Kuna men who carve *nuchukana*, begins with the cutting of a branch or a root from a selected tree, following a precise process that is explained as a birth. I also suggested that the whole process of making a

nuchu (*nuchu sopet*) has to be interpreted as a fertile act carried out by old Kuna men. I would like to add now that this operation might also be regarded as an act of extraction of a baby *nuchu* from the mother-tree. In this sense, pushing my interpretation a bit, old Kuna men may be seen as the male equivalent of midwives. They both help and participate in the process of birth. However, that of a *nuchu* is a special birth: it brings ancestral beings among living people.

Secondly, what an old Kuna man does is precisely bring back to life ancestral beings, the tree-people, precious to human beings for their powerful knowledge, mastered by ritual singers (*api sua*) and by *nelekan*. An old Kuna man, cutting the branch of a tree from the forest and giving it human shape, recalls the act of the creator Mavutsinim, who decorated the wooden logs with feathers, necklaces and armlets with the aim of turning them into living people (see chapter seven). Or that of Kwatïngï, who carved his daughters out of wood (see chapter six)[207]. Once the *nuchu* is carved with a human shape, the old man makes the eyes for it and decorates its cheeks with red achiote (*Bixa orellana*). Eventually, in the case of a male *nuchu*, he puts a necklace around their necks to make them look like an *ina tuleti* (botanic specialist). Once the outer form is completed, the *nuchu* is sung over by the *api sua*, who wakes, or revives it (*otuloket*). Like the singers (*maracá-êps*) of the Xingu myth, who sung to revive the dead people. Like Tat Ipe sung trying to revive his mother (see chapter six). But as both myths tell us, dead people do not come back.

Drawing together in my analysis the ritual use of wooden logs in the Xingu (Agostinho, 1974) and that of *nuchukana* by Kuna people, I wish to show also how the latter might be regarded profitably as 'images of the dead people'. As a matter of fact, *nuchukana* represent the first people who lived on the earth, and who transformed into trees before the generation of Kuna people. For this reason we can say that *nuchukana* are the instantiation of ancestral entities in the Kuna lived world. Following this idea I will argue further that *nuchukana* are the 'image of a person'. But how so?

[207] Among the Tlingit and the Tsimshiam of North America, are told slightly different versions of the same story about a man whose wife dies. In the Tlingit version the widower asks a skilled woodcarver to carve his wife's face on the wood. "The carver got hold of a piece of cedar and set to work. When his carving was finished, he dressed it in her clothes and called the husband. Overjoyed, the husband took the statue and asked the carver how much he owed him" (Lévi-Strauss, 1997: 182).

To understand this point I need to introduce the idea of the after life that Kuna people have. As I was told, men and women after death do not live with their kinspeople anymore. Each one will live in a house with her husband or his wife. They will not have children any more. On the patio of their house there will be plenty of animals and plants, so that they will not have to garden or hunt any more. Furthermore, their bodies will lose any personal distinctiveness. They will look like each other, the only difference maintained is their gender differences. This will allow the couple to still enjoy the pleasure of sex without having babies. But any distinctive personal aspect that each of them had in life will be erased.

This image of couples of generically individualized persons, living a sterile afterlife, reminds me powerfully of a couple of *nuchukana*: generic images of gendered persons, devoid of any distinctive trait. The way in which *nuchukana* are carved aims therefore to create images of persons devoid of their singularity, in the same way as Kuna people imagine the dead.

This also corresponds to the way in which the ceremonial wooden logs of the mortuary ritual of the Upper Xingu are created. Although there are variants in which the various groups living in the area carry out this operation, they all follow the same basic procedure in representing the dead. A section of a tree trunk, more than a meter high, is cut, then a band in its middle, from where the bark has been previously detached, is decorated with motifs coming from body paintings. A feather decoration is put on the top, where the head is meant to be, and cotton belts are bound around the log, over and under the painted section. As Basso noted, "The designs painted on them indicate whether the person represented was a man or a woman, but otherwise all are identically decorated with yellow feather headdresses and cotton belts" (1973: 142; see also 1985: 139).

Another aspect of the preparation of these posts caught my attention. Although Agostinho (1974: 90-91) could not find out any gender specific decoration of the *kwaríp* (the name given to the posts and the entire ritual by the Kamayurá), he was told that each specific post corresponds to a specific deceased person. Furthermore, "[…] with the same white colour they do the small triangular face of the *kwaríp*, whose eyes and mouth are represented by small black circles: because the face is painted on the east side of the trunk, at this height it is oriented to look at the rising [sun], like the dead in their graves" (*ibid*: 91).

Kuna people say that each person, after death, will encounter all the animals he has hunted during his life. Many times, during the night meetings in the central gathering house, I heard the chiefs (*saylakan*) chanting long and detailed descriptions of how life is after death. This topic always triggered laughter, especially when my friend Juan Mendoza translated in Spanish that "cada uno hará su zoologico in paraiso" ("everyone will have their own zoo in paradise").

Image of a person

To understand what it means to make a *nuchu* we need to reflect upon the impossibility of bringing human bodies back to life, as suggested by the set of myths previously analyzed and compared in chapters six and seven. The importance of the body is stretched to the point that Kuna people are aware that they need an image of it in order to enter into contact with ancestral entities. What a *nuchu* has, instead of a body, is an 'image of a body', which, although it lacks one of the basic attributes of human bodies ('motility'), it is able to develop subjectivity. *Nuchukana* have a wooden substitute of the human body, which is going to rot after a certain amount of time, as is the case for human beings. They are therefore an 'image of a person' in their external appearance.

What an old Kuna man is doing by giving shape (*sopet*) to a *nuchu* is 'building a house' for ancestral entities (see introduction). This is the prerequisite for calling ancestral entities, providing them with a substitute body, or rather an 'image of a body', which lacks of the body itself, in the proper human sense. In this way Kuna old men momentarily bring back to life the ancestral beings that now live their eternal life in a place separated from that of human beings. Even though they cannot bring them back as flesh and bones, as Tat Ipe was also unable to do with his mother, the stress is nonetheless put upon the temporality of life of *nuchu*. They are in fact made of wood, which sooner or later is going to rot.

If we consider that the chief of all *nuchukana*, and of all trees in the forest, is the balsa tree (*ukkurwala*), even more emphasis is put on the temporality of the life of a *nuchu*. It is balsa wood that rots most quickly. As Kuna people told me, when a *nuchu* rots or breaks, it means that it is going to die soon. It was explained to me that the wooden statue is like the *mola* (the clothes) of the *nuchu*. For this reason each *nuchu*

must be cleaned often with water perfumed with sweet basil. Its clothes are cleaned to prevent dust, sand and sea salt decaying it. Balsa wood is very soft and light and *nuchukana* made out of its wood do not last long. Nonetheless, *ukkurwala* are still the most powerful and are used in all Kuna rituals.

Often *ukkurwala* are made specifically for a ritual, as in the case of *nele*'s initiation. Once the ritual finishes they are disposed of or kept as dolls for children. It seems as if their short life is connected with their high ritual power[208]. As if the impossibility of having a human body was substituted by the emphasis of the limited life of their substitute wooden bodies, which recalls the temporariness of human life[209].

In lacking a human body, I suggest therefore that a *nuchu* is the 'image of a person'. Using the word *sopalet*, Kuna people refer to many forms of figuration. The shape of a canoe is 'its image' (*e sopalet*). Weaving baskets is *sopet*, 'to give shape', 'to make the image'. Carving a *nuchu*, as noted in chapter three, is the highest form of image making and I argue that this is so because it is the image of a person.

What have these activities in common? On one hand, the first thing that appears is that *nuchukana*, canoes and baskets are containers. Baskets contain food, while canoes contain food and people and *nuchukana* contain the *purpa* of trees. On the other hand, photographs are like shadows, or dreamed images; they contain (or are) the *purpa* of a person. To take a picture with a camera is '*potto kaet*', or in some cases '*wakar kaet*' ('to take the face'). *Kaet* means 'to take', 'to catch', 'to get' something. To go fishing with a net is *ua kaet*; to be imprisoned (sent to jail) is *kalesa*; when someone's soul is stolen by an evil entity is also *purpa kalesa*. The action implied by the verb *kaet* is not a metaphor of a concrete action, as we would intend it in the case of taking a picture of someone. Old Kuna people are fearful of their pictures being taken by tourists, because their *purpa* is taken away and they cannot see the photos that are printed afterwards.

Even if nowadays, familiarity with cameras has increased, I feel that the meaning has not changed that much. Taking a picture is still taking one's *purpa*. What has changed perhaps is the attitude towards photography. Once we started using our camera, Kuna

[208] In the conclusive phase of the mortuary ritual the Kalapalo dispose of the posts. "Late that afternoon the posts representing dead *anetaw* are pulled up, thus ending their ceremonial significance. The *aougufi* singers use them as seats, until toward dusk the young boys of the village roll them into the nearest body of water, usually the bathing area" (Basso, 1973: 147).

[209] However other kinds of wood are used to carve *nuchu* that last longer. Some of them are particularly appreciated for their hardness and resistance to time, such as *ikwuawala*, *nekawala*, *katepwala* (see table in chapter three). Even if *nuchukana* of different kinds of woods are always employed in rituals, Kuna specialists always stressed the fact that the leader, the chief, was *ukkurwala*, the balsa tree.

friends were always very keen that Margherita and I took pictures of them and they always wanted us to bring back the prints from Panama City to show them. Especially during the first months of fieldwork we operated a choice following our photographic taste and printed the photos that we thought were beautiful, portraying for example a close-up of a woman sewing her *mola*. That photo, to our surprise, would be regarded by the woman portrayed in it with disappointment and slight embarrassment. It was not what she expected.

Luckily we used a digital camera so we started showing the image after it had been shot, so we could correct our way of taking pictures. Whenever I took a head and torso shot of the person, I was always asked to take another shot portraying the whole figure, from the feet to the head. The second shot was always received with more satisfaction. In this way we learned how to take pictures in a way that satisfied Kuna people, that is portraying the whole image of persons.

Considering the meaning of the word *purpa*, which means 'immaterial double', 'image', 'semen' and 'menstruation', I wish to show that a *nuchu* is closely related to *purpa*. Probably the meaning of both is interrelated. I suggest that to understand what a *nuchu* is, we must understand what *purpa* is and vice versa. Namely I put forward that if we agree on the definition that a *nuchu* is the 'image of a person', we can start exploring its relation with *purpa*.

This leads me to explore another direction: if *purpa* is the inner image of a person, and of every living being in the world, what is its relationship then with what it is an image of? Or to put it another way, what is the relationship between the inside and the outside of a person? Between its inner form and its surface appearance? To explore this issue I suggest looking at what Kuna people intend for design. I also suggest looking at design as the 'emphasis on surface appearance', so relevant for Amazonian peoples (Gow, 1989). More precisely, the relationship between designs and images can be profitably explored in understanding how both concepts are part of the everyday life of Kuna people.

Design

As I argued in chapter four, the meaning of *kurkin* must be searched through the complex pattern of relationships that interweave human beings and supernatural entities

(spiritual grandmothers and animal entities). Central to the concept of *kurkin* is its 'designed nature'; namely it is designed (*narmailesa*) by spiritual grandmothers. Spiritual grandmothers design (*narmakket*) onto the *kurkin*, when the foetus is being formed (*soplesi*) within the mother's womb. *Kurkin* is thus the support of each person's 'first design' (Gow, 2001: 112), which is visible to midwives at the birth of the baby and later on during a person's life by *nele*.

In the case of *nele*, the invisibility of his design at birth culminates, as I have shown in the course of this work, with his capacity to see the 'real image' (*purpa*) of supernatural as well as of human beings. His capacity to see and, at the same time, to be seen goes beyond the limits of normal human life; by being unrestrained by the perspective of human design, he is able to acquire multiple perspectives and to see the changing forms of unstable images in the cosmos. As we have seen, the design on the amniotic membrane of a newborn makes manifest the relationship between the small baby and the animal entity with which it is associated. This association is thus socially manipulated, by being severed through the baby's inclusion within kinship ties and with the use of plant medicines. The relationship between the baby and the animal is thus substituted by the relationship between the baby and its kinspeople.

Therefore, what remains is the 'good side' of design, the sign of a supernatural association rendered safe through the inclusion into human social life. The original design thus becomes a human attribute; it becomes human design. The sign of alterity transforms into potential human skills and into the immanent relation that every person entertains with the supernatural. In this sense, I suggested, we should understand the term *kurkin* as it is translated by Kuna people into Spanish: 'inteligencia', ('intelligence'), and the ambivalent concept of *tarpa*, as both the 'extension beyond the body', or the 'auxiliary spirit' of *nelekan*.

Here I want to enter into further details on the definition of *kurkin* and on the relevance of its 'first design'. As I have said so far, *kurkin* stands for 'capacities' still to be developed, that is 'potentialities'. This issue may be analysed further by in two different ways: one is that linked to the idea of 'destiny' as something pre-determined in the life of a person; the other is that of the 'individualization' of a person. I suggest following the second view. The idea of 'destiny' seems in fact not to fit into Kuna ways of thinking, but is more rooted in the way we, Westerners, conceive the individual as an individualistic person. My argument is grounded in the idea that Kuna people, as well as

other Amerindians, conceive the individual as a collective person. This point has been made by Amazonian scholars, who showed that the indigenous idea of humanity is that of 'intrinsically multiple' and that people form 'communities of similars' (Overing, 1999; Gow, 2000). Furthermore the image of oneself "is based on the attribution of others' images of it" (Taylor, 1996: 206). In this sense the idea of individual destiny is not one conceived by Kuna people. Instead what I suggest is that the designed *kurkin* gives to the person their personality and individual distinctiveness.

Each person is in fact born with 'potential capacities' inscribed within the *kurkin*. Skills will develop in the course of a person's life, increasing with the use of medicines a 'natural tendency' shown by a child in particular kind of culturally determined activities, i.e. sewing *mola* for girls; weaving baskets for boys. A person often comes to be associated by others to a particular skill he or she has and that becomes embedded in individual personalities. For example a man, whose expertise in making dugout canoes is called *ur sopeti* ('canoe maker') by his friends, in the same way that a botanic specialist is called *ina tuleti* ('medicine man'). A person may also be called by various names during his or her life course. For example many men decide to change their Spanish name when they become old or when they learn ritual knowledge, in order to stress the change in their status.

The reflection of one's skills or ritual status in names, points to the relational nature of one's self. It is when other people call you *ina tuleti* that you are a medicine man, otherwise, if this is not publicly recognised, you will not change your own status[210]. Even if you decide to change your name, it is only when other people start calling you by your new name that it will be actively associated to your person.

As Garibaldo del Vasto once told me your name changes during your life, because you are not always the same. A person is thus conceived as an 'identity in process' associated with the development of particular skills. In this sense it is intended with the use of prefixes in ritual language. Four different prefixes are repeated each time by ritual specialists to invoke supernatural entities. The prefixes *olo-*, *mani-*, *ikwa-*, *ina-* are used in front of each entity name when the ritual specialist refers to it during the singing. This may refer to the full-powerful nature of ancestral entities, which having four names, have completed all the stages of enhancement of the self. As described in

[210] Public ceremonies are held in the gathering house, in which the master (*kana*) publicly gives his disciple (*apkila*) the coloured necklace (*winni*) and the staff (*kapolet*) symbolizing that he has 'graduated' in his discipline.

chapter two, the eight boys of the Father looked towards the four directions and saw the whole world in creation. This also symbolizes the full (ideal) trajectory that a *nele* should undergo four times the initiation ceremony to become a 'real *nele*'.

Therefore *kurkin* is associated with the development of the individual capacities of a person, and thus to his or her personality. It is this aspect that enables each person to develop its own particular way of acting within the world and to be seen by others as him or herself. Therefore, conceiving themselves as intrinsically similar to one another, Kuna people have developed a social theory that conceives the development of personal skills, which I argue is intimately linked to the idea of design. Design has thus to do with the possibility to see and to be seen in one's own personal, human, transformative state.

People and *nuchukana*

The outside surface of the body is the place where the 'first design' is, pointing to the development of skills and personality through the life course of a person. Then the design becomes interiorized and transforms into the individual intellective capacity, which is how the Kuna conceive the brain (*kurkin*). The inside of the body is instead what contains one's *purpa*, which I suggest could be called the 'original image' of oneself. The blank self upon which personality is inscribed, starting with the engraving of the 'first design' and developing through the images that other people project onto oneself.

If, on one hand, the image of a living person is composed by all such attributes and personal capacities, and is the locus of other people's projected love and memory, on the other hand, the image of the dead is devoid of all such personal traits. As Taylor (1993) has vividly argued, the Achuar dead are actively forgotten by their living kinspeople in order to become part of the group of ancestral souls that provide living people with the possibility of reproducing their social life. With this in mind I suggested that *nuchukana* are images of the dead. Furthermore, they are 'ideal dead', for they are ancestral beings who had already detached from present day Kuna people. As the myth of 'the young boys of the Father' (chapter two) tells, they are the ancestral beings who were sent to the earth during its creation. Once that was completed they became ancestral powerful beings, and lived separated from people and animals.

Moreover, they are distant others and radically different from living Kuna people, for they do not have kinship relationships. Kuna people told me that *nuchukana* may live in couples, but they never mentioned their families. They live as heterogeneous ensembles which act together towards a common end, that of fighting evil entities, set up by human beings. They live a sterile life and cannot have children, like the Kuna people in the afterlife. Or maybe we can say that their children are the *nuchukana*, who, however, are born only through the intervention of human beings. In this sense a *nuchu* is radically different from a ghost (*kirmar*), who retains part of its personality as a living being and is still attached to its living kinspeople. It is by losing its individuality that the ghost will fade away, detaching from human sociality and becoming part of the souls of the dead. Only de-individualized, generic persons live in heaven.

Nuchukana are generic ancestral people. They are the souls of ancestral tree-people, who lived at the beginning of time. Then they retired into the celestial home of Sappipeneka, from where they now act as chiefs of trees and reproduce themselves acquiring the form of trees. Kuna people use them as the source of healing, extracting their sap, cutting their bark, leaves and vines, to prepare medicines. But the ultimate source of their ancestral power is drawn from making them alive. As in the case of the Xingu mortuary ritual, the dead are brought back to life for a limited time, enabling the living to mourn their dead kinspeople. Through re-enacting the mythic birth of the first women carved in wood by the creator, the Xingu ritual aims to bring back dead kinspeople to life. Through re-enacting the human birth, and using it as a metaphor, Kuna people aim to bring ancestral beings back to life. Kuna carvers are thus like the demiurge of the Xinguan mythology: they carve people out of wood.

The carving of a *nuchu* thus creates the possibility for a tree to have a soul, although for a limited time, among living Kuna people. The ancestral soul can move from its celestial (or underworld) home and dwell momentarily in its terrestrial home, which is the wooden statue prepared for him by a Kuna carver. Furthermore, once carved into a human form, once a part of a living tree has been transformed into a *nuchu*, the image of an ancestral being can be seen by a *nele*. This is very important, for a *nele* cannot see in dreams, generic images of tree entities, but he can only see them when they become *nuchukana*. Once a *nuchu* has been carved it thus acquires an individual form, which can be seen by a *nele*. Although the wooden shape of *nuchukana*, seen by normal people, shows only a de-individualized, generic image of a person, the image of a *nuchu* that is seen in dreams by the *nele* is a specific person. *Nelekan* describe in fact their

personal *nuchukana*, or any *nuchu* that they see in dreams, as a man or a woman with specific bodily features, a specific personality and a personal name.

Besides retaining the qualities of the tree species from which it is carved, each *nuchu* develops its own personal traits. For this reason Kuna people often refer to one of their *nuchukana* as the one that they rely on most, as Beatriz Alba told me (see chapter three). But one last thing must be noted: *nuchukana* develop their personal traits only through their relationships with human beings. They receive loquacity from the carver, they become expert curers through their association with a chanter, they become reliable diagnostician by talking with a *nele*. Moreover, it is by being in a relation with family members that they learn to be sociable. People in the household take care of their *nuchukana*. They are remembered, nurtured and perfumed. Thus they become part of the group of human kinspeople, who they will protect and help in return. Nevertheless, they still remain powerful ancestral beings, devoid of kinship and social qualities, who must be treated with respect by Kuna people, and whose revenge in case of negligence and mistreatment must be feared.

One day, I was speaking with Miki Smith on the patio of his house, between the kitchen and the dormitory; in the meantime he was carving a *nuchu*. At a certain point he stopped carving, took the *nuchu* with one hand, and told me: "When there is plenty of food in the kitchen, when people are eating, you may hear someone calling, 'come eat, come drink'. So you think, 'Who is hungry? Who is he calling? Everyone is satiated here.'" Then, holding the *nuchu* close to his chest and watching it, he continued, "I'm the one who looks after you. I'm going to give you food and drink. Although I cannot see you, you are going to protect me. Evil people and demons will not come to me. You will remember me and I will take care of you."

Conclusions

Throughout this work I described ethnographically the carving of wooden statues and the shamanic figure of the seer among the Kuna of Panamá. I focused on the relevance for Kuna people of the opposition between what is visible and what is not visible, as a overarching category of their cosmology. I also paid attention to the social context that surrounds the creation of both figures: the *nuchukana* and the *nelekana*. Eventually I reached the conclusion that carving a *nuchu*, for the Kuna, is an action aimed at bringing an ancestral soul among living people. Through the act of carving, Kuna people establish relationships with powerful ancestral beings, and ask for their help and protection against evil entities that constantly threaten human social life. By the same token, ancestral souls are individualized through the relationships with human beings; they receive an external human shape, which enables them to share, for a limited time, the space with human beings, receiving care and nurturance from them, in exchange for their protection against evil beings.

This journey in the exploration of the Kuna way of living and of their vision of the world took me into directions that I did not previously imagine. One conclusion that I indeed reached thus far concerns the complex interconnectedness of different aspects of the life of Kuna people. When I first started to analyze my ethnographic material I attempted to divide issues into anthropological categories, such as shamanism, aesthetic, mythology, etc. The usefulness of this operation proved to be limited, insofar as many categories of the Kuna fell out of anthropological categories. On top of that, I realized that following the explications that Kuna people gave me I started to look at new aspects that I had previously overlooked. For instance, designs, which I had left aside at the beginning of my fieldwork, and which I only thought as linked to women's clothes, became relevant once I began to describe the birth of seers (see chapter four). Moreover, the analysis of the carving of *nuchukana* lead me to explore the transformational skills of Kuna men in relation to fertility. In general, the way in which Kuna people explained to me the carving of *nuchukana* and the birth of *nelekan* pointed

to the following directions: the complex relationship with cosmic alterity, the acquisition of the capacity to see, the conception of birth and the relation with the dead. I explored these topics throughout my work, following the way in which Kuna people explained the creation of *nuchukana* and the birth, and the 'social creation' of *nelekan* (see chapters four and seven on the latter point).

I departed from the description of one characteristic aspect of the life of Kuna people, namely their life on islands. This feature puts the Kuna in a peculiar situation within the panorama of South American indigenous people to which I refer throughout my work. Moreover, as I explained in the first chapter, the life on the islands of the San Blas archipelago has to be seen in the light of historical changes. Namely Kuna people moved from the Colombian Darién forest to the Atlantic coast of Panamá and then to the islands of San Blas after the arrival of the Spaniards (cf. Howe, 1998). Nonetheless, I argue, that through exploring the present day relationship between the island and the mainland forest it is possible to understand relevant aspects of the life of Kuna people, such as the carving of *nuchukana*. Moreover, the fact that, although living on islands, the Kuna retain a 'forest cosmology', allows the comparison with Lowland South American societies. It is in fact clear that, although the Kuna obtain more security, by living distant from the primary source of danger and predation, which is the forest (cf. Descola, 1996 [1987]; Gow, 1987, 1994; Langdon, 1992; Århem, 1996; Overing, 1996), the Kuna still identify the forest, more than the sea, with cosmic alterity and as both the cause and the source of remedy for evil.

In the first chapter I argued that the island is a space opposed to the forest for two reasons: first there are no trees on the island, second it is spatially separated from the mainland forest by the sea. Considering these two aspects I described in the first two chapters that the relationship with the mainland forest is perceived by the Kuna who live in Okopsukkun as both pointing to the ancestral past and to the future. Uncultivated trees and animals show the immanence of ancestral entities in the present, while cultivated plants are conceived as the source for the growing of children and thus pointing to life in the future. The forest is for the Kuna, a space that is both separated and distant and which is inhabited by ancestral beings. This separation has to be cautiously guarded, lest illness and death spreads among villagers. For this reason everything that comes from the forest, which is not plant food, such as animal or plant medicines, game meat and *nuchukana*, needs to be rendered safe through human action

before reaching the island (cf. Crocker, 1985; Overing Kaplan, 1975; 1986; Århem, 1996).

As described in chapter three, the carving of *nuchukana*, performed by skilful Kuna old men, follows a precise process, which entails the creative embodied knowledge of the carvers. As Kuna men told me, this process aims to keep alive a part of a tree and to transform it into a *nuchu*. Notably, *nuchukana* are the only powerful forest beings that are kept alive in the village. This is a powerful thing for the Kuna, and they are completely aware of what the presence of their powerful neighbours within their houses entails. This becomes particularly evident on the occasions of curing rituals, in which the *nuchukana* have the active role of venturing to the supernatural domain and fighting the evil entities, guided by the songs of ritual chanters. Kuna people told me that, if during the rituals the kinspeople of the ill person or of the specialist do not follow the ritual restrictions, the *nuchukana* would take revenge against either the ill person or the specialist. Moreover, since early childhood Kuna children are advised not to touch *nuchukana*, or not to treat them as dolls. I observed that in fact special wooden dolls are carved for small children to play with, and although these seemed completely the same as *nuchukana* to me, Kuna children could easily recognise which ones they could play with.

Nevertheless some children have a special relationship with *nuchukana* and some may even be specially carved for them. This is the case for young *nelekan*. Starting from the fact that Kuna seers are able to see *nuchukana* in their real form of persons I described the 'ontogeny' of *nelekan*, focusing on their birth and on the relationship with their mothers. The birth of a *nele* provides good ethnographic insights on the way in which the Kuna conceive designs. By attracting the attention to the visual surface of bodies, designs point to the way in which kinship is constituted through the construction of consubstantial bodies (Gow, 1989). This point is clearly true for both the Piro, upon whom Gow's analysis has been built, and for the Kuna, since, as I described in chapter four, the visibility of designs on the newborn caul is the primary means for establishing kinship ties between the baby and his adult kinspeople. On the contrary the invisibility of designs of the *nele*'s caul are perceived as a threat for his mother and father, who are advised to retreat from an established relation with the child, who instead is looked after by his grandmother and grandfather.

The second aspect concerns the particular relationship between the mother of the *nele* and her son. Kuna people say that both parents could die when the *nele* develops the

capacity to see. However, by describing the case of some women *nele* whom I met during fieldwork, I focus on the case in which the mother, to deprive the foetus *nele* from his potential capacity to see, becomes herself a *nele*. This suggests, as I suggested in chapter five, an hypothesis on the particular way in which Kuna women become *nele* through stealing the capacity to see from their sons. I thus showed that the Kuna case, in presenting new evidence on female shamanism, might thus profitably contribute to the debate on gender and shamanism in South America, as raised by Colpron (2005).

In order to understand the reasons behind the explication that the mother of the *nele* is threatened by her son's powerful capacity, in chapters six and seven I analyze one Kuna myth in comparison with other Amazonian myths. Following Lévi-Strauss' stance (1969) on the interconnection of South American mythologies, I consider the Kuna myth of the Sun and the Moon as one of the multiple variations of the same myth present throughout South America. By comparing it with the Piro and the Kalapalo version, I underlined some aspects particularly relevant in relation to the Kuna. First, the death of the woman described in these myths explains why the mother of the *nele* in present day Kuna life is threatened by the auxiliary spirits of her son, who correspond to the animals of the Kuna myth and to the jaguars of the Piro and the Kalapalo myth. Second, the three myths considered describe the origin of human mortality and the beginning of human condition as the separation from animals. The original commonality between humans and animals and their consequent separations is a theme widespread among South American indigenous societies. I then describe the role of Kuna seers in attending to this separation and mastering the powerful forces, to which they have access through their personal relationship with the supernatural (cf. Overing, 1985a; 1985b; 1986; Viveiros de Castro, 1992).

From the comparison with the Kalapalo myth another interesting aspect also appears, that suggests to the conclusion I have reached in this work, namely that the *nuchukana* are the instantiation of ancestral beings. This issue emerges form considering the Kalapalo myth in relation to other creation myths from the Upper Xingu region of Central Brasil, inhabited by indigenous groups of different linguistic affiliation but with strong socio-cultural similarities. The Kalapalo myth describes the creator god who carves his daughters out of wood to prevent his real daughters from marrying the jaguar. The theme of carving people out of wood is also part of the complex mortuary ritual performed by indigenous people in the Upper Xingu. Following the descriptions of Basso (1973; 1987a), Agostinho (1974) and Viveiros de Castro (1978), the symbolic

relevance of special wooden logs used in these rituals, the *kwarip* or *kwarup*, can be noted. These are the parts of tree trunks, especially decorated with body painting and feather headdresses, resulting in an abstract representation of gendered human figures. These wooden logs are the focus for the attention of the participants in the ceremony, and they also enable the kinspeople of the deceased persons to mourn their dead; until when, at the end of the ceremony, the logs are thrown to the nearby lake and people laughing and joking return to normal life.

The wooden representation of generic gendered human figures in the Xingu rituals made me think about the idea of the afterlife for the Kuna. In chapter seven I describe how Kuna people conceive of people after death as deprived by their personal features and living with their partners of the opposite sex, detached from other kinspeople and with the company of the animals that the man hunted during his life. Life after death is therefore deprived of kinship and difference (cf. Overing Kaplan, 1984), and represents a return to the pre-social life of mythic time.

With all this in mind, in chapter eight, I propose to regard the *nuchukana* in exactly the same way as the Xinguans conceive the wooden logs of their mortuary rituals, and in the same way as the Kuna conceive their dead: as generic images of dead people. To return to the Kuna creation myth presented in chapter two, I also argue that differently from the people of the Xingu, the Kuna consider the *nuchukana* as an instantiation of the 'ancestral dead', rather than as deceased kinspeople. Therefore the aim in carving *nuchukana* is that of having access to the powerful knowledge of ancestral beings, which is mastered by specialists in order to protect Kuna people against the malign agency of animal entities and of demons. The carving of Kuna specialist is thus to be seen as a creative act, which is comprehensible only by observing it as linked to Kuna mythology and their daily practices. It is by thinking of the 'young boys of the Father', who were transformed into powerful beings by Great Father, who made them witness the creation of the world and the arrival of evil entities, that we can understand the powerful act of carving a wooden *nuchu*. By calling to life an ancestral tree entity, after a new *nuchu* has been carved, the ritual chanter starts singing, '*Patto Tiolele pe uanali*...', which means, "As God has already advised you…" He thus completes what the carver has started when he gave human shape to a wooden log. He calls to life the ancestral entity of a tree, who has already been taught by Great Father during the creation of the world and whose knowledge Kuna people can now use.

Images and designs in Amerindian ontologies

Héctor Garcia presented to me a problem, as I describe in the introduction, which led me to explore the creation of *nuchukana* and to study the 'capacity to see' among the Kuna. After having given an ethnographic account of these aspects, I realize that the conversation with Héctor opens another wider question, which I shall phrase as follows: what is an image for Kuna people?

Studying the carving of *nuchukana* showed the relevance of the opposition between the outside and the inside of plastic forms (and bodies), between visible and invisible and between design and image. Departing from a single aspect of the visual life of Kuna people, I showed the importance of these oppositions in many aspects of Kuna life. The surface of forms (and bodies) is the visible side enhanced by designs, the inside of forms (and bodies) is the invisible side perceived as image. The former corresponds to the normal way of perception of daily life; the latter to the capacity to see by seers and to the perception of normal people through dreaming.

The opposition between plastic forms and decorative designs was originally noted by Lévi-Strauss (1960, 1972), observing the face painting of the indigenous women among the Caduveo. He noted that the complex design imposes a visual order on the face, and this order is created precisely through the tension between the graphic sign and the plastic surface of the face. This opposition raises a number of interesting problems, which I think could be profitably explored through the further analysis of my ethnography and through a comparative study of Amerindian visual systems.

First, the opposition between 'image' and 'design' appears now to be widespread in South America (see Gow, 1989; Lagrou, 1998; 2007). Moreover, new studies have been dedicated to the exploration of the indigenous conceptions of 'image', showing new paths in the study of shamanism and cosmology of South American indigenous societies (see Barcelos Neto, 2002; Viveiros de Castro, 2006). These studies show the utility to consider ethnographically the perception of images as hallucinatory states or dreams and the production of designs as carried out by women in daily life. Nonetheless little attention has been paid to the creation of plastic forms in South America, compared to the number of studies dedicated to the production of designs (cf. Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1978; Gebhart-Sayer, 1986; Lagrou, 1996; 1998; Gow, 1999; 2001; Taylor, 2002; 2003). Given all this, the carving of *nuchukana* by Kuna old men may thus contribute to

the understanding of Amerindian visual systems. As I have shown in this work, carving a *nuchu* is a form of image making; it is the instantiation of an image of an ancestral being. The Kuna also have another form of figuration, the pictography used for helping to memorize the long ritual chants (Severi, 1993; 1997). Nevertheless this is restricted to the use of ritual specialists; it is jealously guarded by them, who consider pictographic texts as part of their knowledge and only shown to their disciples. It is thus not a shared form of representation and unlikely to be seen by people in daily life.

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss observed another interesting aspect, which is also widespread on the continent: the gender division behind the image/design opposition. Namely, as he noted (1972: 256), men are sculptors and women are painters. A relevant feature among Kuna people is that women sew designs on their clothes, *molakana*, while men are dedicated to carving wooden objects and weaving baskets. Kuna women have developed an extremely complex and technically skilled design system, which seems to be the transformation of body painting, practiced in the past (Salvador, 1997; Perrin 1998). *Molakana* are the object of intense everyday dedication of Kuna women, who exchange ideas about designs, teach among themselves how to sew and to make designs, and copy each other's designs. Moreover, designs are linked to women's knowledge over fertility (cf. Gow, 1999). They show the fertility of a woman and at the same time they show her beauty and power of seduction. It would therefore be interesting to conduct further studies on what designs are in the lives of Kuna women and how they fit in the above mentioned general opposition with images.

Eventually a third point is raised by the consideration of Amerindian designs and images within their lived contexts: how can we account for the indigenous point of view on the nature of images and designs, given the fact that they are conceived in a completely different ontological framework than that of the European aesthetic tradition? What for Amerindians is a complex design would easily be dismissed as decorative by a Euro-American observer (as Lévi-Strauss also did); and what for Amerindians is a self-evident image, for us would be a figure, that is a representation of something else. Although the nature of decorative/geometric art has been addressed within Western art history (Gombrich, 1979), the problem of its relation to figurative art still remains an unresolved question. Gell (1998) attempted to address this problem from the perspective of anthropology, opening new ways in the ethnographic exploration of indigenous visual systems. It would thus be interesting to consider new

approaches in the studies of the aesthetic of the Others that take onboard the anthropological consideration of our own aesthetic.

For these reasons it is interesting to explore the point of view of Amerindians on the nature of images, whether they be dreams, shamanic visions or carved images, together with their notion of design. As this work hopefully contributes to show, focusing on the ideas that indigenous people have about their material activities, such as woodcarving, provides insights into different areas of the life of Amerindians. As it has recently become more and more evident, aesthetic is not separated from social life and cosmology among the Amerindians. It will be interesting therefore to consider seriously the contribution that the study of aesthetic provides to new comprehensions of Amerindian ontologies.

References

Agostinho, P. (1974) *Kwarìp. Mito e Ritual no Alto Xingu*, São Paulo: Editora Pedagógica e Universitaria/EDUSP.

Århem, K. (1996) 'The Cosmicic Food Web: Human-Nature Relatedness in the Northwest Amazon', in P.Descola and G.Pálsson (eds.) *Nature and Society. Anthropological Perspectives*, pp. 185-204, London and New York: Routledge.

Barcelos Neto, A. (2002) *A Arte dos Sonhos. Uma Iconografia Ameríndia*, Lisboa: Museu Nacional de Etnologia/Assírio & Alvim.

——— (2004) 'As Máscaras Rituais do Alto Xingu um Século Depois de Karl von den Steinen', *Bullettin de la Société Suisse des Américanistes*, 68: 51-71.

Basso, E. (1973) *The Kalapalo Indians of Central Brasil*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press.

——— (1985) *A Musical View of the Universe. Kalapalo Myth and Ritual Performances*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

——— (1987a) *In Favor of Deceit. A Study of Tricksters in an Amazonian Society*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

——— (1987b) 'The Implication of a Progressive Theory of Dreaming', in B.Tedlock (ed.) *Dreaming. Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations*, pp. 86-104, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Belaunde, L. E. (2000) 'The Convivial Self and the Fear of Anger Amongst the Airo-Pai of Amazonian Peru' in J.Overing and A.Passes (eds.) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, pp. 209-220, London: Routledge.

——— (2001) *Viviendo Bien. Género y Fertilidad Entre los Airo-Pai de la Amazonía Peruana*, Lima: CAAAP.

Chapin, M. (1983) *Curing Among the San Blas Kuna of Panama*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Arizona.

——— (1989) *Pab Igala. Historias de la Tradición Kuna*, Quito: Abya-Yala.

——— (1997) ‘The World of Spirit, Disease, and Curing’, in M.L.Salvador (ed.) *The Art of Being Kuna. Layers of Meaning Among the Kuna of Panama*, pp. 219-244, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Colpron, A. M. (2005) ‘Monopólio Masculino do Xamanismo Amazônico: o Contra-Exemplo das Mulheres Xamã Shipibo-Conibo’, *Mana*, 11(1): 95-128.

Crocker, C. (1985) *Vital Souls. Bororo Cosmology, Natural Symbolism, and Shamanism*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Descola, P. (1992) ‘Societies of Nature and the Nature of Society’, in A.Kuper (ed.) *Conceptualizing Society*, London: Routledge.

——— (1996 [1987]) *La Selva Culta. Simbolismo y Praxis en la Ecología de los Achuar*, Quito: Abya Yala.

Erice, Jesus (1980) *Gramatica de la lengua kuna*, Panama: Ministerio de Educación

——— (1985) *Diccionario de la lengua kuna*, Panama: Ministerio de Educación

Erikson, P. (1989) ‘Les Matis de la Tête aux Pieds et du Nez aux Fesses’, in M.L.Beffa and R.Hamayon (eds.) *Les Figures du Corps*, pp. 287-295, Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative de l'Université de Paris X-Nanterre.

Ewart, E. (2003) ‘Lines and Circles: Images of Time in a Panará Village’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n.s.) 9: 261-279.

Fausto, C. (2001) *Inimigos Fiéis. História, Guerra e Xamanismo na Amazônia*, São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo.

Fortis, P. (2002) ‘La ‘mola’ dei Cuna di Panamá come linguaggio figurative’, Undergraduate thesis, Università di Siena.

Gebhart-Sayer, A. (1986) ‘Una Terapia Estética: los Diseños visionarion del Ayahuasca Entre los Shipibo-Conibo’, *América Indígena*, 96: 189-218.

Gell, A. (1993) *Wrapping in Images. Tattooing in Polynesia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——— (1998) *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gillison, G. (1997) ‘To See or Not to See: Looking as an Object of Exchange in the New Guinea Highlands’, in M.Banks and H.Morphy (eds.) *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Goldman, M. (2007) ‘Fetichismo, História e Devir nas Religiões Afro-Brasileira’, Unpublished paper presented at the symposium ‘An Epistemology for Anthropology’, Lisboa 20-22 September 2007.

Gombrich, E. H. (1979) *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Oxford: Phaidon Press.

Gow, P. (1987) 'La Vida Monstruosa de las Plantas', *Amazonía Peruana*, 14: 115-122.

——— (1989) 'Visual Compulsion. Design and Image in Western Amazonia', *Revista Indigenista Latinoamericana*, 2:19-32.

——— (1991) *Of Mixed Blood. Kinship and History in Peruvian Amazonia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (1994) 'River People: Shamanism and History in Western Amazonia' in N.Thomas and C.Humphrey (eds.) *Shamanism, History, and the State*, pp. 90-113, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

——— (1999) 'Piro Designs: Painting as Meaningful Action in an Amazonian Lived World', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n.s.) 5: 229-246.

——— (2000) 'Helpless. The Affective Preconditions of Piro Social Life', in J.Overing and A.Passes (eds.) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, pp. 46-63, London: Routledge.

——— (2001) *An Amazonian Myth and Its History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (2005) 'The Dynamics of Fear in the Piro Lived World', Unpublished paper.

Guss, D. M. (1989) *To Weave and Sing. Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Hanbury-Tenison, A. R. and Burton, P. J. K. (1973) 'Should the Darien Gap Be Closed?', *The Geographical Journal*, 139(1): 43-52.

Harner, M. (1972) *The Jívaro. People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Herrera, L. and de Schrimpff, M. C. (1974) 'Mitologia Cuna: Los Kalu. Segun Alfonso Diaz Granados', *Revista Colombiana de Antropologia*, 42 :203-247.

Holmer, N. M. (1947) *Critical and Comparative Grammar of the Cuna Language*, Göteborg: Etnologiska Studier.

Howe, J. (1976a) 'Smoking Out the Spirits: A Cuna Exorcism', in P.Young and J.Howe (eds.) *Ritual and Symbol in Native Central America*, pp. 67-76, Eugene: University of Oregon Anthropological Papers 9.

——— (1976b) 'Communal Land Tenure and the Origin of Descent Groups among the San Blas Cuna', in M.Helms and F.Loveland (eds.) *Frontier Adaptations in Lower Central America*, pp. 151-163, Philadelphia: ISHI.

——— (1977) ‘Carrying the Village: Cuna Political Metaphors’, in D.Sapir and C.Crocker (eds.) *The Social Use of Metaphor*, pp. 132-163, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

——— (1998) *A People Who Would not Kneel. Panama, the United States and the San Blas Kuna*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

——— (2002 [1986]) *The Kuna Gathering. Contemporary Village Politics in Panama*, Tucson, Arizona: Fenestra Books.

Howe, J. and Sherzer, J. (1975) ‘Take and Tell: a Practical Classification from the San Blas Cuna’, *American Ethnologist*, 2(3): 435-460.

Howe, J., Sherzer, J. and Chapin, M. (1980) *Cantos y Oraciones del Congreso Cuna*, Panamá: Editorial Universitaria.

Isacsson, S. E. (1993) *Transformations of Eternity. On Man and Cosmos in Emberá Thought*, Göteborg: University of Göteborg.

Jeambrun, P. (1998) ‘L’Albinisme Oculocutané: Mises au point Clinique, Historique et Anthropologique’, *Archives Pédiatrie*, 5: 896-907.

Kane, S. C. (1994) *The Phantom Gringo Boat. Shamanic Discourse and Development in Panama*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Kracke, W. (1989) ‘O Poder do Sonho no Xamanismo Tupi (Parintintin)’, *Série Antropologia* 79, Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Ciências Humanas.

Lagrou, E. M. (1996) ‘Xamanismo e Representação entre os Kaxinawá’, in J.M.Langdon (ed.) *Xamanismo no Brasil: Novas Perspectivas*, Florianópolis: Editora da UFSC.

——— (1998) ‘Cashinahua Cosmovision: a Perspectival Approach to Identity and Alterity’, Ph.D. thesis, University of St Andrews.

——— (2000) ‘Homesickness and the Cashinahua Self: a Reflection on the Embodied Condition of Relatedness’, in J.Overing and A.Passes (eds.) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, pp. 152-169, London: Routledge.

——— (2002) ‘O Que Nos Diz a Arte Kaxinawa Sobre a Relação entre Identitade e Alteridade’, *Mana*, 8(1): 29-61.

——— (2007) *A Fluidez da Forma: Arte, Alteridade e Agência em uma Sociedade Amazônica*, Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks.

Langdon, J. M. (1992) ‘Dau. Shamanic Power in Siona Religion and Medicine’ in E.J.M.Langdon and G.Baer (eds.) *Portals of Power. Shamanism in South America*, pp. 41-62, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1960) *Tristi Tropici*, Milano: il Saggiatore.

——— (1966) *The Savage Mind*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

——— (1969) *The Raw and the Cooked. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 1*, London: Jonathan Cape.

——— (1972) *Structural Anthropology*, London: Penguin University Books.

——— (1973) *From Honey to Ashes. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 2*, London: Jonathan Cape.

——— (1982) *The Way of the Masks*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

——— (1995) *The Story of Lynx*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

——— (1997) *Look, Listen, Read*, New York: Basic Books.

Lima, T. S. (1996) 'O Dois e seu Múltiplo: Reflexões sobre o Perspectivismo em uma Cosmologia Tupi, *Mana*, 2(2): 21-47.

Londoño-Sulkin, C. (2000) 'Though it Comes as Evil, I Embrace it as Good: Social Sensibilities and the Tranformation of Malignant Agency among the Muinane', in J.Overing and A.Passes (eds.) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, pp. 170-186, London: Routledge.

Margiotti, M. (2000) 'Gli Indigeni, il Panama, gli Usa e il Canale. Strategie di Convivenza e Mediazione degli Interessi', *Latinoamerica*, 71: 31-45.

——— (Forthcoming) Ph.D. thesis, University of St Andrews.

McCallum, C. (2001) *Gender and Sociality in Amazonia. How Real People are Made*, Oxford and New York: Berg.

Munn, N. (1986) *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nordenskiöld, E. (1938) *An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians*, Göteborg: Etnografiska Museet.

Overing Kaplan, J. (1975) *The Piaroa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——— (1984) 'Dualism as an Expression of Differences and Danger: Marriage Exchange and Reciprocity among the Piaroa of Venezuela', in K.M.Kensinger (ed.) *Marriage Practices in Lowland South America*, pp. 127-155, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Overing, J. (1985a) 'There is no End of Evil: the Guilty Innocents and their Fallible God', in D.Parkin (ed.) *The Antrhopology of Evil*, pp.244-278, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

——— (1985b) 'Today I Shall Call him 'Mummy: Multiple Worlds and Classificatory Confusion', in J.Overing (ed.) *Reason and morality*, pp. 152-179, London and New York: Tavistock.

——— (1986) 'Images of Cannibalism, Death and Domination in a "Non-Violent" Society', *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 72: 133-156.

——— (1989) 'The Aesthetics of Production: the Sense of Community among the Cubeo and Piaroa', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 14: 159-179.

——— (1996) 'Who is the Mightiest of Them All? Jaguar and Conquistador in Piaroa Images of Alterity and Identity', in A.J.Arnold (ed.) *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows: Animal Tales and American Identities*, pp. 50-79, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.

——— (1999) 'Elogio do Cotidiano: a Confiança e a Arte da Vida Social em uma Comunidade Amazonica', *Mana*, 5(1): 81-107.

——— (2000) 'The Efficacy of Laughter. The Ludic Side of Magic within Amazonian Sociality', in J.Overing and A.Passes (eds.) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, pp. 64-81, London: Routledge.

——— (2003) 'In Praise of the Everyday: Trust and the Art of Social Living in an Amazonian Community', *Ethnos*, 68(3): 293-316.

Overing, J. and Passes, A. (2000) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, London: Routledge.

Perrin, M. (1998) *Tableaux Kuna. Les Molas, un Art d'Amerique*, Paris: Arthaud.

Perruchon, M. (2003) *I Am Tsunki. Gender and Shamanism among the Shuar of Western Amazonia*, Uppsala: Uppsala University Library.

Prestan Simón, A. (1975) *El Uso de la Chicha y la Sociedad Kuna*, México D.F.: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, G. (1978) *Beyond the Milky Way. Hallucinatory Imagery of the Tukano Indians*, Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications.

Rival, L. (2006) 'Amazonian Historical Ecologies', *Journal of the Royal Antrhopological Institute*, (n.s.) S79-S94.

Rosengren, D. (2006) 'Transdimensional Relations: on Human-Spirit Interaction in the Amazon', *Journal of the Royal Antrhopological Institute*, (n.s.) 12: 803-816.

Salcedo Requejo, J. (1908 [1640]) 'Relación Histórica y Geográfica de la Provincia de Panamá', in *Relaciones Históricas y Geográficas de América Central*, Madrid: Libreria General de Victoriano Suárez.

Salvador, M. L. (1997) *The Art of being Kuna. Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Santos-Granero, F. (1991) *The Power of Love: The Moral Use of Knowledge amongst the Amuesha of Central Peru*, London: Athlone Press.

——— (2004) 'The Enemy Within: Child Sorcery, Revolution, and the Evils of Modernization in Eastern Peru', in N.Whitehead and R.Wright (eds.), *In Darkness and Secrecy. The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia*, pp.272-305, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Seeger, A., da Matta, R. and Viveiros de Castro, E. (1979) 'A Construção da Pessoa nas Sociedades Indígenas Brasileiras', *Boletim do Museu Nacional*, (n.s.) 32: 2-19.

Severi, C. (1981a) 'Le Anime Cuna', *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 4: 69-75.

——— (1981b) 'Image d'Étranger', *Res*, 1: 88-94.

——— (1982) 'Le Chemin des Métamorphoses: un Chant Chamanique Cuna', *Res*, 3: 33-67.

——— (1983) 'Los Pueblos del Camino de la Locura', *Amerindia*, 8: 129-179.

——— (1987) 'The Invisible Path: Ritual Representation of Suffering in Cuna Traditional Thought', *Res*, 14: 67-86.

——— (1993) *La Memoria Rituale. Follia e Immagine del Bianco in una Tradizione Sciamanica Amerindiana*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

——— (1997) 'Kuna Picture-Writing. A Study in Iconography and Memory', in M.L.Salvador (ed.) *The Art of being Kuna. Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama*, pp. 245-270, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

——— (2000) 'Cosmologia, Crise e Paradoxo: da Imagem de Homens e Mulheres Brancos na Tradição Xamânica Kuna', *Mana*, 6(1): 121-155.

Sherzer, J. (1990) *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture Through its Discourse*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——— (2001 [1983]) *Kuna Ways of Speaking. An Ethnographic Perspective*, Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books.

——— (1997) 'Kuna Language and Literature', in M.L.Salvador (ed.) *The Art of being Kuna. Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama*, pp. 103-134, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

——— (2003) *Stories, Myths, Chants, and Songs of the Kuna Indians*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Stout, D. B. (1947) *San Blas Cuna acculturation: an introduction*, New York: Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology.

Taussig, M. (1993) *Mimesis and Alterity*. *A Particular History of the Senses*, New York and London: Routledge.

Taylor, A.-C. (1993) 'Remembering to Forget: Identity, Mourning and Memory Among the Jivaro', *Man*, (n.s.) 28: 653-678.

——— (1996) 'The Soul's Body and Its States: an Amazonian Perspective on the Nature of Being Human', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2: 201-215.

——— (1998) 'Corps Immortels, devoir d'oubli: Formes Humaines et Trajectoires de Vie Chez les Achuar', in M.Godelier and M.Panoff (eds.) *La Production du Corps. Approches Anthropologiques et Historiques*, pp. 317-338, Amsterdam: Éditions des Archives Contemporaines.

——— (2002) 'The Face of Indian Souls: a Problem of Conversion', in B.Latour and P.Weibel (eds.) *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, pp. 462-464, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

——— (2003) 'Les Masques de la Mémoire. Essai sur la Fonction des Peintures Corporelles Jivaro', *L'Homme*, 165: 223-248.

Teixeira-Pinto, M. (2004) 'Being Alone amid Others: Sorcery and Morality among the Arara, Carib, Brasil', in N.Whitehead and R.Wright (eds.), *In Darkness and Secrecy. The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia*, pp.215-243, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Tice, K. E. (1995) *Kuna crafts, gender, and the global economy*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Toren, C. (2002) 'Anthropology as the Whole Science of What It Is to Be Human' in R.Fox and B.King (eds.) *Anthropology Beyond Culture*, pp. 105-124, London: Berg.

——— (2007) 'How Do We Know What Is True?', in R.Astuti, J.Parry and C.Stafford (eds.) *Questions of Anthropology*, Oxford and New York: Berg.

Ventocilla, Jorge (1991) 'Caceria y subsistencia en Cangandi, una comunidad de los indigenas Kunas (Comarca de San Blas, Panama)', Ma thesis, Universidad Nacional de Panama.

Ventocilla, J., Herrera, H. and Núñez, V. (1995) *Plants and Animals in the Life of the Kuna*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Vilaça, A. (2002) 'Making Kin Out of Others in Amazonia', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n.s.) 8: 347-365.

——— (2005) 'Chronically Unstable Bodies: Reflections on Amazonian Corporalities', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n.s.) 11: 445-464.

Villas Boas, O. and Villas Boas, C. (1970) *Xingu. The Indians, Their Myths*, London: Souvenir Press.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (1978) 'Alguns Aspectos do Pensamento Yawalapíti (Alto Xingu): Classificações e Transformações', *Boletim do Museu Nacional*, (n.s.) 26: 1-41.

——— (1979) 'A Fabricação do Corpo na Sociedade Xinguana', *Boletim do Museu Nacional*, (n.s.) 32: 40-49.

——— (1992) *Frome the Enemy's Point of View. Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

——— (1998) 'Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, (n.s.) 4: 469-488.

——— (2002) *A Incostância da Alma Selvagem*, São Paulo: Cosac &Naify.

——— (2006) 'A Floresta de Cristal: Notas sobre a Ontologia dos Espíritos Amazônicos', *Cadernos de Campo*, 14/15: 319-338.

Wakua, A., Green, A. and Peláez, J. (1996) *La Historia de mis Abuelos. Textos del Pueblo Tule. Panama - Colombia*, Associación de Cabildos Indígenas de Antioquia.

Wassén, Henry S. (1934) 'Mitos y cuentos de los indios Cunas', *Journal de la Société des Americanistes*, XXVI.

——— (1937) 'Some Cuna Indian Animal Stories, with Original Texts', *Etnologiska Studier*, 4.

——— (1938) 'Original Documents from the Cuna Indians of San Blas, Panama', *Etnologiska Studier*, 6.

——— (1955) 'Etnohistoria Chocoana y Cinco Quentos Waunana Apuntados en 1955', *Etnologiska Studier*, 26: 9-78.

Whitehead, N. and Wright, R. (2004) *In Darkness and Secrecy. The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Wilbert, J. (1987) *Tobacco and shamanism in South America*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Yépez, B. (1982) *La Estatuaria Murui-Muinane. Simbolismo de la Gente 'Huitoto' de la Amazonia Colobiana*, Bogotá: Fundacio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas Nacionales.