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This book is an ethnography of wood carving and shamanism among Kuna people living on an island of the San Blas Archipelago, off the Atlantic coast of Panamá. By describing the relationship between shamans and their auxiliary spirits, represented by carved wooden anthropomorphic figures, it explores the link between art and ontology. The main argument is that by inquiring into the visual system of a society, into the way people perceive the world and make sense of it in their daily life, we can gain better insight into their ideas about the social, the cosmological, and the person. This has two main implications: first, visual art is treated in this work more as a category of experience, a way of knowing, than as an aesthetic category. Second, visual art is examined through the category of the people who create it. By asking what it means to carve the figure of a person for Kuna people, different fields of experience of their lived world are explored. It is argued that Kuna categories of design and image are central to their conceptualization of the human person and to how they perceive the world. This work explores these categories through an ethnography of the everyday that focuses on Kuna discourses about what it means to be human.

Birth and death are the limits of human life. By considering how the person is constituted and how illnesses and death are conceived, it is possible to understand how Kuna people see the world and experience the immanent relationships binding together the beings living in it. These relationships are conceptualized and acted on through designs and sculptural forms, among other media. It is my aim here to show that the category of the visual and the capacity to see are key to the process of becoming human among the Kuna. In order to properly understand what Kuna people mean by “visible” and “invisible” we need to unfold the experiential fields in which visual capacity has a prominent role. For this reason, in exploring the production and meaningfulness of Kuna ritual wooden statues, I place them at the center of the network of social relationships among people between themselves as well as with nonhuman entities. Carving wooden statues is an activity carried out by skilled elderly men. As I argue, it is through their embodied knowledge and lifelong experience of transformations that they mediate between mortal human beings and immortal primordial spirits, in order to cure and protect people from illness and death.

Kuna wooden sculptures, nuchukan, are protectors and helpers of Kuna people. They aid shamans in curing and diagnostic rituals and protect households against the penetration of malevolent spirits. They are powerful consorts of Kuna people. They nonetheless differ substantially from human beings, primarily in that they do not have bodies. Although they can be met in dreams and engage in conversations with shamans, and sometimes even with nonshamans, their material form, visible to everyone in waking life, is only a temporary abode for the immortal soul that inhabits each of them.

This book argues that in order to talk about the visual experience that surrounds Kuna wooden figures and makes them meaningful for Kuna people, we have to explore their ontology; we have to look at the wider context in which the human person is considered to be constituted and within which people come to acquire their own knowledge of the world. In doing so, the ethnographic focus of this work is on the lived experience of people who engage in wood carving and shamanic initiation, which I chose as privileged roads leading to the understanding of the Kuna visual system. It is by focusing on the embodied lived experience of those who produce specific art objects that the meaning of those objects becomes known to the anthropologist. For Kuna people, as for most people who do not wish to develop an internal market for art objects, the meaning of art is intimately linked to the everyday experience of their lived world.

Unlike the conception of Westerners, for the Kuna being invisible is not an intrinsic quality of any subject or object endowed with subjectivity; it is rather a quality of a relation between two subjects. That which sees and that which is seen engage in a relation in which predation and reciprocity often modulate the encounter. Similar to other Amerindians, Kuna people contend that seeing what lies beyond the limits of normal visual experience is the field of what anthropologists call shamanism. In the case of Kuna wooden statues, it is the visual capacity of ‘seers’, nelekan, that enables them to see nuchukan in their real appearance as people, to converse with them and learn from them, whereas others are able to see only the carved wooden figure that hosts a primordial soul. Wooden statues act therefore as a boundary to human visual perception. In a similar way, bodies act as limits between the internal images of souls and external visual appearances. Human souls can be perceived detached from their bodies only when they float free and meet with other souls.

The relationship between the visual appearance of wooden statues and bodies and their internal images stands at the core of the analysis carried out in the present work. This gives rise to a series of questions concerning the Kuna visual system. First, if the “invisible” internal form of a nuchukan (pl. nuchukan) is what counts in the relationship with ritual specialists, why do Kuna people bother carving anthropomorphic figures at all? This process seems redundant if seen from the outside, especially since Kuna people, along with most Amerindians, think that objects (not to mention animals and plants) possess souls, which, regardless of their external appearance—be it stone, tree, or animal—is that of a person. My argument is that the effort of carving a human form for hosting a primordial soul has to be seen as a generative act, which, despite the impossibility of creating a human
body out of a part of a tree, bears a resemblance to human gestation and birth. Similar to the birth of a human being, carving a nuchu is about giving an individual form to a generic soul, allowing it to acquire a personality through establishing relationships with other human beings.

The second question is, what is the relationship between designs and images? This question is a leitmotif throughout this book. Although it is indeed not fully answered, it opens a very interesting path of research that, as I shall suggest in the conclusion, points to a wider comparative field of research on Amerindian art. Let us now begin with a discussion of how this question arose during my fieldwork.

**The Ethnographic Riddle**

Initially, I went into the field with the idea of studying the Kuna women's diverse cloth designs of their colorful blousas, molakana, seen in a rather complicated reverse-appliqué technique. Molakana are known worldwide and sold internationally. I became interested in molá designs before commencing my fieldwork and 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. studies, I decided to go to the field to observe what Kuna women actually do. I found myself in their creative process. Unsurprisingly, I began seeing how to formulate my questions to Kuna women, most of whom did not understand what I was interested in. In fact, I slowly became aware that I was less and less confident about the nature of my interest. Sitting on the porches of their homes observing women sewing their molá, I often wondered how I had gotten myself into this embarrassing situation. Insisting on asking about meaning and explaining my common understanding and sociohistorically informed ideas of art. My questions appeared to be meaningless to Kuna women, though were keen to show me their beautiful molá. I recognized that I was in an entirely man knowledgeable in Kuna ancient history and able to teach me about the origin of molá, about which the women seemed quite uninterested.

My frustration about not knowing what direction my research should go kept growing, until one day in May 2003, after three months of living in Okopsukkun. I gathered my courage and went to speak with Héctor García, one of the chiefs, sayakana, of the village. Despite my hesitance to interview one of the village elders, whom I pictured as reluctant to speak with foreigners, Héctor received me with an encouraging kindness. He actually proved to be a loquacious speaker. That day, while he listened to my questions about the meanings and origins of molá designs, he sat on his stool near the kitchen fire carving a small wooden stick, stopping at times to examine his work and to look at me. He was surrounded by baskets containing woods of various shapes, roots and vines, which he explained he used for the preparation of medicines. He patiently waited for me to finish formulating my questions, then took a nuchu from a basket and told me:

I've carved it. This is 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 before coming here. Otherwise they'd need a house to be built for them before coming here. Otherwise they'd need a house to stay in. They'd need a house to be built for them before coming here. Otherwise where would you stay? It's the same for the souls of the dead. 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.

Walking home after my conversation with Héctor, I kept thinking about what he had told me and about his nuchu. Although I could not make sense of his words, I felt a genuine interest in what appeared to me a completely different vision of the world. What is a nuchu? I asked myself. Why did Héctor describe it as a house? Thinking about these questions during my stay in Okopsukkun led me deep into the exploration of Kuna cosmology.

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Talking about images and designs is talking about two inseparable aspects of the same problem, like talking about the internal appearance of a nuchu and its external form. Images and designs are intimately interconnected aspects of Kuna experience, and they are constitutive of the human being as a whole. They are not able to attain figuration. What is interesting, in my view, is focusing on what Kuna people actually do instead of what they apparently do not do. Therefore, what Kroeber described as “feebleness in representation” could well be the clue to the distinctiveness of Amerindian art.

Franz Boas first addressed the problem of the relation between plastic figures and graphic designs in his famous study of the art of the Northwest Coast of America. He argued that figuration was not independent from the restraints of decorative art in the carving of totem poles:

When making simple totemic figures, the artist is free to shape its subjects without adapting them to the forms of utensils, but owing to their large size, it is limited by the cylindrical form of the trunk from which they are carved. The native artist is almost always restrained by the shape of the object to which the decoration is applied.

When the artist desires realistic truth he is quite able to attain it. This is not the case, generally the object of artistic work is decorative and the representation follows the principles developed in decorative art.

For Boas decorative and figurative art were defined following the Western canons and therefore considered two hierarchically separate techniques. Figuration was the highest form of art. Nonetheless, he was able to observe ethnographically the irreducibility of Northwest Coast art to either decorative or figurative art, a problem that was later addressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Alfred Kroeber elaborated this relation in his comparative study of South American art. Although his tendency was to project Western aesthetic values onto Amerindian cultures, he nonetheless noted a very interesting aspect of South American art:

Within the range of the merely decorative, and sometimes of the symbolic as well, the arts of South America frequently evince originality and fantasy. They are free in adding interest and skill in representation, which would have to lead products like those of the Maya—or Egyptian and Chinese—in which specificity, as the approach to the realities of nature, is attained and religious expression. Besides the evidence of the absence of anything like the Northwest Coast totem poles in South America, what is remarkable is the coincidence of both Boas’ and Kroeber’s statements in respect of the prominence of decorative art. Nonetheless, he was able to observe ethnographically the irreducibility of Northwest Coast art to either decorative or figurative art, a problem that was later addressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that the Amerindian avaricious to figuration is in fact a nonproblem. In his seminal study of face painting among the Brazilian Caduveo he showed that the opposition between the static for Boas defined as “geometric” in the Western aesthetic tradition, is a powerful analytical perspective through which to look at Amerindian art. Lévi-Strauss cogently argued that face and design are inseparable aspects of the person, and each one cannot be conceived as separated from the other: “In native thought, the design is the face, or rather it creates it.” In the same essay, “Split Representations and Kroeber’s Boas’s remark that “when the artist desires realistic truth he is quite able to attain it” to South American art, insofar as I reject the idea that Kuna people, and other Americans, are not able to attain figuration. What is interesting, in my view, is focusing on what Kuna people actually do instead of what they apparently do not do. Therefore, what Kroeber described as “feitobleness in representation” could well be the clue to the distinctiveness of Amerindian art.

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Following the lead of Lévi-Strauss, Gow showed that the opposition between designs and images is widespread among Amazonians, although it still needs to be addressed ethnographically. The recent work of Lagour on the Cashinahua is one of the most complete analyses focusing on an Amerindian design system. The richness of her ethnography is key to her exploration of the Cashinahua visual system, where designs are the main medium for communicating with nonhuman agencies and fabricating beautiful human bodies. Lagour also demonstrates how the categories 'design,' 'figure,' 'dami,' and 'image,' juxtaposed, are central to Cashinahua experience of the world. As a Cashinahua woman cogently explained to Lagour, 

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"Designs are the language of yuxin." Although Amerindian concepts of designs have been richly explored, indigenous conceptualizations of plastic forms remain little studied. Barcelos Neto's fine work on "plastic cosmology" and the rituals of masks among the Waika from the Upper Xingu (central Brazil), is a rare exception.

Another exception is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work on the Yawalapití. Much of his ethnographic analysis of the experiential categories of the Yawalapití is devoted to the relationship between what he defines as the archetypical model of each living being and its actual form in the everyday life. The Yawalapití has an ethnoarchaeological view on this relationship as a series of different forms, which ranges from the archetypical mythic beings, living a separate life and unreachable by human beings, to their earthy, and inescapably imperfect, actualization. Each species, including human beings, has a prototype that was created in mythic time and that stands for the species in general. Individual living beings are the actualization of such prototypes. This is also illustrated in myths, which describe how Kwanamat, the creator, fabricated the first human beings using the egg of a bird that, as it was going to fly, was seized by the wind and fell to the earth, transformed into a "original" model, umatã. "As a matter of fact, Kwamutsy made the prototype of 'making': he transformed tree trunks into the first human beings."

Viveiros de Castro suggests that the slippage between symbol and referent is a pervasive feature of Yawalapiti thought and is subsumed to the relation between the private and public, and actualization. Any actualization, he argues, is always a weak and tenuous replication of the original for the Yawalapití. Similary, for the Cashinahua, a drawn 'figure,' dami, looks less like its model than a real 'image,' yuxin, which is intended as the immaterial double that each living being possesses.

It seems to me that the Yawalapiti idea of the original act of creation as an act of replication—defined by an incommensurability between original and replica—is a generic expression of description of what is a scripture for Amerindians, the process of giving shape and transformation. The Yawalapiti idea of creation is linked to the idea of the irreversibility of death. In carving images, and by the transformation of the ancestral image into the non-human alterity, Kuna people reassert the incommensurability between the living and forms of alterity. It is by acknowledging this ontological distance, at the core of Kuna cosocosmological theory, that we can make sense of their visual art.

The difference between an image and what it is an image of is at the core of Kuna ontology, similar to saying that for the Yawalapiti a symbol is always different from its referent. This, I suspect, is not caused by an ambivalence intrinsic to the cognitive process of representation, as Goody would have it, but it has its roots in the reflection of Kuna people on life and on the irreversibility of death. My point is that carving images of a person for Kuna people is about the human condition, which instantiates a reflection on the human condition as forms of nonhuman alterity. By the same token, carving a nuchukana is a declaration of alterity from death and the establishment of identity for the living. By replicating the original act of creation, through which immortal tree beings were created, wood carving establishes the difference between mortal and immortal beings.

This artful process is aimed among Kuna people at curing illnesses, which is the opposite of dying. Curing is in fact a process through which the person has to be recomposed in its unity. It is the unity of the human person, achieved through the fabrication and maintenance of proper human bodies, that requires a skilful balance between soul and body, between internal forms and external appearances, in other words, between image and design.

Images, Designs, and the Kuna Person

This book argues that the relation between designs and images lies at the core of the Kuna theory of personhood. Kuna people consider persons as formed by elements that have their own independent life in the universe, which are then transformed and melded into human bodies by adult people. The Kuna theory of visual art is therefore identical to their ontology: it provides people with categories to know the world. Concepts such as image and design are embedded in social praxis and not just abstract ones. Images and designs are not categories of the aesthetic; they are categories of praxis.

For this reason I frame my analysis around the Kuna concepts of image and design as minimal categories of Kuna visual art.6 Although in this book I focus on Kuna wooden figures, with some attention to canoe making and design, there are other forms of visual art in the Kuna lived world. Basket weaving, carving of stools and other objects, clay molding, and beadwork are important activities in the everyday life of Kuna. The Kuna people I met directed me to those forms that seem to concern the most and thus provide the best objects for an analysis of their visual system. Furthermore, Kuna verbal art has been studied extensively by Sherzer, who has produced illuminating analyses of the integration of verbal forms and social life. In this work I deal exclusively with those categories of human experience that inform Kuna ideas about visual capacity. For this reason I do not endeavor to integrate visual and verbal art into a wider field of aesthetics, which would require further ethnographic research.

Similar to Munn's discussion of the Walbiri, Kuna women's designs, molakana, are the objectification of the subjective experience of Kuna women. Nuchukana are instead the outcome of the male equivalent of female fertility. In each of these two activities—seeing designs and carving figures—one category is concretized at the expense of the other: carving the figure of a person means to produce the generic representation of a gendered person; seeing designs manifests the individual praxis of each woman. Male and female nuchukana are carved to represent their general gendered attributes but without any of the specific features that would render them similar to an individual living being. Carving a nuchukana points to the basic principle that each living being shares the same original, or true, form, which is that of a person. By the same token, a nuchukana is the instantiation of an impossible form, at least from the perspective of human beings. It instantiates the immortal dead that are ever different from the living, for they lack the basic attribute of the latter: the human body. Nuchukana are self-different figures: they are different from themselves, insofar as they lack external features by means of which to abduct their internal forms. Like Yanomami xapiripë spirits, they are not iconic images, although, unlike them, they are visible in normal waking experience.

The realization of designs by Kuna women is part of the wider process of making oneself visible within the network of social relations. Making molakana and carving nuchukana are aspects of the life trajectory of a Kuna person who develops his or her own praxis during the course of a lifetime. In this work, I do not focus on molakana but instead on designs, of which molakana are an instantiation. To this end I explore the category of 'design,' narmakkalet, and the concept 'beautiful,' purpa, which tend to coincide for Kuna people, insofar as what is beautiful is compellingly decorated with designs and attracts the gaze of humans and nonhumans alike. On the other hand, what is 'ugly,' nelekana, has the effect of repelling the onlooker. Seeing means to get close and grasp one's inner self, as composed by a self and an Other, the human and the nonhuman, animal, component of the person. It is by appreciating the mixed composition of newborns that adult kinspeople are able to create new human bodies, that requires a skilful balance between soul and body, between internal forms and external appearances, in other words, between image and design.
about the power of white people by representing their image in their wooden statues. He reaches the conclusion that the power of nuchukana resides in the fact that they are copies of white people. Although Taussig addresses the interesting problem of the representation of white people in Kuna sculptures, he fails to address the two main issues arising from it: What do white people represent for the Kuna? What is an image for them?

As for the first question, this has been already addressed in part by Severi, who studied the healing song for madness, nia akar, and argued that for the Kuna the evil spirit that causes people to become ill, nia, is associated with the historical figure of white people and their disastrous encounter with Kuna people. Severi argues that madness, the most dangerous form of otherness, is understood as a transformation of the self. I wish to suggest that white people should be understood as one, perhaps the most distant, form of alterity for the Kuna, although this does not constitute directly the topic of the present work. This of course poses problems for Taussig's thesis on the mimetic faculty applied to Kuna ontology. Although his argument is an interesting digression on Benjamin's reassessment of mimesis, I suggest it does not shed much light on the Kuna theory of images.

As might already be evident, the position that I adopt in this work is to follow Kuna categories as closely as possible, using only them to understand the world as they see it. In so doing, I come to a different conclusion from that reached by Taussig. It is not by looking at what they allegedly represent (although I maintain that the "white people problem" is an interesting one) that we might be able to understand Kuna wooden sculptures, but by looking at how they function in the performance of a ritual. As I noted above, nuchukana wooden statues are a representation of absence. It is by being the negation of the very possibility of representation that nuchukana establish their own agency in the world. It is therefore by focusing on the fullness of human life that I will carry out my ethnographic analysis of Kuna wood carving. I consider birth and the rituals surrounding it, and the coming into being in the world as key moments to understand Kuna woodcarving and the visual. I also argue that the concept of humanity must be the focus of any study that chooses art as its object—a far cry indeed from mimesis.

In addition, I find it more appealing and realistic to think that Kuna people themselves chose what they found appealing about foreign colonists. I do not think that the Kuna consider white people appealing tout court, even less that they want to become white. I rather think that it is analytically significant to start from the idea that American indigenes were already open to alterity when Europeans so abruptly appeared on the scene. It is exactly the transformability of American lived words that so easily tricks the observer into recognizing some familiar aspect. By the same token, I find, and I am not alone, that it is important to explore what indigenes do and say, as their own personal and distinctive point of view on life, and to focus the attention "from start to finish" on indigenous voices. This has important implications, which, if we refrain from seeing facile refractions of ourselves where they do not exist, might provide new insights into the variability of human nature.

Seed

A few Kuna villages are located on the mainland; the majority are on small islands close to the coast, each with a population ranging from a few hundred to four thousand individuals. Other villages are situated in the interior of the region and in the Darién forest, and there are two villages in the Colombian territory on the Gulf of Urabá. About 35,000 Kuna live in the Comarca Kuna Yala, which comprises the San Blas islands and a narrow strip of coastal land westward for more than two hundred Kuna live between Panama City and Colón. The language of the Kuna, tule kaya, although still a matter of debate, is considered affiliated with the Chibcha family.

When entering a Kuna house, one is struck by the strong contrast between the bright sunlight outside and the darkness inside. The eyes slowly become accustomed to the dim light of the interior and begin to discern the shapes of the objects and persons. Hammocks hang between the horizontal joists; one bed is positioned in one sector of the house separated by a cane wall. A wooden trunk supported by four legs is 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 at the foot of one of two main posts, one can distinguish, with some difficulty, a plastic box containing a tight group of small, carved wooden statues standing upright one beside the other. They are the nuchukana, the anthropomorphic figures carved by elderly Kuna men, used in healing rituals and kept in each house as protection against evil spirits. These small wooden statues measure between five and thirty centimeters and represent both males and females. On the occasion of the celebration of village-wide healing rituals special statues more than a meter tall, called nia ikar, are carved in batallasawood. These lose their vitality at the completion of the ritual and are either discarded or, more rarely, kept on house patios as decorative items.

Despite their difference in size, nuchukana and ukurukakalana are similar in appearance; they are standardized representations of the human figure with few details to represent their gender. In general, they are roughly made, with scant attention to details. Indeed, depending on the type of wood used for carving and its hardness, different levels of detail can be achieved. However, as I discuss in chapter 3, Kuna people value the properties of each tree more for their spiritual impact on curing processes than for their material properties. Characteristically, almost all statues are upright figures, standing with arms stretched along the torso, slightly bent legs, and looking forward. This straight posture is likely to be connected to the shape of the wooden sticks from which the figures are carved. Similar to the Northwest Coast totem poles, the cylindrical shape and the size of each wooden log poses the external limits of the carved figure. No external parts are attached to the branch or root used for the carving, in order to make limbs or items of clothing. Figures with spread legs or arms are rare, but these are made using already bifurcated branches (like a reverse Y

The features of the face are sketchy. A prominent straight nose is the hallmark of every nuchu, and it is attained by carving out the rest of the face, which results in a flat surface where sometimes little holes are incised to hold the glass beads that represent the eyes; the mouth is almost never

One of the first definitions of nuchukana that I received was that they are nelekan, or seers. They are powerful, knowledgeable beings, able to cure illnesses by confronting the pathogenic entities of animal beings, ponikana, and demons, niakana. Despite their nonhuman nature, they might be valiant helpers of Kuna people. To this aim ritual specialists have to befriended them, and members of the family have to establish commensal relationships with them. Literally each nuchu, after having been carved by an elder specialist, has to be incorporated in the household by the people who will look after it and seek its protection. Normally it is the 'grandfather, ' who is expert in the preparation of plant medicine, or by a "ritual charmer," a person who knows the healing "chants," niakana. The major skill of nukane is that of seeing beyond the limits of the 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 other cure rituals. It is not the ritual specialists or directly used by nuchukana to cure ill persons. A nai may be consulted 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 nai has discovered the cause that afflicts the entire village, he helps the api' su, who is engrossed in the performance of an eight-day-long collective healing ritual, called nek apsoket, to rid the village of the presence of malevolent entities.

We can therefore say that human beings and nuchukana are effectively co-existent. Despite the ontological alterity of nuchukana, their power and agency might be harnessed for the sake of human's protection against forms of predator alterity, such as that of ponikana. Crucial in the process of mediation between people and nuchukana is the figure of the nai proper, the human seer, who by virtue of his capacity to see is able to establish direct relationships with nuchukana. In this work I therefore focus on the relationship between nuchu and nai, which I argue is vital in shedding light on Kuna sociosociological preoccupations and understanding the interplay between the visible and the invisible in Kuna ontology.
Kuna people are clear in saying that nelekan is different from other ritual specialists because they are born with a particular gift that renders them able to see nonhuman entities in dreams as people. This distinction by birth is manifested by the fact that nelekan, different from other babies, have no designs on the remains of their amniotic sac at birth. The absence of what I call amniotic design, is the index of the nele’s shamanic capacity. This, as becomes clear in the second part of the book, is a striking example of how Kuna people think of the formation of the human person through a rather elaborate theory of the body that emphasizes its visual appearance. Amniotic design is an index of human nature in the sense that they are “the visual instantiation of designs as entities in the world”. Their invisibility is an equally revelatory sign, as it points to the powerful, not fully human nature of the nele, which indeed gives him visual access to cosmic transformations.

I would like to point out at this point that throughout my work I refer to the nele as a male person, he. This does not mean that there are no female nelekan; in fact, there are many. Kuna people always emphasize that only male nelekan are born nele. Women may become nele once they are adults, and this happens as a result of being pregnant with a nele son (see chap. 5). I have chosen throughout my work when I speak in general about nele to focus on the “ideal figure” of nele from birth as a male, as Kuna people described it to me. In several chapters I discuss individual cases of female nele.

Among the Kuna

Until now, an ethnography that focuses on wood carving and shamanism among the Kuna has not been undertaken. This work is an ethnographic account of the Kuna people’s lived world as I came to know it, living in the village of Okopsukun during March 2003 and November 2004. Like the majority of Kuna villages in the Kuna Yala district of Panama, Okopsukun is situated on an island a short distance from the coast. The island is one of two independent villages, Ustupu and Okopsukun. Although the border between them is not noticeable to foreign eyes, the division is clear in terms of administration and population.

On my first visit to Okopsukun I landed in a small aircraft at the small airport on the mainland coast. I then crossed the channel to the island 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 densely inhabited island, one house attached to the other, was completely different from what I had seen from the airplane. 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. A crowd of people, mostly children, was waiting for Margherita—my partner and fellow anthropologist—and me in front of the house where we would live for the first period of our fieldwork. Margherita had already been living in Okopsukun doing fieldwork for two months before my arrival, and thus everyone was already aware that her “partner,” we, was about to arrive as well. Our luggage was instantly taken inside the house, and I soon found myself seated with a glass of malon, a sweet plantain drink, in one hand and bread in the other, attentively observed by a crowd of children.

In the months after my arrival in Okopsukun I slowly learned how to adjust to the 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. I learned how to eat futo maí, “people’s food,” by putting a pinch of salt and some chile on a corner of the plate, then with a spoon mixing alternating bites of plantain and fish. I learned to take three or four showers a day, with the fresh river water that, thanks to the aqueduct, arrives, although quite irregularly, 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,” Onmakket neka, where the chiefs sing long mythic chants, describing the creation of the world. After two months I learned to wake up at five o’clock in the morning to join the women of the village at the watering place, while the men of我家 were still asleep in their houses. Sometimes I went to work early in the morning, in the forest, with a Kuna friend, back and forth from the island to the mainland forest.

Kuna women spend most of their time in their houses, preparing food and drink, sewing molakana, attending the morning meetings in the gathering house, and visiting their in-sis people. Men travel almost every day to the forest, leaving at dawn and usually returning at midday. When do certain kinds of gardening work, such as felling trees or sowing and collecting maize, they may stay away until late in the evening, sometimes until the next day. 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 done by groups of men, and except for working in the few big gardens that are cultivated collectively by the adult men of the village, gardening is an individual activity and requires skill and 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 start preparing food.

Besides being gardeners, most Kuna men are fishermen, procuring their families’ daily meal. They mostly fish in the sea near the island, usually with a simple line and a hook. Few people in Okopsukun possessed fishing nets or an outboard motor during the period of my fieldwork, which would allow them to catch great quantities of fish in the nearby Sukkunya gulf and sell it to other people. Fish and garden crops provide the daily food for each family, which is supplemented by and sometimes substituted with the products bought in the small local shops (Sp., tiendas) 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 companion for Margherita as I was not taking good care of her by working in the forest. But then they also added that we had no children yet I still had time to learn.

On one occasion I went to the forest with Garibaldo del Vasto, a Kuna medicine man in his fifties. Garibaldo 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 remains vivid in my memory. We set out early in the morning with one of his sister’s sons, 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 talking to me. He explained almost everything he was doing, from the ways in which he cut the bark from trees to collecting medicines; he told me the names of the trees, vines, and shrubs as we walked. He showed me his gardens, told me his garden he helped to clear of trees in the past, and showed me the gardens of other people we passed by, commenting on the way they were looked after. He stopped to listen to the cries of animals, telling me which animals they were. He showed me how he put together different types of plant medicines in his baskets, depending on the medicine he wanted to prepare, 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 properties of the plants that grow on its banks.