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 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 irremediable boundaries that define the person's being in it. These boundaries are conceptualized and acted upon 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 prominence 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 and beings that inhabit each of them.

Kuna wooden sculptures, nuchukana, 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,” nlekana, that enables them to see nuchukana 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 nuchu (pl. nuchukana) 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 blouses, molakana, seen in a rather complicated reverse-appliqué technique. Molakana are known worldwide and sold internationally. I became interested in mola 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 and find myself in their creative process. Unsurprisingly, I began 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 patios of their homes observing women sewing their mola, I often wondered how I had gotten myself into a situation that made me feel less and less confident about the meaning of designing. Insisting on asking about understanding and socially informed ideas of art. My questions appeared to be meaningless to Kuna women, though were keen to show me their beautiful molakana and soon suggested that I find an elder man knowledgeable in Kuna ancient history and able to teach me about the origin of mola, 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 mola 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 where would they stay? It’s the same for the souls 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.

Walking home after my conversation with Héctor, I kept thinking about what he 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 Héctor describe it as a house? Thinking about these questions during my stay in Okopsukkun led me deep into the exploration of Kuna cosmology and it was Héctor’s shift that opened 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 riddle that Héctor posed to me is not a simple one. However, I can appeal to earlier anthropologists who noted the same problem when they tried to describe the art of American Indians. That these scholars, some people like Héctor today is proof of their research acumen and points to a wider and yet little explored problem concerning Amerindian ontologies.

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, he 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 often; 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 canon 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 figurative or decorative 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 realm of the merely decorative, and sometimes of the symbolic as well, the arts of South America frequently evince originality and fantasy. They are flexible in adding interest and skill in representation, which would be9e used to produce like those of the Maya—or Egyptian and Chinese—in which linearity, an 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’s and Kroeber’s statements in respect of the prominence of design. Kroeber stated 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 "feastlessness in representation" could well be the clue to the distinctiveness of Amerindian art.

Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that the Amerindian aversion to figuration is in fact a nonproblem. In his seminal study of face painting among the Brazilian Caducus he showed that the opposition between the plastic form of the face and the immaterial image, as 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 designs of the face, or rather it creates it”. In the same study, “split Representation of the face” and "Amerindia", he showed that the opposition between graphic and plastic is a much wider problem, and it is key to understanding Amerindian art.

Following the lead of Lévi-Strauss, Gough showed that the opposition between designs and images is widespread among Amazonians, although it still needs to be addressed ethnographically. The recent work of Lagrou 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 Cashinahuan visual system, where designs are the main medium for communicating with nonhumans and fabricating beautiful human beings. Gough also demonstrates how the categories "design", "kene", "figure", "dami", and "image", yuxin, are central to Cashinahua experience of the world. As a Cashinahuan woman cogently explained to Lagrou,
"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 Waiaji from the Upper Xingu (central Brazil), is a rare exception.

Another exception is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work on the Yawalapiti. Much of his ethnographic analysis of the experiential categories of the Yawalapiti 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 Yawalapiti is_LANGUAGE1_ this relationship as a series of different forms, which ranges from the archetypal mytic beings, living a separate life and unreachable by human beings, to their earthly, 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 Kwamuty, the creator, fabricated the first human beings using the wood of a tree. The Kwamuty-created, as it were, is the replication of the original for the Yawalapiti. Similarly, for the Cashinha, a drawn figure, 5 dram, looks like its model than a real Image, 6 yuxin, which is intended as the immaterial double that each living being possesses.

It seems to me that the Yawalapiti's concept of the original act of creation as an act of replication—defined by an incommensurability between original and replica—is a synecdoche of description of what is a sculpture for Amerindian cosmology in general. I argue that the non-iconic nature of images lies at the core of the Kuna visual system, as well as that of other Amerindians. Although this may seem a bold statement, I endeavor to demonstrate its validity in the course of this work. I will refer to the case of mortuary rituals and the use of wooden logs to represent deceased people in the Upper Xingu region of central Brazil, where the Yawalapiti and other indigenous people live. Through this comparison I will argue that the carving of nuchukana is linked to the idea of the irreversibility of death in carving images in wood. People rehearse the incommensurability between the living and forms of atternity. It is by acknowledging this ontological distance, at the core of Kuna sociocosmological theory, that we can make sense of their visual art. By mastering the process of giving shape and transformation, Kuna carvers and ritual specialists become able to establish power relations with immortal beings, seeking their help to cure illnesses and prevent death.

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 with the person in mind, which instantiates a reflection on the human condition through the transformation and neutralization of the nonhuman side. Becoming visible is thus coextensive with becoming human, that is, internal and the external form that real human persons are created.

On the Kuna

...more...

Severi, in his extensive study of Kuna concepts of suffering and memory and of the pictographic representation of curing chants, often describes nuchukana and nelekana. Moreover, Severi provides useful insights on the concepts of purpu (soul, image) and Aunkir (brain, intelligence), which I focus on in the course of this work, through my own ethnography (see especially chaps. 4 and 5).

Tausgiss focuses on nuchukana as the privileged object of his inquiry on the mimetic faculty. His study concentrates on the way Western imagery is perceived by Kuna people—and, he argues, by colonized people in general—by focusing on one aspect of nuchukana previously noted by Nordenskiöld and later by Chapin, namely, the representation of European types in Kuna wooden figures. Tausgiss argues that Kuna people aim to
The curing of illnesses, on the other hand, is then performed either by a 'medicine man,' ceremonies, or by a 'ritual chanter,' in the performance of an eight-day-long collective healing ritual, called nek apsoket, to rid the village of the presence of malevolent entities. or when epidemics spread in a village. In the latter case, once the who will look after it and seek its protection. Normally it is the 'grandfather,' household "remember" them and think of them. They learn to see and to control their dreams medicines, or by a 'ritual chanter,' in the performance of an eight-day-long collective healing ritual, called nek apsoket, to rid the village of the presence of malevolent entities. 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 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 is along the cane wall, where stools and chairs are arranged. A small table is located against the wall, used for cooking and eating. 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.

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 ukkurwalakana, are carved in balsawood. 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 ukkurwalakana 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, 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 shape) that lend themselves to this particular posture. Sometimes nuchukana might in fact be referred as seukena, "sticks," or mimimsuukana, "little sticks."

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 represented. Male figures are normally carved wearing a flat-topped hat, a shirt, sometimes with a tie, and trousers. Female figures are made wearing a headscarf going down to the shoulders, a skirt, and a long skirt. The figure shapes are painted with artificial colors and the cheeks colored with makep (Bixa orellana). A few of the figures also wear bead necklaces across the neck and torso, similar to those worn by Kuna curing specialists symbolizing their healing capacities. All the nuchukana in each house are kept together in the same box, called uku, meaning "canoe," together they form a quite homogeneous ensemble, regardless of differences in size and style of carving, with some being older and more deteriorated than others. Despite or perhaps because of their importance in Kuna daily life, nuchukana are kept relatively out of sight, and it took me a few months to notice their presence in almost every household.

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 valuable helpers to people. To this aim ritual specialists have to befriend 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 sings chants during the night to speak with his nuchu and greet them, or who calls them in the afternoon when he sits at the table, inviting them to join the meal. The "grandmother," miis, puffs tobacco smoke from a pipe or a cigarette on nuchukana to refresh and strengthen them. All these quotidian acts show nuchukana that the people living in the household "remember" them and think of them.

We can therefore say that human beings and nuchukana are effectively coexistent. Despite the ontological alterity of nuchukana, their power and agency might be harnessed for the sake of humans' 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 nele 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 nele, which I argue is vital in shedding light on Kuna sociocosmological preoccupations and understanding the interplay between the visible and the invisible in Kuna ontology. The curing of illnesses, on the other hand, is then performed either by a 'medicine man,' who knows the healing 'chants,,' 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.

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Seers are born shamans who are able to see animal and tree entities in dreams. In developing their capacity to see through initiation ceremonies, nelekan 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 'medicine man,' who knows the healing 'chants,,' 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. In this work I therefore focus on the relationship between nuchu and nele, which I argue is vital in shedding light on Kuna sociocosmological preoccupations and understanding the interplay between the visible and the invisible in Kuna ontology.

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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 remaining 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 design of the body that emphasizes its visual appearance. Amniotic design is 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 seers 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 Okopsukunik between March 2003 and November 2004. Like the majority of Kuna villages in the Kuna Yala district of Panamá, Okopsukunik is situated on an island a short distance from the coast. The island is occupied by two independent villages, Ustupu and Okopsikunik. 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 Okopuskunik I landed in a small airplane at the main 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 Okopsukunik doing fieldwork for two months before my arrival, and thus everyone was already aware that her "partner," was, as we, 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 Okopsukunik 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 fufu masi, "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. 13 After two months I learned to wake up at five o'clock in the morning to watch on the horizon the first rays of the sun. My Kuna friends often accompanied me to see the sun rising in full immersion in the sea, and usually by a simple line and a hook. Few people in Okopsukunik 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 (tiendas), and by Colombian traders, such as sugar, cocoa powder, rice, pasta, and canned fish.

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 kinspeople. Men travel almost every day to the forest, leaving at dawn and usually returning at midday. When they 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 Okopsukunik 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 (tiendas), and 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 knew 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 as 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 by showing 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 along. He showed me his gardens, told me whose garden he helped to clear of trees in the past, and showed me the gardens of other people we met along. 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.

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