Kuna Picture-Writing
A Study in Iconography and Memory

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Rows of small figurines, of circles, boats, flags, leaves, or flowers, accurately colored one by one, on balsa wood form the oldest documents that we have; more recently they appear on ruled pages of school notebooks. Kuna healers and chiefs have produced images of this kind for at least a century (Fig. 8.3). Like other picture-writings of the American Indians, these images have been considered with some embarrassment by Western scholars. Historians of art have found them difficult to understand in purely aesthetic terms; historians of writing found them too pictorial to be sound vehicles of information.

As a result, we often find them exposed in museums hastily labeled as "drawings used as supports for memory." However, what exactly is their relation to memory? How are they actually used for memorizing? What kind of text do they help to preserve? What indigenous notions of memory and image are involved in this technique? A drawing devoid of phonetic value is, we tend to think, a fragile, even rusty means for encoding a text. Whatever the symbolism used for transcribing words in a drawing, it will be fatally restricted to the domain of the individual. "Never mistake a drawing for a text," warned E. Gombrich rightly in his famous book on The Sense of Order (1979): the way to produce meaning of a design—argued the great historian of art—is totally different from that of a sign. A design should be freely appreciated aesthetically, a sign should be deciphered following implicit rules (1979, 365). As a consequence, communication through signs tends to be easy and accurate, while communication through images is difficult, always arbitrary, inevitably vague. Faced with a document that stands midway between sign and design—we will see that in a Kuna pictogram there is more than in an "arbitrary" design and less than in a "conventional" sign—we feel uneasy.
Yet field work shows that the Kuna still use these drawings for transcribing very long texts, and that they provide for a very effective memorization of them, even if, as Nils Holmer (1957) has demonstrated long ago, there is no representation of the sounds of the language in these pictograms. So how can Kuna drawings be almost as effective as writing, without possessing precisely the most important property of the writing system, namely a consistent representation of the sounds of the language? How can these rather rough designs replace signs, or at least assume a similar function for the conservation of very elaborate texts? A typical reaction, still common among historians of writing, has been, as we will see, to isolate as an exception and then marginalize the Kuna tradition. In this context the effectiveness for memorization of Kuna pictograms ceases to be discussed; it is either superficially doubted, or simply denied (cf., for example, Gelb 1975, 1993–95). Kuna picture-writings, following authors like Döringer (1935), Cohen (1937), Gelb (1952), or, more recently, Debrunner (1990), is hardly worth an analysis in itself: it must be like any other American Indian pictograph: volatile, uncertain, unreliable. In this paper, I will take the opposite direction, and try to show that Kuna pictography has its own consistency, and that we find these designs difficult to understand not because they are arbitrary or confused, but because they contradict some of our most deeply rooted prejudices about “oral” traditions, writing, and the making of a social memory.1

When speaking of societies that we no longer wish to regard as primitive, we have got into the habit of calling them “oral” or “preliterate societies.” With the exception of the early civilizations of Mexico, the American Indian societies naturally fall into this category. However, this way of defining these societies is fairly recent, and far from being obvious. The first discoverers of the New World would undoubtedly have been surprised to see them so described. For many of them, it was perfectly natural to assume that the Indians, like themselves, had always possessed a technique for preserving knowledge, legible signs, parchments, and indeed entire books (Severi 1995a).

When the Spanish Jesuit Gaüss—the first missionary to settle for a long duration among the Kuna in the Kuna Yale archipelago in order to undertake the difficult task of converting them to Christianity (Gaüss 1900–1914)—reported the very widespread and contemporaneous practice of picture-writing, he viewed the writing of the Indians in the same perspective. In the first place, there was no doubt in his mind that it was a vestige of the past, a practice that had long since fallen into disuse: “In former times these Indians were acquainted with writing,” he wrote in 1910 about a practice of which there was direct evidence before his eyes and which, it should be added, still continues today. Secondly, for him as for seventeenth-century chroniclers de Enciso (1857) or Oviedo (1835–1833), the pictograms were “hieroglyphs” altogether comparable in their function to our systems of language notation. Nevertheless, the ritual use of this picture-writing, the techniques employed, and its very appearance remained completely unknown to the missionary. Concerning the picture-writings, Gaüss (1911–1914, l. 20, 253) writes:

Antes escribían estas indias sus escrituras de jeroglífico en unas tablillas que hacían de la madera blanda que llamamos balas, grabando con una
esperita de estilete las figuras: unas les representaban palabras e idéas,
y otras, notas musicales.

It is clear that these illusions, these mirror images between Spaniards and Indians, could persist only for lack of real documents.

The earliest real records of texts “written by American Indians” were assembled in the middle of the last century, in the northeastern United States a long way away from the Darién and its tropical forests. Among the researchers who collected this
material, H.R. Schoolcraft (1853), C. Mallery (1865-1879), and W. Hoffman (1888) were no doubt the most active. Th. Mallery, in particular, we are indebted for a rich corpus of American Indian picture-writing, formed though it is of scattered examples, and almost never along with the corresponding texts. Neither Mallery nor Schoolcraft were theoreticians. They were men of action, one a governor of Indiana and the other a colonel in the American army. They collected documents, leaving speculation to others. In the same spirit, K. Nordenskjöld, who visited the Kuna of the Darién in 1907, set about collecting the first pictographic documents of that population. He too, like Mallery and Schoolcraft, was a man of action. However, he did not confine himself, like his predecessors, to collecting pictures accompanied by vague commentaries or a few isolated words. He worked with young Indians and started to collect, from the mouths of chiefs and shamans, texts (e.g., incantations, therapeutic chants, stories) believed to be transcribed by picturegrams.

It was difficult work which sometimes took on a tentative character owing to Nordenskjöld's inadequate grasp of the Indian language. The first results were published in 1908 and then again ten years later, in a posthumous edition in 1918, after the work had been interrupted by Nordenskjöld's premature death. Many pictures remained without commentaries and many texts remain incomplete in the field notes that he left to the Göteborg Ethnographical Museum. And yet for all that, the documents published by him are in many respects quite exceptional. For the first time, what was being offered for present was no longer, as in Malley's work, rows of uncertain signs, usually very few in number, aligned on a page, followed by occasional skimpy commentaries.

The Indians that Nordenskjöld had visited painstakingly filled up pages upon pages of the small exercise books that the Swedish ethnologist had brought them. Stories relating the origin of certain mythical beings associated with the sun or moon (Nordenskjöld 1921: 30 sqq. and plate VIII); invocations to magic crystals to the spirits of snakes and birds and shamans; funerary, and other chants linked to initiation rituals, which could require hours to recite, were recorded in long sequences of signs. Nordenskjöld also noted two important details concerning the medium used for these writings and their internal organization: the picturegrams were traditionally drawn on plants of balbaswood (of which he collected a remarkable example, now in the Göteborg Ethnographical Museum) and always in accordance with a fixed pattern (the signs running from bottom right upwards, in boustrophedon).

The reaction of the historians of writing to this new material (which became known between 1910 and 1918) was highly circumspect. The question of writing, by which the men of the Renaissance set so little store, was crucial for these scholars who, in an evolutionist and positivist spirit, were endeavoring to establish a synoptic and chronological table of the inventions of humanity. What seemed natural to the historians and navigators of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries had become inescapable. If the presence of writing was evidence of an evolution that the American Indians had never been able to achieve, how were these Kuna signs to be interpreted, where were they to be placed in the scale of the technical evolution of the human species? The question was not an easy one to resolve. After being seen as the mysterious residue of a perfect but unknowable writing (a "paleography") as Cassal still considered it, the picture-writing of the Kuna was said to derive from an imitation of the Spaniards and thus to be further evidence of the strength of one group of peoples and the weakness of another. The conclusion seemingly drawn by Döringer was that those who had not reached the stage of writing had no choice but to die out? Kuna picture-writing was thus relegated to the status of an intellectual curiosity. When E.J. Geib (1971: 1975) took a brief look at it, its place in the evolution of the techniques of
humanity (which Deringer still had some trouble in establishing) had been settled.
Kuna picture-writing represented a distant precursor of phonetic writing, uncertain
evidence of an effort toward writing, an effort that had, of course, proved fruitless.
Pictography could not be considered an effective technique by Gelb because, to his
mind, no information can truly be conveyed through such a medium. The metaphor
that he uses to describe any pictorial images preceding phonetization is very revealing.
Such images are steam. It is true that without steam no locomotive can advance,
but it still remains formless, indeterminate, volatile (1979, 204). The fact that major
traditions have existed without writing (the Audum civilization and the Vedda tradition
remained orally and for centuries) does not disturb the grammatologist. Since
that time, Gelb's verdict as to the impracticable nature of picture-writing has barely
been questioned. John DeFrancis (1990) in his ambitious Verbal Speech, replaced
Gelb's thermodynamic metaphor with one borrowed from highway construction.
In his book, pictograms are labeled once and for all "dead-end symbols" (1990, 53).

Jack Goody, for his part, in a series of studies (1977, 1987) developed an idea of
orality that fully corresponds to the view of writing outlined by Gelb. The illusion
entertained by the grammatologist, who wants to base his science of writing on the
study of the internal properties of sign systems, almost independently of the laws
of language, is matched by an idea of oral tradition that is always defined negatively
in relation to writing. In this approach, no visual medium or adjacent to the spoken word
is taken into account. The spoken word, "Vasina ana", must be taken to comprise
all that is passed down by word of mouth to the exclusion of any material object that
might serve as a source for knowing the past (Vasina 1976, 60, 275). The position
adopted by Goody and Watt (1988) perhaps illustrates better than any other the link
between these two viewpoints: one anxious to assert the autonomy of signs in relation
to forms of enunciation, the other proclaiming the autonomy of the spoken word as
against material forms (objects, pictures, etc.). According to these two authors, in a
work that has had considerable influence, in polythetic societies there can be no
hierarchy or clear distinction where traditional knowledge is concerned. Information
circulates freely in such societies, without constraints or rules, since the spoken word
is by definition unstable and difficult to control. In such a situation, all knowledge
directly answers the homeostatic demands of the social organism (ibid. 1-68).
Consequently, no effective memory is to be found in oral cultures (Vasina 1976,
295-96). Any memory that does not directly answer the demands of social life is then
excluded from traditional knowledge. It follows that, by definition, oral societies are
societies virtually devoid of memory. This again, although expressed in different
terms, is the same idea as Gelb's before writing, uncertainty and disorder prevail in
the realm of knowledge.

In considering the case of the Kuna, we shall be led to question this approach.
However, far from putting us on the track of a vanished (or failed) writing, the Kuna
picture-writings will force us rather to think again about this all too simple conception
of the use of the spoken word. In order to understand the images we are examining,
we need a model of tradition other than that based on the purely oral. Pictographic
iconography does not have an immediate bearing on the representation of the lan-
guage but rather follows the particular structure of texts fixed by tradition. We shall
see that if this technique of memory is disregarded, pictographic symbolism becomes
wasteful for the Kuna, and incomprehensible for us. Among the Kuna, as in
many American cultures (Zuni, Navajo, Pima®), any spoken word referring to tradi-
tional knowledge is ritualized. All ritual is "chart." To understand this point, it is
essential to refer to the categories used by them to classify knowledge. The Kuna do
not distinguish literary genres (e.g., myth, epic, legend, magical incantation), only
according to their content. A crucial distinguishing criterion of knowledge concerns the type of experience of which it is the result. When it is innate, resulting from an immediate vision of the supernatural, it pertains exclusively to the naka, the seer who in his dreams and visions sees the future or the ultimate cause of a calamity or sickness. This knowledge can and must be ritually protected. It does not require any learning.

Learned knowledge is altogether different. While the naka’s vision is unique and may apply to any circumstance, the spoken words learned from a master are specialized, specific, and local. Unable to be mastered in its totality, the knowledge to which the Kusa specialist holds the key is divided into several traditions that are learned only with difficulty, jealously protected from outsiders, and subject to reciprocal controls on the part of specialists. The first distinction made in learned knowledge concerns those who are required to be its expositors and guardians, and at the same time entails linguistic differentiation. Chiefs, shamans, and specialists in female initiation rituals each have their own knowledge and language. For each also, there are specific circumstances for the ritual enactment of traditional knowledge.

The contrast between the words of the chief, those of the shaman, and those of the gendule—the specialist in the initiation chant reserved for the occasion of a girl’s first menstruation—will suffice to give an idea of the forms taken by this ritualization of traditional words. The gendule, whose chant recalls the origins of the differentiation between the sexes, and between animals and human beings, gives public utterance to a text which is by tradition fixed and unchangeable. Joel Shrizer, with others, has produced evidence of the extraordinary precision with which these texts are preserved. It is to be noted that this is the only occasion when the actual use of pictography is included in the sequence of ritual actions to be performed in public (Shrizer 1950, 340).

The shaman for his part recites his therapeutic chant (a genre of which we now know a number of examples) in a place set aside for this purpose, adopting a fixed stance, prescribed in detail by tradition (Severt 1967). Here, too, variation is in principle forbidden and pictographic notation common practice. The case of the chief is somewhat different. He is required to recite regularly (one evening in two) before the village men’s assembly, the Chant of the Fathers, a cycle of chants that mix together tales of the origins, stories of culture heroes and villages, chronicles of everyday life, moral admonition, and political speech-making. The chief’s words are, like the others, pronounced publicly (before the men’s assembly) in a language that ordinary people (and primarily women who, in this context, do not have the right to speak) cannot understand. However, the recitation of the Chant of the Fathers has two distinctive features: the chief’s words are always translated and commented on by his second-in-command (the enar, whose role is indeed to be the chief’s spokesperson). These words also, alone among traditional words, have the privilege of being more flexible, of being faithful more to the substance than to the letter of any given traditional story (Howe, Shrizer, and Chapin 1966; Howe 1985).

The use of picture-writing is key to these degrees of elaboration of the chief’s words. Used, as will be seen, to fix courts of traditional knowledge (lists of names of places or of persons not to be forgotten), it serves no purpose in the case of a mere admonishment or a political speech that a chief chooses to formulate in words, without referring to the far stricter model of the chant.

In short, traditional texts are ritualized by the actual modes of enunciation9 and by the use (fixed in the chanting of therapeutic, funeral, and initiation rituals, relatively fixed in the case of the cosmological and mythical tales of chiefs, and definitely improvised in the case of admonishments and chronicles) of a parallelistic style that
reduces each story to the alternation of a limited number of fixed formulas, repeated and varied in ways that we shall look at in detail later. The result of this division of languages and knowledge is a classification and a distribution of repertoires of traditional texts. The division of Kuna knowledge has been sketched in this way by Howe (1976) (Fig. 8.3).

The knowledge that can be transcribed in pictograms is then intended to be enunciated, either publicly or privately, but in a strictly ritualized form. Far from being a way of dispersing knowledge in the labyrinth of any given specialist’s skills, parallelistic enunciation strongly simplifies the structure of the narrative while being sufficiently flexible to adapt to any event, any story in the tradition. D. Tedlock (1983) has fully understood this phenomenon, which he has studied among the Zuni and the Maya Quiché.

Ordinary talk not only has words in it, is the sense of strings of consonants and vowels, but it has patterns of stress, of emphasis, of pitch, of tone, of pauses or stops that can move somewhat independently of the sheer words and make the same word mean quite different things... To fix a text without making visible marks is to bring stress and pitch and pause into a fixed relationship to the words. The Zuni call this technique “telling it right up,” we would call it “chant” (1983, 14).

The parallelistic structure of Kuna ritual enunciation impacts to the story’s rhythm, while linking the words to a fixed theonomy, which reflects a stable relationship between stress, pitch, and pause. In this sense, all traditional knowledge is transformed into iñar, i.e., “chant” in Tedlock’s sense: regulated words, which are “told right up.”

Only at that moment does the pictogram appear. Examination of the pictographic materials and corresponding tests at our disposal leads to two conclusions: 1) Whatever the degree of variation allowed by tradition, a Kuna chant is always enunciated in a parallelistic style; 2) Anything capable of being enunciated in a parallelistic style can be rendered pictographically.

Some examples: images and words

Let us now take a look at some examples of this pictographic transcription of ritualized words. Among Nordenkild’s documents (Nordenkild 1958, Vol. II, 54), the most straightforward is a list of names of “séets” (mages), the culture heroes sent to earth by God to instruct Kuna women and men in social customs, knowledge of plants, and the proper organization of the world in which they live (Fig. 8.4).
The drawing is extremely simple, the line uncertain, the images difficult to distinguish one from the other. Although the aim is to fix the names of individuals firmly identified in the cycle of the Chants of the Fathers, no story seems to be mentioned here. The memory of the person who drew the figures seems to find support in a single principle, namely alternation. The list is divided between beings said to be "above" and beings said to be "below." This rudimentary criterion of spatial organization, whose effectiveness for memorization may be doubted, is developed in another picture board (Fig. 8.5), which describes the movement across the sky of the canoe that traveled every night by one of the central characters in Kuna mythology, Moon, who is accompanied here by a series of mythical characters, incarnations of stars, animals, and plants.

Another list of names then, but how is it represented? If we follow the numbering recorded by Nordera Kindil on the board, we realize that there are two organizational principles simultaneously at work here. Parallel to the enumeration by vertical columns or by horizontal lines of the list of characters associated with Moon (the details of which are of scant importance here), we see the establishment of a spatial classification of the pictograms by territories: sea, horizon, sky. Thanks to the horizon, which divides the area represented into two distinct territories, we can on examination understand not only the succession (1, 2, 3...) of characters accompanying Moon on his voyage, but also distinguish between those who belong to the sea, the sky, and the horizon.

Far from representing directly, like a drawing, the voyage of Moon's cortège across the night sky, this image provides us with a prop for memorizing a list, in which the pictograms are organized according to a classification "by succession" and "by territories" (Ceveri 1985).

This superimposition of different classificatory criteria plays a fundamental role in pictography. Gelb, Goody, Defrancis, and others see recourse to memory as an irremediable defect of graphic systems. That which is of the order of memory is for them individual, arbitrary, changing, unsafe, never verifiable, etc. In what sense can we speak here of mnemonics or of a relationship to memory? Do we see here a series of no doubt rather rudimentary drawings made by the shaman or the Kuna chief exclusively by the light of their talent or imagination? If this is so, does this mean that these images, rapidly sketched for their personal use, can be understood by them alone?

We have already seen that the words transcribed as pictograms are immediately organized by linguistic difference, the parallelistic structure of the text and by the ritual order of enunciation. Howe, Sherzer, and Chaplin have shown how any variation, any personal creation: fits into the mold of Kuna traditional speech (1980).

It may also be noted that a large number of the pictographic texts at our disposal, although collected at different periods and by independent researches, reveal a surprising stylistic homogeneity. A number of rules concerning the representation of objects are always observed: the pictograms are always arranged in a particular order, and a remarkably high number of signs regularly recur. These two remarks would suffice to convince us of the extreme inadequacy of an interpretation that would claim to reduce pictographic symbolism to the realm of individual imagination alone.
It should also be added that the pictograms are always used as a didactic tool. During his period of instruction (which can last for years), the pupil of a shaman, a chief, or any other Kusa specialist spends long days in his master's hut, where he must show respect and obedience. Nearly every day he brings him presents and he may even work for him for many years. In return, his master, whom he invariably calls sayde (chief), takes the pupil into his home and passes his knowledge on to him. The teaching is based on two separate forms of learning. One, which is purely verbal, draws on the disciple's auditory memory. The master recites a passage from the iger and has the disciple recite it until he has learned it by heart. The text is treated here, in Adock's expression, as a relic (1983, 236), the only concern being to memorize the words, not to understand them. In accordance with custom, the pupil thus often learns words whose meaning escapes him.

The other technique used for learning is based on pictograms. Very often, a pictogram represents a proper name (designating a place or a mythical being); the master shows his disciple drawings representing particular protagonists of the igale: a sea whose exploits are being recounted, a particular plant spirit, the mythical villages where the gods have locked up an evil spirit, etc. These images, which he must engrave on his memory and then learn to copy, are supposed to help him to recall, with what is meant to be absolute accuracy, a text that can sometimes be of considerable length. We have seen that the pupil starts by learning verses of the chant, which he must try to memorize. The master then shows the pupil series of pictograms representing variations (the lists of names of villages, spirits, etc.) contained in the verse, while teaching the pupil to decipher them. With the help of these drawings the pupil can then question the master on the content and meaning of the text. It is then that the pupil, who up to now has had to learn "without asking," can at last embark on an exegesis of the chants and form a more detailed and more thorough idea of the shamanistic tradition.

This twofold organization of instruction matches the parallelistic structure of the Kusa iger. Let us consider some examples taken from the Demon's Chant (Severi
Here is how the text describes the underground villages (hosted at the fourth ethereal level in Kuna cosmology, which has eight) which the shaman's auxiliary spirits are to visit in search of a sick man's lost soul:

- Far away, there where the sun's canoe rises, another village appeared
  - The village of the monkeys appeared
  - The village shows its monkeys

- Far away, there where the sun's canoe rises, further still, another village appeared, the village of the threads (snakes) appeared
  - The village that coils up like a thread appears
  - The village that coils up like a thread reveals itself
  - The village that coils up like a thread and the village of the monkeys unite, like two canoes in the sea they crash into one another
  - Seen from afar, from far far away, the two villages unite, they seem to
  - Disappear

- Far away, there where the sun's canoe rises, another village appeared
  - The village of the skirt appeared
  - The village shows its skirt

- Far away, there where the sun's canoe rises, further still, another village appeared, the village of the creepers appeared
  - The village of the creepers appeared
  - The village shows its creepers

Let us compare text and picture board (Fig. 8.6). As has been noted by Kramer (1970, 1993) following Nordenskiöld, Kuna pictography does not transcribe all the words that are recited. Yet, what these scholars did not notice is that the choice of the words transcribed is to no means left to chance. Following the alternation between repeated formulae and "lists of variations" which structure the parallelic text, the pictograms refer only to certain words in the language of the chant, and indeed to those very words which, at particular moments in the course of the chant (for the
master who draws and for the pupil who learns to interpret the pietogram), play the role of variants in relation to a set formula. In point of fact, the pietogram transcription translates into images only the list of variations (the names of the villages: monkeys, threads, canoe, etc.). Throughout the Demon's Chant, the verbal formula that provides the narrative structure of the text ("Far away, there where the sun's canoe rises, farther still, another village appeared") is never translated into pietograms. It has to be learned exclusively by means of verbal mnemonics: the memory of sounds.

It is to be noted in Figure 8.6 that the pictorial representation, in the form of a triangle, of the spirits' village (which recurs in much of the pietographic material, even from much earlier times?) seems quite independent of the text, and has its own meaning. Looking at Figure 8.7, one will understand at first glance, for instance, that the text transcribed here involves, like the Demon's Chant, a series of galagum, of "villages inhabited by evil spirits." In this picture-writing, we recognize a series of triangles inscribed in a bigger triangle that frames them.

However, Kusa chants never describe explicitly a galu (village). In the passage of the Demon Chant that we are discussing here, the text provides pointers as to the spatial location of the village ("where the sun's canoe rises" naturally signifies "eastward"); it gives the village its name, but never describes its form. The learning of a Kusa chant consequently involves three separate elements: a graphic formula and a verbal formula, both constant and independent of one another, and a variation of the text translated into pietograms.

In fact, this alternation of fixed graphic and verbal patterns with "translated variations" is the basic principle of Kusa picture-writing, and can account for a great number of documents. In the Chant of the Demon, the entire passage describing the visit of the chiefs of the auxiliary spirits of the shaman, Nele Ukuwar, to the "villages" inhabited by the evil spirits, the images (Figs. 8.8-13) consistently translate only that feature which distinguishes one village from the others (its name).

This transcription shows clearly how picture-writing reduces considerably the text, limited as it is to some names. But it shows also how the drawings can powerfully enrich it using purely pictorial means: one by one, the villages (never commented on or described here by the text) become alive before our eyes, acquiring details, colors, and forms.

This referential interdependence between word and image is the main feature of Kusa picture-writing technique: far from being completely superimposable on one another, the two graphic and oral codes along with the corresponding learning techniques each provide specific information. The formula, which completes the definition of the spirits' village each time, gives us a good example of this. Let us compare the text with the image:

The two villages unite, like two canoes in the sea they crash with one another

Seen from afar, far away the two villages unite; seen from afar, from far far away they seem to touch.

It is to be noted first that in the oral text all the villages crash into one another, two by two, at that vanishing point beyond the horizon where they are placed by the gaze of the shaman's see-spirit. This succession of villages is not immediately visible in our reduction of the therapeutic chant. Resting his chant on the material at his disposal, the shaman in fact arranged the villages in pairs (2-3, 2-5, etc.). The oral text (along with other early pietographic documents in which the images are arranged on long strips of balawood) tells us that this movement of union which constitutes the chain of the spirits' villages here concerns all the villages. We shall, therefore, have to read the pietographic plates in uninterrupted succession. This particular
sequential ordering of the stages of the journey (and of the variations in the owl text) reveals another, purely mnemonic aspect of the pictographic notation. As he runs through this list of villages, the shaman will in fact have to say twice the name of all the villages (except the first and the last), following the pattern 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, etc.

Furthermore, we have in the Kuna text the expression ulu—yola, where ulu means "canoe," yola means "clash or shock," and yola is the verb "to be seen." This expression means "seem to crash like two canoes (in the sea)" and is elsewhere regularly translated into an image with divergent lines (clash, shock) which unite the two
villages, achieving that superimposition on the horizon, or reciprocal communication, to which the text refers. However, the "point of impact," where the two villages meet is always marked in the drawing by a circle which represents both this "union" and the sun. The sun is in fact the esoteric meaning, concealed from noninitiates, of the word *ulubwa*, which signifies "canoe."

The two actions—one manifest in the oral text and implicit in the pictographic image (canoe), the other implicit in the text and shown in the drawing (sun)—are distributed in the two graphic and oral registers with the twofold aim of preserving
them by means of a mnemonic technique based on the image and concealing their true significance from the gaze of noninitiates. Without additional knowledge, the image of a sun could not refer to the ulatka (cause) of the text, nor could the same word designate the run that is seen in the photographic image.

This interplay of reference between text and image shows that neither one code of meaning nor the other is self-sufficient. Only a parallel reading of the iconography and the text allows the entire meaning to be revealed. I will try to show that this is especially true when Kuna pictography uses a more complex symbiosis than that
which we have just been considering. Yet this sequence of supernatural villages placed along the path of the Chant of the Demon is still a fairly straightforward case. The relationship between the image and the word can become more complex.

Let us see another example: when, later in the same chant, the shaman needs to transmit to his pupil the description of great supernatural villages, inhabited by a whole series of animal spirits whose characteristics are enumerated in the chant, he adopts another technique. Among these great villages, the most important is the one known as the Village of Transformations (Severi 1983, 40), described as the true "place of origin" of the animal spirits that bring "madness" to men. For these spirits, which result from the "transformation" of certain animals of the forest, all birth is metamorphosis. After reproducing the constant formula already known to us in order to denote the appearance of a village ("Down there, there where the sun's canoe rises...") the text announces: "Here, in this village, the spirits are transformed, the spirits are born." Through the nominalization of the verb, common in Kuni (Holmer 1947), and the position taken by this term in the text, the verb "to be transformed" thus becomes the proper name of the village. From that point on, the chant enumerates these metamorphoses one by one. Let us look at part of it:

Here the nias, the lords of this place, are transformed
Here the nias are transformed into peccaries, the peccaries are here, with their black clothes, they cry "ya-ya-ya-ya-ya"
The peccaries are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed
They are transformed into lords of the animals with striped fur; above the trees, the nias with striped fur cry "duruku-duruku"
The animals with striped fur are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed
They are transformed into gosanaga deer, the nias are here, at the foot of the trees, with their black clothes, with their entangled antlers, they cry "me-me-""The gosanaga deer are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed
They are transformed into wassanbala deer, the nias are there, at the foot of the trees, with their black clothes, with their entangled antlers, with their great pointed antlers, they cry "ma-ma-"
The wassanbala deer are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed
Into land animals, into peccaries the nias are transformed, the nias are there, at the foot of the trees, with their black clothes; down there, at the foot of the trees, the nias cry "me-me-"
I will soon comment on some details of this very rich text. Here, let me note that the procedure followed by the pictographic representation of the text remains the same. When the object was to present the stages of the shamanistic voyage, the board translated only a list of village names. Here, where the object is to describe the nature and number of spirits dwelling in a village, the pictograms translate a list of spirits' names. From the point of view of the structure of the text, we have then here a list of "transformations" that is inserted into a list of "village names":

Following this new principle (which is, in fact, a flexible use of the same principle, parallelism) the text can eventually elaborate, in quite refined terms, the notion of the process of "transformation" itself. Let us follow here the graphic and linguistic representation of this notion, as another example of the interplay between the memorized words and the images in a Kuna chant.

Let us refer to the verbal formula, which is regularly repeated here. In its first occurrence concerns, in the first two verses of text quoted earlier, the metamorphosis of the pecaries:

Here the nias are transformed into pecaries, the pecaries are there with their black clothes, they cry "juna-yan, yu-yan".

The pecaries are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed.

Let us consider the pictographic equivalent of these verses (Fig. 8.14). We note first of all that this graphic sequence possesses the same recurrent character as its equivalent in the oral text and that all the recurrent cases are consistent with one another, as they are in relation to the verbal formula. In the graphic transposition of the verb chirriri (to be transformed, to become other) we see the spirit represented, in its place of origin, as an animal with a human double. Now when we recall that one of the basic meanings of the word burks, "the double," is "inmaterial image" (as it may be represented by the image of a human face reflected in a mirror, by the shadow cast by a body, by the echo of a cry in the forest, for example), we understand that this image of a human being (after the graphic description of the animal) is in fact its essence, its hidden double. The text and the reading given of it by the shaman are very clear here: what "one sees first" is the image of an animal; the form whose existence is accessible only to the gaze of the seer spirit (the nele); its secret is the image of a human being. The spirit is not fully defined either by the presence of an animal or by that of a person or even by a juxtaposition of the two notions. The spirit can appear only when an invisible human double makes its dwelling in the body of a forest animal. The "transformation" to which the chant refers is then defined using both words and images. Text alone (which never speaks of a "human soul") or even the sole graphic representation (which obviously cannot give an idea of an invisible presence) is unable to portray it completely.

This pictographic page, which shows a more complex relationship between images and words, also develops the same principles as we saw in the previous examples. The pictograms are classified there according to the same two criteria of sequence and territory. When the Kuna scribe must, further on, distinguish between the evil incarnations of two kinds of monkeys, he does so, as in the rudimentary example shown in connection with the list of culture heroes (Fig. 8.15) by contrast with "those above" with "those below."

The nias are transformed into one-shape animals, they are down there, at the foot of the trees, with their black clothes, and they cry "uma-uma."
The uma-unaga animals are changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed.

The nias are changed into yo-yoga monkeys, they are up there, above the trees, with their black clothes, they cry like monkeys.

The yo-yoga monkeys are transformed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed.

Similarly, in the village which follows immediately the Village of the Transformations, where the main theme is the dance that the animal spirit perform in order to seduce the human person and make her or him crazy, the pictograms portray, one by one, the spirit-dances (deer, birds, etc.), while the general sense of the place translates the action of dancing itself (see Fig. 8.15).

Once this principle of relationship with the text through the transcription of variations (or, as we have seen, variations of variations) is established, Kuna healers and chiefs can use picture-writing in two related ways. They can draw long texts made of simple images delineated in rows, or they can combine simple pictograms in order to draw more complex images transcribing several sections of a text. In one case these sections will follow each other as in a page of a manuscript; in the other, they will be disposed in a more "figurative" way, to compose a single image. Let us look at some examples, drawn from documents collected by Nordenstiöld, by Holmér and Wassén, and by myself. The first is taken again from the Demon's Chant. It is the beginning of its first part, called "Into the House of the Shaman" (collected in Malatapu in 1918). The second belongs to the famous Max Igala, the chant devoted to difficult childbirth, published by Holmér and Wassén in 1935. The third is drawn from the Rock Crystal Chant collected in 1927 by Nordenstiöld, presumably in Utupu.

In our first example, at the beginning of the Max Igala, we find the shaman-singer seated on a "golden seat" in his house, facing the sea. A violent wind is blowing, curving the palms of the island. The ocean is agitated, the crests of the waves are becoming white. A great tempest is coming. Here is how the chant, in its verbal and pictorial versions (Fig. 8.16), describes this situation:
1. The evil wind is blowing, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

2. The evil wind is whistling, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

3. The evil wind is whistling, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

4. The evil wind is blowing, whistling, whistling, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

5. The trunks of the palms near the ocean curb themselves, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

6. The palms of the ocean are curved, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

7. The leaves of the palms near the ocean are changing, they become yellow, they shine like gold, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

8. The leaves of the palms of the ocean do not move, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

9. The leaves of the palms of the ocean become blue-green, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

10. The leaves of the palms of the ocean make noise, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

11. The branches of the palms of the ocean whittle, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

12. The branches of the palms of the ocean become blue-green, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

13. The waves of the ocean raise up in the sky, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

14. The waves of the ocean run one after the other, the shaman is seated in the house, he sits on the small golden seat, looking around.

15. The waves of the ocean are seizing each other.

16. The waves of the ocean seize each other.

17. The waves of the ocean start to speak.

18. The waves of the ocean run one after the other.

19. The waves of the ocean become white.

20. The waves of the ocean are white.

21. The waves of the ocean run one after another.

22. The waves of the ocean are seizing each other; the waves of the ocean seize each other.

23. The waves of the ocean speak.

24. The waves of the ocean become white.

25. The waves of the ocean look white.
It is clear that in this splendid scene of tempest (where the transformation of the palm into a tree shining like gold introduces the great theme of metamorphoses which dominates the entire chant), the shaman has first translated into images only a part of the first four verses: the one describing the singer in his hut, his gaze intensely fixed toward the ocean. One could say that in this case, the shaman has exceptionally depicted the constant part of the text, not the variation. However, this apparent exception is probably due to the impossibility to represent the wind itself. In fact, immediately after, pictograms and verbal formula switch roles again: this passage is never more repeated in the drawing, and it becomes the verbal formula constantly repeated in the following text. From verse 5 on, we come back to the situations we are familiar with: a verbal formula not transcribed in a graphic pattern, and the translation of a list of variations. Until now, we have seen cases where the chant was composed by a graphic formula independent from the text, a verbal formula that was never transcribed in images, and a "transcribed variation." In this case, a verbal formula introduced in the first verses is transcribed once in pictograms, and then used as a constant in the following passage. This technique of memorisation is developed further in a passage taken from the *Mus Igar* (Holmér and Wasén 1953). Consider for instance vv. 79-91:

79. Under the hammock of the sick woman I put you nelegan
80. Under the hammock of the sick woman I gather you nelegan
81. Under the hammock of the sick woman I raise you up nelegan
82. They raise up along the extremity of Mus Pug'ip’s road
83. The medicine man calls the plant chiefs, they come to call other nelegan
84. Toward the sunrise, he calls Nele Ukuumbiwagwale, Nele Biningwale
85. They come with garments (mola) smoking like blood
86. They come with hats (qogin) smoking like blood
87. They come with beads (weni) smoking like blood
88. Under the hammock of the sick woman I put you nelegan
89. Under the hammock of the sick woman I gather you nelegan
90. Under the hammock of the sick woman I raise you up nelegan
91. They raise up along the extremity of Mus Pug'ip’s road

Here the text starts with a sequence of four verses (79-83), to which an identical graphic sequence always corresponds. One might notice that the variation concerns here the verbs (awidi: to put, adidi: to gather; odlumakkil: to raise up), and is "transcribed" for mnemonic purposes, using different colors in the same image. To this micro-variation (implicit and internal to the formula) corresponds a similar structure in the text. In this part of the chant, this formula often alternates with passages, such as vv.84-87 where the images display explicitly their usual function of translating the variations of the text—here "the garments, the mola" represented as flags, "the hat" a metaphor for "mental or spiritual power" (Swezey 1966), and the beads. Finally, one notes that the expression "the medicine man calls the plant chiefs toward the sunrise" is always translated throughout this pictographic version of the chant by the same image: a standing figure raising his arms.
Among the documents published by Nordenstamööd, we find other examples of this kind. Let us consider our third example, the Rock Crystal Chant (Akwarele iyo) in Nordenstamööd (1938, 339 sqq). Rock crystals are considered to be "sire" (melody) in Kuna tradition, and the shamans often include them among their auxiliary spirits. Here, as in the Mux Igar (Holmér and Waarden 1951), the chant alternates cosmological references concerning the place of these beings in the Kuna oholaman universe with the offering that is made to them of the smoke from the ceremonial brazier. This smoke from tobacco leaves, coca leaves, and other herbs is supposed to make them drunk, and hence powerful.²⁹

At the mouth of the river the first God set your dwelling

Nene-nus-galele, Akwarele, Gunagale, I speak to you

(In burning) the herb innagigiba I speak to you, in burning the

herb innagula, I speak to you

In burning coca I speak to you, in burning tobacco I speak to you

In burning tobacco (smoking my pipe) I speak to you, Nene-nus-galele, Akwarele,

Gunagale

For you the first God made shelter (gahu)

For you the first God made fences

Nene-nus-galele, Akwarele, Gunagale, I am warning you

Your fences are well established, your fences well disposed in rows

Your fences are shining now, they shine like gold

Your fences are shining now

Your fences are well established, your fences well disposed in rows

Your fences are shining now, they shine like silver

Your fences are shining now
Your fences are well established, your fences well disposed in rows.

Your fences are shining now, I am calling everything, your fences are shining now.

Your fences are well established, your fences well disposed in rows.

Your fences are shining now, like a mirror your fences are shining.

If we compare once again text and image, we see that the pictographic transcription always operates in accordance with the principle of the representation of variants within verbal formulas entrusted to memory. In this last case, however, instead of these being, as in the Village of Transformations, a list of spirits' names which is inserted into a main list (of place names), there is an alternation of the same formulas aligned one after the other. A last feature to be noted is that the same short series of pictograms recurs, thereby constituting a visual equivalent of the parallelism of the verbal text, which makes it a valuable prop for memorizing the names. The parallelistic structure of the Crystal Chant can be notated as follows:

A B C D E F G H I L M D E F A N A O D E F...

Until now, we have seen cases where the text is memorized by the use of series of simple pictograms delineated in rows. The text can establish different relationships among these series (of inclusion or of alternation, as we have seen), but the structure of the series itself remains the same. Let us now conclude with an example of the
techniques used by the Kuna specialist: the combination of several pictograms in order to construct more complex images, in what we have called a more "figurative" way. In the description of the Village of Darkness, this technique leads to a result of intense poetry, both in the image and in the text. In the case of this village, where the jaguar of the sky is seen coming down from the sky in search of its victims, we will try to read the pictographic image (Fig. 4.39), while reading and commenting on the text:

126. There where the sun's canoe lies, stops is, another Village appeared
127. The Dark Village appeared
128. The silver flower of the sun's canoe darkened, the lord of the sun's rays grew dim
129. The silver flower of the sun's canoe dim
130. The Village grows dark, the Village dazzles with light, the Village grows dim
131. Far off in the sea, in the open sea, the waves advance, the waves rise up, the waves of the sea cover the Dark Village
132. The waves of the sea go down, the waves recede, the wings of the sea waves spread like smoke, the wings of the sea waves rise up in the air
133. The wings of the sea waves interface, they have interlaced, they are interlaced
134. The Dark Village rises in the air, the Village shakes, the Village overflows with water, out there, where the Dark Village is. The Dark Village rises up, the Village shakes, the Village overflows with water, the Village overflows, out there, where the Dark Village is.
135. The countless threads that weave the sea foam rise up in the air, the threads of the sea interface, they have interlaced, they are interlaced
136. The Village becomes covered with clouds, the Village rises up in the air, the Village overflows with water, out there, where the Dark Village is.
137. The countless threads that weave the sea foam dance in the air, they knit together, they are well knit
118. The Village becomes covered with clouds, the Village is invaded by mist, the Village is all full of mist, the Village overflows with water, the Village overflows, out there, where the Dark Village is
119. The countless threads that weave the sea foam fall, the threads that weave the sea foam fall from the sky like drizzle
120. The Village becomes covered with clouds, the Village is invaded by mist, the Village overflows with water, the Village overflows, the Village becomes filled with water, out there, where the Dark Village is
121. The birds of the storm hurl themselves into the sea, the birds of the storm hurl themselves into the sea
122. The Village becomes covered with clouds, the Village is invaded by mist, in the Village streams form, the Village echoes with the sound of falling rain, the Village becomes filled with puddles of water, out there, in the Dark Village
123. The jaguars of the sky move through the air, the jaguars of the sky hang in the air, they cry "twi-awa"
124. This part of the Village resounds, the Village resounds, from afar one can hear the Village
125. From the top to the bottom of the Village the Golden Dish sits; hanging from a rope-to-accompany-the-dead, the Golden Dish lets itself fall, over there, in the Dark Village
126. The teeth of the jaguar of the sky are all red, they are all magueb color, its nails are magueb color; hanging from a rope-to-accompany-the-dead, the Golden Dish lets itself fall in the Village
127. The teeth of the jaguar of the sky are all red, its nails are all red; hanging from a rope-to-accompany-the-dead, the Golden Dish comes down in the Village
128. The jaguar's teeth are all magueb color, all red; the Blue Golden Dish comes down over there, in the Dark Village
129. Hanging from an umbilical cord, the flyway birds calls; hanging from an umbilical cord, just like a jaguar of the sky, he is calling
130. The bulugwale bird roars; hanging from an umbilical cord, the bulugwale bird roars like the jaguar
131. Over there, at the place of the Dark Village, the Village resounds, the Village trembles, from afar one can hear it resound, over there, at the place of the Dark Village
132. The jaguars of the sky move through the air
133. The silver peccary grunts
134. The silver land peccary calls, he calls "mus-mus"
135. The land peccary who lives out there, at the foot of the trees
136. The jaguar seized him, he carried off his prey up there, in the Village
137. The Village becomes filled with blood, the Village becomes filled with the odor of blood
138. The Golden Dish carries off its prey up there, into the Village
139. The na-ni-ni jaguars come down from the sky in search of prey
140. The na-ni-ni jaguars of the sky are hanging up there (they move through the air) in search of prey
141. From the top to the bottom of the Village to the other the Golden Dish falls
142. From one side of the Village to the other the Golden Dish falls
143. The naki-naki jaguars of the sky are hanging up there, they are looking for
their prey, up there, at the top of the Dark Village

164. The jaguar sings like the ilugwe bird, his teeth are mageb color, his nails are mageb color; clinging to its rope-to-accompany-the-dead, the Golden Dish comes down to the Village

165. Its teeth are all red, its nails are all red; clinging to its rope-to-accompany-the-dead, the Golden Dish comes down to the Village

166. All red, the Blue Golden Dish comes down to the Village, it is clinging to its rope-to-accompany-the-dead, out there, in the Dark Village

167. The Village trembles, the Village resounds, it can be heard from afar, the Village cries "sama-sama".

168. At the end of the Dark Village, clinging to an umbilical cord, the palukwa bird calls, the bird rear out; clinging to an umbilical cord, the palukwa bird calls, the palukwa bird rears: clinging to an umbilical cord, the asiggoar bird calls, the asiggoar bird rear.

169. In the distance, at the top of the Dark Village, the Village resounds, the Village trembles, the Village resounds, it can be heard from afar, out there, in the distance, at the top of the Dark Village

170. The yo-yo jaguars of the sky call out, the yo-yo jaguars of the sky call out.

171. In the distance, at the top of the Village, the yo-yo jaguars of the sky call out, they cry "tsu-vo".

172. Up there, above the trees, the jaguars of the sky seize their prey, they carry it off to the top of the Village

173. Blood flows through the Village, the Village becomes filled with the odor of blood

174. The Golden Dish carries off his prey up there

175. The jaguars of the sky move through the air, up there, at the top of the Dark Village

176. The lords of the yellow-robed flies want to go into the Village, they prowl all around the Village, they prowl all around the Village

177. Their wings can be heard, their wings buzz, the flies want to go into the Village, the flies fill the Village, the flies settle all around the Village

178. The lords of the bluish-green-robed flies want to go into the Village, they fill the Village, they prowl all around the Dark Village, they prowl all around the Dark Village

179. Their wings buzz, their wings buzz

180. The bluish-green-robed flies fill the Dark Village, they settle all around the Dark Village, up there, at the top of the Village

181. The monkeys move through the air, their prints are all over the Village, their prints are all over the Village, their prints are all over the Village.

Let us see how this text is translated into a single, complex image made of pictograms. After the ritual formula signaling the appearance of the galu before the gaze of Nele Ukwé and his army of seer spirits ("There where the sun's canoe is, another nias Village [mëgaul] appeared"), the image at the bottom left of the pictographic plate (corresponding to vv. 128–20) mandates first and foremost, as it proper, the name of the galu. The word setoku refers to that very moment of the darkness that immediately follows the sunset (dusk, dark), a borderline moment situated at the threshold of the right (suit). The darkening along with the slight dazzling of the eyes (somnmugwed, "dazzling"; verse 130: "The Village grows dark, the Village dazzles with light") which becomes perceptible just when the last ray of light falls combines
in the definition of the Village. The image translates the esoteric formula that designates the setting sun—"the silver flower of the sun's canoe darkness"—by juxtaposing the two pictograms (flower, canoe/nun) on a surface where they are framed by the blackness of the innumerate night and the dazzling glare.

Verse 133-34 describe that "stormy sea" where the sun has set.

The text then describes the rhythmical movement of the waves and the transformation of the form they produce (designated in the text as "the wing of the sea waves," v. 135) into a great mist that covers the village. The rising form of the waves (v. 135) is formed of countless threads that interlace and tie knots in the clouds from where the drizzle comes.

The pictogram that designates the clouds here is the same as that representing the storm in verse 134.

"The lords of the storm hurl themselves into the sea." Seasonally the village been entered (v. 143) than we see there the jaguar of the sky (achu nipollu) move through the sky letting out his hunting cry: "wa-awuwa." Here (v. 165-166), the text refers for the first time to the jaguar of the sky, in its mention of a Golden Dith (oelote). The shaman Enrique Gomez describes this object as a kind of staff that transports the jaguar of the sky in its flight. But it is "also" a part of the actual body of the jaguar. In his own words, the Golden Dith is the "shoulder of the jaguar of the sky." Moreover, in speaking of the Blue Golden Dith (v. 148), the text attributes to this shamanistic staff the color of the jaguar of the sky in the pictographic image, thus pointing to this identification of Golden Dith with jaguar which later becomes explicit (see v. 174: "The Golden Dith carries off his prey up there"). Here the jaguar of the sky is represented in its "descent to the Village of Darkness" (Fig. 8.23).

Its nails and teeth are the color of its victim's blood and at the same time of anger, a red-colored substance that plays a considerable role in the painting of the body (face, arms, chest) which the Xana consider to be a powerful means of sexual seduction.

A further revealing detail is the fact that the jaguar comes down from the sky hastrng from a guerriguer, that "rope-to-accompany-the-dead" which is always placed on the corpse of an Indian before burial (Brott 1968). But the jaguar of the sky is defined essentially as an animal of metamorphosis: he is at once a being of the forest (ahuan) and being of the sky, a bird (uluhe). He first transforms himself into two species of bird, haugu and ha fugus (v. 149-150).

These two birds betray their predatory nature by uttering the jaguar's hunting cry ("just like a jaguar of the sky, [the bird] is calling," v. 149, 150). Their situation in the image, which pairs them with the jaguar, translates this partial etiological coincidence of two animal species that represents here the mythical being. But the birds-with-the-jaguar's-eye do not merely attest, by combining the characteristics features of the hunting animal of the forest and those associated with the animals of the sky, to a kind of metamorphosis of one zoological species into another. By this second representation of the jaguar of the sky, they also offer a contrast with the first one in that they hang from the sky not by a rope-to-accompany-the-dead (gueriguer) but by a sirirab (an umbilical cord). The fact is that the Xana shamans can detect the presence of the jaguar of the sky both in the circumstances of an Indian's death and in certain features of his birds. The ambiguous nature of this mythical being may be revealed just as much in the unexpected death of an Indian as in certain positions assumed by the umbilical cord at the moment of birth: if the fetus emerges from the mother's womb with the umbilical cord wound all around it, say the Indians, the midwives may interpret this as a sign that the child is destined to go mad (Freigen
269. Sevier 1906). In verses 13-18, the text explains the definition of the jaguar of the sky, a psionically hunting animal, he is seen in the act of seizing his prey—the pecos—when he carries off to the top of the Village, into that black sky which conceals his presence from the sight of the Indians. The pictogram faithfully translates this “invisibility” of the jaguar’s hunt by a black surface devouring his victim. But for the Indian shaman, not only can the celestial jaguar take on the visible form of a bird, but he can also speak like that bird. Thus in verses 16-17 we are told that the hunting animal “sings like the jagua bird.”

The transformation, which until then had been in one direction only (the bird roars like a jaguar, so we were told up to now by the text), here comes full circle. The bird-jaguar relationship is now reversible, and verse 18 confirms the identical nature of the two animals by mentioning three species of bird (the third of which, anggigui, “read” here for the first time) which again utter the jaguar’s hunting cry.

Other jaguars (the yo-yo jaguar) dwell in this black top of the Village that conceals them from our sight: their cry alone (tous) reveals their presence. Bluish-green-robed spirits and monkeys, drawn by the stave odor of the blood of the jaguar’s victims, go toward the Village and seek to enter it.

This example shows that, though certainly based on relatively simple principles of transcription and organization of the pictograms, a Kuna “pictographic text” may become fairly complex as an aesthetic image, as well as an effective support of memory (Fig. 8.16).

Iconography and memory

Let us now look again at the ways in which traditional knowledge is learned. We have seen that the pupil starts by memorizing passages. The master shows the pupil series of pictograms representing variations (lists of names of places or characters) contained in those passages and teaches the pupil to decipher them. It is then that the relic text (Tedlock 1983) of the chant becomes an object that can be manipulated. The pupil can then question the master on the content and meaning of the text. Who was the son who is associated with the crystal? Where are the first spirits’ villages to be found? Which river is it whose mouth was the first dwelling of the messengers from the sky? Why can the jaguar of the sky sing like a bird?

It should not be forgotten that the chant is always formulated in a special language, very different from ordinary language. The learning of a chant coincides then with the learning of that variety of language. Picture-writing can be learned only in this context. This means that it can in no case transcribe words belonging to ordinary language and that, even within that language, only a relatively limited number of words are translated into images.

Pictorial symbolism then translates only a limited, specialized vocabulary. This fundamental feature would be enough in itself to show how inadequate the comparison with phonetic writing is. All notation of language sounds must be able in principle to transcribe any word of the language by means of a limited number of signs. In the case of picture-writing, the situation is reversed: the limitation whereby the language is able to be represented in a consistent manner does not affect the number of signs used, but the number of words that can be designated by images (Siewer 1983). Of course this does not mean that the vocabulary of the Kuna chants does not change in the course of time. However, changes are far from being left to individual whim. Additionally, there may be a difference between this and that pictographic transcription of the same chant, but the difference will usually concern the style established by a master’s teaching and will not be a purely individual difference. In the context of the tradition, iconography from a "shamanistic
school," transmitted from master to pupil, reflects the slow-changing vocabulary of the chants.

Neither individual drawing nor phonetic writing, pictography has its basis in its relationship with oral instruction. For this reason, instead of it being seen as a failed or vanished form of writing, it should be regarded as an extraordinarily effective act of memory. In the context, the relationship between the pictograms and the words does not lie where the theories of writing seek to place it (between signs and phonetic values), but rather between the order of the pictograms and the parallelistic structure of the text. Seen from this angle, the link that is established between signs and text, which Celce (1972, 1973) and many others have described as "pictorial" and "tenuous," proves to be consistent and clearly identifiable.

Once the real effectiveness of this technique is established, it becomes possible to understand its role and its influence over the entire tradition. Each story is ritually enunciated in special language and in paratelic style and then inscribed into pictograms. As in the example that we have studied, it will thus receive a title, which will place it in the general catalog of stories (the great cycles of the Fathers, the Lost Souls, funeral and initiation chants, etc.). The background against which the story unfolds will then be marked by a series of lists of proper names, true points of anchor age for memory, where the mythological and cosmological knowledge of the chiefs and shamans is condensed.

Although picture-writing may be powerless to reproduce the sounds of spoken language it is capable of linking the image to the structure of a text as it is required to be enunciated by tradition. This link results from an articulation between techniques of memory (based on methods of classification), forms of ritual enunciation of traditional knowledge (parallelism), and the learning of an iconography. It results in spoken words which the Kuna describe as "strong," in the dual sense of lasting and effective.

We have seen that historians of writing and anthropologists tend to adopt two separate approaches: one anxious to assert the autonomy of signs in relation to forms of enunciation, the other proclaiming the autonomy of the spoken word as against material forms (objects, pictures, etc.). The Kuna memory-pictures, with the consistent relationship that they establish between forms of enunciation and iconography, show that a link can be established between aspects that our tradition keeps separate. It is becoming more and more clear that, in actual fact, in a number of societies where social memory is apparently based solely on the spoken word, the image has a constituent role in the process of transmission of knowledge (Sewell 1993). These acts of transcription of the mythological universe of which the Kuna tradition offers us a particularly sophisticated example, far from reflecting the first faltering steps, the unsuccessful attempts, the distant precursors of the origins of writing, reveal a number of crucial features of the multiple oral and pictorial practices that constitute a so-called oral tradition. Perhaps by looking at these pictograms with a fresh eye we may begin to understand not the lost writing of the American Indians but the force, the vitality, and the extraordinary persistence of their strong words transformed into images.