Cosmology, Crisis, and Paradox: On the White Spirit in the Kuna Shamanistic Tradition

Carlo Severi

An image is where past and present meet instantly to form a constellation.

— Walter Benjamin

The link between various kinds of narratives and the construction of social memory has become, after the work of Paul Ricoeur and others, obvious to historians, anthropologists, and social scientists in general. If, as Ricoeur has argued, to narrate a story is a way not only to recall it but also “to refigure one’s own experience of time,” narrative has to be seen not only as a particular literary style but also as a form of existence of memory itself. This perspective has tempted many historians as well as some psychologists to argue that no memory is imaginable without a narrative frame.

The relation of social memory to images is less clear. All his life, Aby Warburg tried to outline a general theory of social memory based on images as well as on texts. His emphasis on the complex relations between visual symbols and meaning, on the need to consider a picture or a sculpted object as only one element in a series of representations that might involve ritual actions, texts, oral traditions, or even entirely mental images, and his insight that the analysis of social memory was a way to study the social life of symbols certainly were decisive steps toward a new approach to this question. Unfortunately, Warburg’s ideas on social memory have been poorly developed since his death, and, at least in the field of social anthropology, much has still to be done if we are to understand the ways in which a cultural tradition can rely upon images.

The representation of traumatic experience in a cultural tradition is a particularly difficult aspect of this problem. The analysis of trauma as a phenomenon affecting perception and memory and as a psychological process generating painful symptoms was obviously one of the first steps in Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the unconscious. However, as Freud pointed out very early on, not only can trauma cause painful reminiscences but it can also put in danger memory itself, as a process closely associated with the construction (and the survival) of an ego. In the latter case, no story can be told about the traumatic experience. Instead, a sort of blank or an enigmatic image appears to consciousness as a complex, often persistently misleading substitute for the reminiscence. It is with these enigmatic images that any attempt to recon-
struct a *narrative* representation of the traumatic past (be it faithful or not) has to deal.

The crucial point here is precisely the relation between the enigmatic image and *narration*. From a metapsychological point of view, the emergence of these images as mnemonic traces seems to replace, or even prevent, the narration of the reminiscence. Moreover, such images seem to be more effective than language, since in situations where no word can be spoken, they register some aspects of the recollection as a psychological process. However, if they bear witness to some psychological elaboration of the reminiscence, they not only often falsify the facts recollected but also prevent precisely that transformation of the subject’s experience of time in a *récit* (narration), which is, according to Ricoeur, one of the decisive steps in the formation of memory. That these images are to be treated as mnemonic traces, not as accurate representations, was one of the discoveries that led to the psychoanalytic theory of symptoms. Since then (namely, since Freud’s famous repudiation of the seduction theory), it has been acknowledged that, as Freud has soberly written, an internal, psychological reality must be distinguished from external, historical facts.

Nonetheless, the same “psychological reality” that in his first years of research Freud opposed to external facts was recognized by Freud in his later work as one of the more powerful forces acting in the lives of societies. The relation between Freud’s work and anthropological research in the twentieth century has not been, with a few exceptions, an easy one. No direct transplantation of psychoanalytic theories into the field of cultural facts has proved really fruitful, and it would be unreasonable to deny that in this area many questions are unanswered and many problems have been left unsolved. However, it would be equally hard to deny that something that might be called “social mnemonic traces” — linked with the task of representing trauma and having a complexity similar to the trauma — are found in practices that we usually associate with social memory. Ritual practices, in particular, are situations in which an extremely traumatic experience — something that can be so difficult to represent in everyday life — can be effectively expressed, and thereby inscribed, in ways that remain to be explored, in the memory of a society.

So how is the recollection of a collective crisis, a social trauma, inscribed in the memory of a society? How can a ritual tradition represent social trauma as an experience? To address these questions, I will focus on a relatively recent transformation in the shamanistic tradition of the Kuna of Panama: the invention of a spirit representing, in supernatural terms, the intervention of the most powerful of the traditional enemies of Kuna society, the white man.

The history of the encounter between the white man and the Kuna has been clearly summarized by James Howe: “Inhabiting a region of great strategic significance, ... [the Kuna] have found themselves caught up in other people’s schemes and other people’s wars, attempting on their part to trade and ally themselves with one side or another without giving up their independence. Repeatedly missionized and subdued, they have each time rebelled and broken free, even in the twentieth century.” Since the beginning of the
sixteenth century, the Kuna have resisted numerous attempts to colonize them. Many stories in the Kuna tradition tell the salient episodes of this history of external aggression, attempts by outsiders to take control of Kuna territories, and Kuna insurrections against Spaniards, Scots, Panamanians, and other Westerners (including gold miners, merchants, missionaries, and the authorities of the Republic of Panama, founded in 1903). To give an idea of the intensity of the Kuna tragedy, I will turn to Howe again. He writes that in 1792 "after nearly three hundred years, peace finally came to the Darién... During just the last half of the eighteenth century, war and epidemic disease had cut the indigenous population in half, to an estimated five thousand." Then, after a century of relative calm, Westerners resumed their attempts to take control of the Kuna's lands. The Kuna again fought back, until the treaty that followed their armed conflict with Panamanian forces in 1925. Even today that treaty warrants to the Kuna their precarious and hard-won political autonomy, and it represents for the Kuna, given the historical context, a remarkable success.

However, it should never be forgotten that American Indians, particularly those of Central America, have now been cohabiting with whites for several centuries. Even when, as in the case of the Kuna, they have been able to effectively combat a generally destructive physical contact, American Indians still maintain that this now inevitable presence has irreparably lacerated their world, upsetting once and for all the balance of forces regulating it. Even transformations not directly produced by repeated military expeditions, Spanish and other, are linked now to this deeply rooted and obsessive certainty that something has been torn apart.

The memory of this traumatic past, during which Kuna society nearly disappeared, is still very much present. In 1992, for instance, in a discourse on Columbus’s discovery of America, the Kuna chief Leonidas Valdés stated, "Now then, we are sitting together here.... We sit here feeling our pain.... When the Europeans came here, they abused us, you see. They beat our grandfathers, they killed our grandfathers, they cut open our grandmothers, you hear. They came here and killed our wise men, you see. So now they say, 'Celebrate the day,' you see,.... [T]hey're coming to celebrate the day of our grandmothers' and grandfathers' death." In the shamanistic tradition, the recollection of this past, and the feeling of this pain, can also be expressed in more indirect, though equally poignant terms, through the invention of ritual images.

The great Swedish anthropologist Erland Nordenskiöld, during his month-long mission among the Kuna in 1927, collected many interesting objects that are now in the very rich collections of the Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg. Among the pieces he donated is a series of the statuettes carved out of balsa (muchugana; singular muchu) that are used by specialists during the recitation of chants devoted to the therapy of various illnesses and representing "auxiliary spirits." These spirits—called nelegan (seeks; singular nele)—are evoked
and appealed to for help during healing rituals. Their function is to help the shaman in his search for the spiritual principle or “soul” whose absence has caused a particular illness, misfortune, or other kind of suffering to a person. As is the case in other American Indian traditions, the Kuna regard vegetal spirits and spirits of the forest (nelegan) as allies of the human beings in the supernatural conflict that opposes them to animal spirits (niqana; singular xin), who are thought of as dangerous and pathogenic.

The statuettes are usually represent birds, sea turtles, and other animals (Fig. 1), or they may take vaguely anthropomorphic shapes and represent various supernatural beings from Kuna mythology (Fig. 2). Some, however, are more surprising to Western eyes (Figs. 3–6). As Nordenskiöld noted — without trying to explain the phenomenon—it is clear that they represent white persons wearing shirts, trousers, hats, and even ties. There is little doubt that, while being used as auxiliary spirits by the shamans in their supernatural travels (and therefore standing for vegetal spirits), they also represent white persons.

This representation of a white person as an auxiliary spirit of the Kuna shaman (confirmed by several recent sources, including my own fieldwork) has been variously explained. Michael Taussig, for instance, has seen in these statuettes a sort of symbolic revenge by the Kuna against the white invaders. This interpretation is common and has been applied to other situations of cultural contact. By manipulating the image of the white man, argued Taussig, the Kuna shaman is able to “catch the power” of his antagonists symbolically, just like a Voodoo priest or just as in West Africa a possessed Songhai “catches the power” of a Catholic priest or a French administrator by taking up his image and thus becoming “similar to him.” Using the image of a paradigmatic enemy in a context of “sympathetic magic,” Taussig argues, the Kuna have found a way to assimilate and ritually “tame” their enemy. This is certainly true, and my own work on the chant devoted to the therapy of what the Kuna call “madness” confirms this point.

Problems arise, however, when Taussig attributes to the Kuna shamanistic tradition intentions going well beyond this symbolic appropriation of the enemy realized through sympathetic magic. According to him, for instance, the Kuna representation of white persons expresses “the fact that the self is no longer clearly separable from its Alter. For now the self is inscribed in the Alter that the self needs to define itself against.” Taussig also finds in these Kuna statuettes (and in particular in the images I have studied in a paper about the Kuna ritual representation of pain) the illustration of “what has been termed the postmodern condition, the virtually undisputed reign of the image-chain in late capitalism where the commodification of nature no less than mechanical and uterine reproduction link in a variety of power-assuming, power-consuming, ways.”

Taussig presents his interpretation as part of a meditation on Walter Benjamin’s ideas on mimesis and on what Taussig calls a “fabulous” history of the senses. His analysis is not intended to be part of an “older anthropology,” about which he claims to “know next to nothing” and, at any rate,
Fig. 1. *Nuchugana* from Ustupu, before 1927; wood, top: 7.0 cm (3¼ in.), bottom: 10.7 cm (4½ in.)
Göteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg, Collection Nordskold
Fig. 2. *Nuchagams* from Kaimora, before 1927, wood, left: 28.3 cm (11 1/4 in.), right: 29.9 cm (11 1/4 in.)
Göteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg. Collection Nørønskiold
Fig. 3. Nuchagana from Kaynora, before 1927, wood, left: 23.4 cm (8¾ in.), right: 23.4 cm (9¾ in.) Göteborg, Etnografiska Museet i Göteborg, Collection Nordenskiöld
Fig. 4. *Nuchu*, before 1918, wood with pigment, 35 cm (13 3/4 in.).
Chicago, Field Museum
Fig. 5. Nushugans, 1900s, wood, some with pigment, 16.3 to 28.3 cm (7 3/4 to 11 1/2 in.)
Los Angeles, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History
Fig. 6. Ukuwolagana, 1900s, wood, left: 116.2 cm (45 3/4 in.), right: 144.2 cm (56 3/4 in.)
Los Angeles, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History
Cosmology, Crisis, and Paradox

thinks would inevitably "miss the whole point." However, Taussig's interpretation of the Kuna figurines in the form of white persons as a simple act of sympathetic magic oversimplifies the Kuna facts. In the Kuna context, the white man is not only a symbol of an alien power that can be caught and used by the shamans. Equally and simultaneously, the white man symbolizes anxiety, uncertainty, mental suffering, even madness. Kuna tradition represents whites not only as powerful seers coming from the point of view of another culture who act as magic helpers of the shaman in his attempt to cure illnesses but also as frightful demons who appear only in dreams. As we will see, the ambivalence of these images of white persons, their paradoxical representation of positive and negative values attributed to the same supernatural beings, is constitutive of their nature. Contradiction is the way in which these ritual images exist.

Taussig is right in remarking on the ironic, even comic character of these figurines. At the same time, he completely mistakes the particular context in which these representations are inserted. Let me clarify this point by referring to an example. Keith Basso has studied a representation of whites used among the Western Apache in the United States that seems, at first sight, similar to the Kuna case. Since the 1940s, the Apache of an isolated village of the White Mountain Reservation in Arizona have reacted to the increasing intervention of white people in their daily lives with the invention of a particular joke: the game of "portraying the Whiteman." The rules of this game are, in Basso's analysis, essentially two: contrast and distortion. Having selected a typical Anglo-American behavior that strongly contrasts with a Western Apache custom (a way of greeting, for instance), the person willing to play this particular game will perform the behavior in public, distorting it so as to "portray" a hilarious caricature of it.

Basso has effectively shown that this humorous, everyday verbal genre by which Western Apaches satirize the white man, is very revealing, in social and in cultural terms. He has argued that from a cultural (or categorical) point of view, the Western Apache's verbal (and behavioral) imitation of whites mobilizes "a set of general ideas—their ideas of who Whitemen are, what they represent, and how they typically behave toward Indians." From a social point of view, these jokes appear to increase solidarity among the Western Apache. As Basso writes: "The products of solidarity and commitment, joking imitations are inverted celebrations of them as well.... These performances are little morality plays in which Western Apaches affirm their conceptions of what is 'right' and proper by dramatizing their conceptions of what is 'wrong' and inappropriate. Concomitantly, they affirm their sentiments for one another, and nothing, they would claim, is more important." Basso also shows that an important aspect of these "joking imitations" is the use of the English language, which in the Western Apache community of Cibecue was still relatively rare in everyday life in the 1980s. Speaking English in order to caricature and mock Anglo-Americans, Western Apaches symbolically appropriate an "image" of their ancient enemies in order to defend themselves and

189
to preserve their own culture. From this point of view, then, these everyday jokes are not far from what Taussig has called sympathetic magic; they seem to assume the same social and cultural functions.

Gordon Craig, a talented Apache cartoonist, has often illustrated in his images the verbal genre studied by Basso. As Basso has noted, "Mr. Craig... says with his cartoons many of the things I have tried to say with words. Indeed, he probably says them better." Let us consider an example of Craig's work and then compare it with the Kuna statuettes collected by Nordskjöld. We will see that, despite appearances, they differ radically in form, content, and context. Thus, in one of Craig's well-known cartoons, there are two young men standing outside at a small airport. The Anglo-American—who is wearing a baseball cap, glasses, a long-sleeved shirt, shorts, knee socks, hiking boots, two Band-Aids on a very hairy leg, and a camera—points to the sky and says to the Apache: "Look chief... heap big iron bird." Apparently unmoved, the Apache, who wears high-top sneakers, jeans, a short-sleeved football jersey, and a large black hat with a broken feather stuck in the band, thinks in reply, in fluent English: "That's an airplane... you turkey."

The rules of the linguistic game described by Basso, contrast and distortion, are clearly present. Craig has not just translated the game of portraying the white man into visual terms, however; he has developed it further. To achieve a strong comic effect, Craig has realized a double inversion: instead of representing an American Indian imitating a white person, Craig (the Apache artist) has drawn a typical Anglo-American speaking like (the Anglo-American would presume) an American Indian would speak. The American Indian replies by showing the knowledge and common sense that white men would like (wrongly) to attribute only to themselves: the "big iron bird" is obviously an airplane. It is clear that in this case, the humor comes not only from the fact that the Apache portrayed in the cartoon sharply contradicts the conventional representation of the American Indian as seen through Western eyes but also from the fact that the white man impersonates an Anglo-American conception of the American Indian (still supposed to be unable to speak English correctly, as well as totally immersed in a premodern or even mythological conception of the world). Let us remark as well that this double inversion is realized in a Western framework. The effectiveness of the image comes in part from a satirical, typically Apache use of a Western graphic style and genre, the cartoon.

In the Kuna case, the contrary happens. The white man, although vividly and realistically represented, becomes a different being, one fully belonging to the Kuna supernatural dimension. Carved in balsa and situated among the auxiliary spirits of the shaman, the white man assumes the figure, the function (and even the supernatural "flesh," constituted by the balsa) of a vegetal spirit.

A number of additional differences emerge when the context in which these representations are used in social life is considered. The Western Apache representation regularly appears in the informal context of everyday interaction. Western Apache joking imitations, Basso has noted, "adapt themselves to their own expressive purposes and the fluctuating requirements of partic-
ular social occasions." This means that, as Basso said, "no two imitations are ever the same"; and that the game itself changes rapidly through time: "Apache portraits of 'the Whiteman' are unfailingly contemporary and consistently experimental." This instability of form and context has an important consequence: that the Western Apache "verbal portrait" of the white man is too fragile a symbolic instrument to preserve the tribe's social memory of the traumatic past. As Basso states, "Whitemen have stolen land, violated treaties, and on numerous other fronts treated Indians with a brutal lack of awareness and concern. But these are not the messages communicated by Western Apache jokers. Their sights are trained on something more basic, and that is making sense of how Anglo-Americans conduct themselves in the presence of Indian people."  

Many of Taussig's remarks about the symbolic appropriation of the Alter being realized through humor may apply to Western Apache portraits of the white man. Nonetheless, as should be clear from this comparison, Kuna shamanistic figurines are in many ways different from Western Apache verbal portraits. While the Western Apache representation relies on the game of "reversing roles," the Kuna representation expresses the accumulation of contradictory connotations on a single image. From this point of view, Western Apache portraits are hilarious inversions, while Kuna ritual statuettes are visual paradoxes. Furthermore, the context in which the Kuna statuettes are used is a ritual one. They are thus inserted in a relatively stable and far more complex context than the everyday context of the Western Apache verbal portrait. The Kuna statuettes do not represent primarily, as in the Western Apache case, a distorted image of "white people" focused on "foregrounding" a cultural contrast in an ingenious way. This dimension is not absent from the Kuna figurines, but they also and simultaneously represent Kuna supernatural beings. In assigning to whites the function of the auxiliary spirits of the shaman, who are supposed to intervene and help in social and individual crises, in social misfortune as well as in individual suffering, they portray whites as transformed into Kuna supernatural beings. In this way, whites become part and parcel of a symbolic system organized around, like any shamanistic tradition, the understanding and treatment of suffering.

It is obvious that these representations are in some way connected with the social memory of the historical conflicts between the Kuna and whites. However, historians and anthropologists have found it difficult to understand them as such, mainly for two reasons. For one, while the "nelegam" function as the "helpers" of the shaman everywhere in Kuna shamanistic ritual and tradition, the figurines do not seem to be clearly connected with narratives dealing with encounters between Kuna and whites. The other, and more crucial, difficulty is that these images seem to be defined in contradictory terms. Whites are represented in the Kuna ritual figurines as seers (nelegam), who are supposed to further a shamanistic cure, and, simultaneously, in ritual narratives as pathogenic animal spirits (nigamana), who attack Kuna men and women and make them ill. As a consequence, the temptation to consider these (apparently
inconsistent or contradictory) cultural ways of conceptualizing the presence of whites as "spurious," "marginal," or "anecdotal" has been very strong. In fact, such imaging has been hastily considered as symptoms of decadence in the indigenous tradition or even as a sign of symbolic submission to the "cultural change" brought about by the whites (that is, domination). In other words, representations of this kind have been considered as marking a step toward "modernization," a process regarded as implying social oblivion and the loss of Kuna ethnic identity.

I would like to show that this interpretation of the Kuna statues is deeply misleading, just as it is perfectly illogical to see them as representative of a conscious postmodern spirit, as Taussig does. Once we reconstruct their context, these paradoxical images can be seen instead as an example of what Warburg called "engrams of social memory," as the result of a process of ritual remembrance in which we can follow almost step-by-step the way a shamanistic tradition has managed to symbolize a situation of crisis.

The Kuna White Spirit

Today in Kuna shamanistic tradition the White Spirit appears as a dangerous being who attacks people in the night, when they dream, and makes them locos (crazy). This is how the Kuna narrate the story of this particular locura (madness). When human beings, male or female, are struck by madness, they sound the hunting call of the jaguar, sing the song of a bird, or roll on the ground like snakes; they exhibit their sexual organs as monkeys do. Those who are struck by madness are, when the first fit is upon them, suddenly divested of their status as human beings. In fact, this fit of madness and the attendant delirium are always for the Kuna the signs of the presence of an animal spirit (nia) in an individual Kuna's body.

Behind this image, if the fit of delirium are two dream stories, unifyingly repeated, like a stereotype. One relates a hunting dream; the other, a dream of copulation. The hunting dream is a daytime dream and is dreamed with open eyes. When a hunter goes far off into the forest, so the story goes, and hears birdsong without being able to catch sight of the bird and immediately afterward becomes aware of the furious grunting of a boar without either seeing a boar or having tracked it, or the howling of an invisible monkey makes itself heard, he realizes that no matter how cunningly he lies in wait or lays an ambush, he will never come face-to-face with these animals. He knows that this characteristic succession of animal cries, which is suddenly accompanied by a harrowing sense of absence, announces the coming of the Jaguar of the Sky. Suspended from the farthest reaches of the sky, the celestial jaguar cannot be seen when he comes down to hunt in the forest. An animal of metamorphoses and an essentially invisible spirit, he will assume in passing the appearances of other animals. But this does not mean that he will hide himself behind their visual aspect—in the boar's skin, the antlers of a deer in flight, the red feathers of a parrot. He can only match his voice to theirs, make their hunting call, shake the leaves of the trees as monkeys do when they flee before
the hunter. Never will he come in sight. Consequently the chant to cure madness sung by the shamans places the Jaguar of the Sky in the supernatural Village of Darkness. Amid the storms that constantly wreck this place of night, the Jaguar of the Sky is seen setting off in pursuit of his prey, and here again, he is never wholly himself: now a bird sounding like a jaguar, now a jaguar sounding like a bird.

But this mythical being is not just a hunter of animals. He is also and above all a hunter of human beings. This is where the second dream story comes in, the dream of copulation. Invisible in the light of day, the Jaguar of the Sky appears in image form in certain dreams. In such dreams he discards the image of the threatening hunter to assume the equally dangerous guise of an intensely desired sexual partner. The sleeping human being who dreams of the disguised Jaguar of the Sky will fall in love with this vision forever and will be driven mad by it.

In *La memoria ritual*, I have discussed the Kuna "Chant of the Demon" and the complex conception of madness that it unfolds. Let me focus here on a single point: the White Spirit is, in the "Chant of the Demon," identified as one of the manifestations of the Jaguar of the Sky. The White Spirit is, then, not a human being but a dangerous animal, even if his appearance might be human. However, instead of characterizing this manifestation in purely negative terms (as a sort of fairytale monster and a constant threat to human beings), the text qualifies this spirit in a more complex and ambivalent way. The White Spirit is called, in the ceremonial language of chants, a pilator (denizen of the spirits’ village). In the vocabulary of the shaman, this word designates a category that associates persons who have been murdered (or committed suicide) with persons who have committed murder. The White Spirit thus appears to be represented simultaneously as an aggressor and as a victim.

Such ambiguity is neither anecdotal nor peculiar to the Kuna. On the contrary, it seems to be in line with other representations of the white man in the supernatural world found in many American Indian cosmologies: the white man becomes ambiguous when, in social memory, the white man has ceased to be perceived and treated as a real person (a warrior, a trader, and so forth) and is instead represented as a spirit. Let us therefore consider seriously the Kuna representation of the white man through pairs of contradictory terms and try to understand its cultural background. As I have said, the Kuna White Spirit is ritually defined in the shamanistic chants as a denizen of an invisible village situated in the realm of the dead. This transfer of the representation of the white enemy from the "real" world to the place inhabited by the dead is, in Kuna cosmology, crucial. Let us start from the two minimal features that seem to define the White Spirit—it is an inhabitant of a supernatural village, and it is related to the dead—and examine in some detail how the Kuna shamanistic tradition represents this supernatural world and in what terms it defines the nature of a spirit.
Kuna Landscapes: The Living and the Dead

Today, most Kuna live on small islands of coral origin located in the Kuna Yala archipelago along the Atlantic coast of Panama. These inhabited islands, sometimes linked to the coast by a long log bridge, are usually flat, barren, and without natural sources of fresh water. The horizon is marked off on one side by the ocean and on the other by the Darién forest. This spatial arrangement, typical of the entire archipelago, is rigidly divided, according to Kuna mythology, among the living, the dead, the animals, and the trees. The world appears to be apportioned horizontally (north to south and east to west) among these four groups. The mainland is the site of agriculture, hunting, and fresh water; the islands are the place where social life and most rituals occur. On the mainland across from the island where the village of the living is located, at the mouth of the river that supplies fresh water, is an unusual clearing in the forest. Here lies the village of the dead in the “real” world, the cemetery, where funerary rituals are celebrated.

In Kuna society, when an adult dies, the corpse is dressed in the deceased person’s best clothes and put in a hammock with her or his head turned “toward dawn,” the east. A cotton rope is placed in the corpse’s hands in order to help him or her in crossing underworld rivers during the perilous journey to the sky, where the supernatural realm of the dead is located; the rope, it is said, “will serve as a bridge.” The corpse is then covered with a white cloth, and the long funerary chant known as “Way of the Dead” is chanted. The next day, the family of the deceased sets off for the village of the dead at dawn’s first light. After the procession of canoes has landed near the clearing at the mouth of the river, the corpse is laid out in a hut with no walls. Offerings of cooked food and leaves from a banana tree are placed on the body. Then the corpse is covered with dirt, which is then beaten with shovels and baked with the flame of a Brazier until the dirt forms a smooth, compact shell. The brazier will remain at the burial place, and relatives will keep it burning throughout the ritual. Bunches of multicolored feathers are hung from the balsa poles holding up the roof of the hut. To help the dead person in making the voyage to the sky, the living build small ladders out of bamboo and a small boat that will carry the hunting weapons the dead man or woman will need for defense. The realm of the dead is a replica of the world of the living, with one exception. There, beyond the blinding light of the sun, everything is golden. Many Kuna sources state that gold is the color of the realm of the dead. What is invisible here, “shines like gold” there.

At sunset, the participants in the ritual go back to the island, where everyone shares a meal and then takes a communal bath of purification. Two ritual gestures are made before they leave the village of the dead. Red pepper seeds, mixed with water, are placed on the tomb. When the water reaches the buried body, the dead person, it is said, will suddenly open his or her eyes and start traveling, first downward through the eight ethereal layers of the earth, then toward the sky. In addition, a rope (obviously recalling the one put into the hands of the corpse) is stretched across the nearby river and then cut. The
final separation of the living from the deceased person and from the dangerous places that he or she will be traveling through is achieved and explicitly symbolized by this cutting of the rope. The deceased begins the journey to the realm of the dead, and the ritual is over.43

When a child dies, the ritual is much simpler. The body is buried among the living, inside the family hut beneath the hammock where the child slept. The Kuna say that this type of burial will help the family have another child. The dead child’s body still bears the male seed, which will make it germinate like a plant. Whereas the proximity of the corpse of an adult to the living is strongly proscribed, the proximity of the corpse of a child is regarded as positive, since it inseminates the barren (usually sterile) land inhabited by the living. Moreover, quite unexpectedly, the “golden world” is not situated in the sky when the burial of a child is involved, but underground. It is instead a place described, for instance in the “Way of Mu” (the chant devoted to the therapy of difficult childbirth),44 as a “pure golden layer of the earth.”

The rituals associated with the burial of the dead, whether an adult or a child, involve the second, vertical division of Kuna space into layers from the top of the sky to the depths of the underworld. The Kuna underground world comprises eight layers. The four upper layers are the birthplace and lair of the evil illness-bearing animal spirits, the nganen. At the very bottom of the fourth layer is the source of the “golden river” that leads to the four lower layers of the underworld. The “soul”45 of a dead adult Kuna must travel through all these regions to reach the eighth and lowest layer, home of Balsa the Seer, and then ascend to the sky. By burying the dead child beneath the hammock in which she or he slept, not in the village of the dead on the mainland, the Kuna hope to keep the child’s “soul” from having to travel through the perilous world of the spirits. Even though the first underground layer is the home of potentially hostile spirits, it is thought of as being as fertile and populated as the mainland across from the island. Burial in this place transforms the child’s body into a plant that can reproduce and return to a woman’s womb as a “bleeding fruit,” a new child.46

I will make no attempt to study here the symbolism of these two rituals and the underlying conception of death. Let me simply point out that, despite their differences, the rite for the dead child and the rite for the deceased adult are built on the same analogy between the human body and the supernatural world. Buried below her or his hammock, the body of the child transforms into a fruit, and, consequently, the dead child’s mother into a cosmic tree bearing a “bleeding fruit.” Similarly, the crucial sequence of actions in the burial of an adult (covering of the body with a white cloth, which designates the vagina; the rope first given and then cut, like the umbilical cord; the food and banana leaves left on the corpse before burial), we find that the earth that will cover the corpse is gradually transformed into the body of an original Mother.

This double reference to a cosmological body and to a corporeal universe—that is, to the representation of a universe shaped in the form of a human
body—is constitutive of the Kuna shamanistic tradition: if the earth can possess a female sex, the body of a woman can be said to contain “eight layers” like the earth,47 or even “whirlpools” like the ocean. As Mac Chapin has noted, a Kuna shaman may identify a “sun” inside the thorax of a sick man or “a pain coming from the sixth (subterranean) level of the earth.”48 Elsewhere, I have tried to show that the representation of the supernatural world in Kuna shamanistic chants is associated in particular with the representation of pain in the human body.49 The chants devoted to the therapy of illnesses always describe the soul’s journey through the invisible world of the spirits as a metaphor for the experience felt by the sick person. The shamanistic chant, then, primarily describes the state of perceiving without seeing that is the feeling of pain.50 In the Kuna shamanistic tradition, suffering is simultaneously described in cosmological and physiological terms: to suffer is to experience a transformation of the universe involving a dramatic impairment of the natural balance between what is seen and what is perceived by other senses. The physiological aspect is troped as an “inner body” that no visual perception can reach, and the cosmological aspect as an invisible world inaccessible to normal vision. In this tradition, properties of the invisible world (such as “bleeding rivers”) refer to the visible human body, and properties of the invisible inner body (for instance, the pain generated in childbirth) refer to the visible world.

According to this principle, and by virtue of his second sight or knowledge of the chants, the Kuna shaman “sees” the presence of the spirits in the body of an ill person in what is visible in the “real” world. He is able to recognize the signs of pain because he is familiar with a particular kind of landscape—namely, the inner theater of the human body as constituted by the “invisible villages” where the spirits live.51 We can then draw the following conclusion. From the standpoint of Kuna tradition, “invisible” things can be said to be simultaneously “there” (beyond the horizon, in the invisible world) and “here” (among us, in the inhabited village, in the visible world) because they are within us: these invisible landscapes are in the human body. This is illustrated in the chant accompanying the dead person on her or his journey. In the “Way of the Dead,” death itself is strikingly described in these cosmological and physiological terms. Recounting the process through which the body becomes progressively cold, the text says, “The spirits of illness let a wind enter his body... into his body they let a wind enter.” Later, this wind becomes a river that literally runs through the body: “And now the river is penetrating your body.”52

In shamanistic texts, spirits are often said to be simultaneously “here” and “there.” According to Kuna tradition, only a mythical imperative uttered at the beginning of time compels human society to be separated—and even then not in essence but only in the contingency of time—from animals, trees, and the mineral world. The underlying principles of life may continuously pass from one body to another, whether human, animal, or vegetal. Hence, the Kuna universe is constantly threatened by the excessive promiscuity of beings.
and by the disorder that would result from their intermingling. To understand this, one has to understand the process of metamorphoses that dominates Kuna tradition. Every being that inhabits the Kuna universe is of a double nature and always on the verge of a transformation. We will see that, when the representation of the white man is included in this universe, it too is destined for "double metamorphosis." Let me begin tracing this process with two examples of the use of simultaneous and contradictory spatial indications in a single landscape and then see how the description of a landscape relates to the definition of the nature of a spirit.

Spirits, Images, and Voices
Speaking of an ukkurwalu (lit. "light trunk"; plural ukkurwalaganu), a call statuette representing Balsa the Seer, who is both a nola and the chief of all the auxiliary spirits of the shaman, a Kuna specialist told Roany Velásquez, "You see there the image of the Seer. It is here. But its spirit is not here. It lies far away, deep down under the earth." To a Westerner, the meaning of this statement could seem obvious: the image of a spirit simply is not the spirit itself, the statuette is only the visible form of a "being" who is located elsewhere. But the Kuna specialist's comment is founded on an entirely different perspective. What really counts in a representation such as the statuette is not its form. Its most important aspect is the matter from which it is made: the balsa itself. From a shamanistic perspective, balsa is associated with two elements of the visible world: a powerful tree and the extraordinary lightness of the wings of a bird. We will see that this conjunction of contradictory elements is what constitutes the nature of Balsa the Seer in a far clearer way than its outward form.

This is how the "Chant of the Demon" describes the birth of Balsa the Seer:

In this way the Balsa Tree was born. At the source of the river called Macamuk at the beginning of time, only animals existed. They were like human beings, and they lived in the river. The pigs, the peccaries, and the other animals were like human beings. The Father looked all around. Evil beings were everywhere.

The niwana, the evil animal spirits, were already there, well before the Father. The Father came after them. He saw that the world could not stay that way and sent a son of his, who came in order to help the people. At that time, the evil spirits, the niwana, were everywhere; they were blind or legless. The Father then touched his penis, and the sperm came out. In eight days, the sperm, gathered in a cup, became solid and took the form of a nighthawk egg. Eight days later, the egg broke, making a sound similar to the chant of the nighthawk: "Tuu." A man came out, and the Father said, "My son has come. I see now that my great son has come." And the Father thought, and after this he said, "Still I do not have a wife." And the Father then worked the mountains and saw in the distance the great invisible villages. And this is how the Father advised his young son: "You were born from me, the great Father. You will work for me." These were the words the Father addressed to Balsa, the Light Trunk. Then the Father caught in his garment all the invisible
villages, and (the son?) learned to know all the things situated in the earth, just as if he were the one who had worked in order to build them. The Father told Light Trunk: "You will be the chief of all the muchumis. Later you will obey the orders given by the shaman; you will do what he tells you, and you will avoid what he forbids you." 37

This text describes the birth of Balsa the Seer as a sequence of extraordinary metamorphoses. His being seems to result from a series of transgressions of the "normal" way of generation. Balsa is born from a cup of sperm without a mother's participation. Then the cup of sperm becomes a night hawk egg. This bird is interesting here for two reasons: it becomes visible only at sunset, between the realms of day and night; and its chant is explicitly related by the Kuna to the cries of a madman. From the egg of this quasi-human bird, Balsa is born as a man. Immediately after, though, the text calls him a tree. From the cosmological point of view, then, the birth of Balsa is described as the simultaneous presence of a being in three different and separate territories: the realms of the trees, the birds, and the humans. He is neither bird nor tree nor man. He is simultaneously all of them. His nature is to be multiple.

We find the same configuration developed in another part of this chant, where the Village of Transformations is described. "Here the spirits are transformed into beings of every kind, here they are born," says the chant to announce the appearance of this village, meaning that transformation and birth, for a spirit, are the same. The text describes the process of an animal spirit's transformation using a verbal formula—for instance, in these lines: "Here the niagana are transformed into peccaries, the peccaries are there with their black clothes, they cry 'ya-ya-ya'-ya! The peccaries are now changed into niagana, they are transformed into niagana, the niagana are transformed." 38

The text describes the birth of the nia (the evil, animal spirit) through two distinct logical movements: first the invisible spirit is transformed into an animal, which is to say that it takes the visible form of the animal; in the following verse, the visible animals are in turn transformed into invisible spirits. This movement from spirit to animal and from animal to spirit is made possible by two operations. When the spirit's invisible presence is replaced by an animal's appearance, the peccaries (like all the other animals mentioned in the Village of Transformations, including fireflies, butterflies, snakes, deer, and monkeys) dress in "black clothes" and let out their hunting cry. We thus have a sequence of the following kind, which is repeated over and over:

the nia is an animal

the animal is dressed in black clothes

the animal lets out its hunting cry

the animal is a nia

158
By showing an animal in a form different from its usual visible form (always described in the text according to this formula), the text gives the proof—from a Kuna point of view—of the spirit’s transformation into an animal. In this context, the black clothes that conceal from sight the peccary’s fur can only refer to the nocturnal, invisible presence of the Jaguar of the Sky—the greatest of all the evil spirits, and the one who can transform itself into every kind of creature. The introduction of the idea of black clothes enveloping the animal’s body is a way of expressing at one and the same time the invisible, nocturnal character of the spirit and its visible incarnation as a creature of the forest.

When the animal spirit ceases to be recognizable by its visible aspect, its presence will be unequivocally revealed by the reference to its hunting cry in the shaman’s chant. And this reference to a concealed presence revealed by its acoustic image faithfully reproduces the dual mode of appearance of the Jaguar of the Sky: either a nocturnal image plunged into darkness, or an invisible presence that only the auditory hallucination of the animal’s cry makes perceptible to the hunter in the forest.

The simultaneous presence of an invisible spirit and of an animal appearance that hides from the light of day defines, here again, the ontological nature of the spirit. Like Balsa the Seer, the nia reveals its nature in the act of transforming itself. The image of the spirit is situated there [far away in the cosmological space], but another sign of its presence (its voice) is always to be perceived here, close to the human village. In American Indian cosmologies, distinctions drawn between different territories of the universe (earth, sea, sky, underworld) often are a way of establishing different ontological categories. A being is defined by the territory to which it belongs. The shamanistic chants of the Kuna show, however, that a spirit can be defined as a being who possesses several natures and therefore belongs to several cosmological territories. The ambiguous structure of the supernatural space (where certain things can be simultaneously “here” and “there”) becomes then a way to characterize the multiple nature of the supernatural beings inhabiting that space.

In the Kuna shamanistic tradition, the definition of the supernatural is connected with the idea of the conjunction of contradictory features: an animal, a tree, even a human being can become supernatural only if it also acquires the nature of other beings. Its inner contradiction (and the flow of metamorphoses connected to it) is expressed in spatial terms as the simultaneous presence of the same being in different locations of the landscape. In this worldview, not only can a river flow through the body of a suffering woman but also a balsa tree and a peccary can be said to be—in supernatural landscapes, in dreams and after death—invisible “here” and shining like gold “there.” In the same way, the White Spirit can be said to be simultaneously plant and animal, good and bad, magical healer and pathogenic spirit.
Like many other American Indian societies, Kuna shamanistic tradition has chosen the supernatural dimension (with its relationship to the representation of suffering) in which to represent social crises and collective trauma. It is there (in that world which is simultaneously represented as an invisible landscape and as a suffering body) that the real enemies of the Kuna have become also new invisible beings. Ritual recollection of the traumatic past paradoxically implies the renewal of the supernatural. However, the representation of the White Spirit (or, rather, the ritual metamorphosis of the whites into spirits), with its series of opposing connotations (murderer/murdered; human/animal; friend/enemy; and so on) follows exactly the pattern established for the representation of any spirit. The ritual transformation of an enemy into a spirit, far from being reducible to simple “sympathetic magic,” marks just a further step in the same logic of condensation. Thus, these representations, seen from the indigenous point of view, are not ambiguous or “confused” (as they inevitably appear from a Western point of view), they are negative in a complex way.

While having the same complexity (the conjunction of contradictory features) that defines any Kuna supernatural being, these representations do convey “realistic” indications concerning the nature of the white enemy. In other words, far from being symptoms of a loss of identity (or of an imminent submission to “foreign” or “modern” values), these representations indicate that the social memory of the Kuna is very much alive. Ambiguity or, more precisely, the capacity to represent individual and social crises through paradox—a term by which we define the coexistence of contrary, conflicting aspects of the same situation—is a strength, not a weakness, of Kuna ritual images.

From a more general point of view, I wish to suggest that there are at least two ways of constructing social memory. One works through the narration (and continuous renewal) of a set of stories. The other, often linked to the elaboration of ritual practices, tends to make a number of relatively stable images more and more complex, increasingly loaded with meaning, and more persistent in time. Two aspects of this last way to produce social memory have emerged here. First, these images are constructed within a ritual context. They are to be regarded, in a Warburgian perspective, as steps in a sequence of ritual representations: Kuna “white” statuettes are unthinkable without the chants and without the elaborate cosmology that the chants evoke. Second, the representation of the white man is always realized only as a single, I would even say contingent, aspect of the Kuna supernatural world. Spirits are “white” among other things. To become “white” is only one of a spirit’s possible manifestations, and spirits take on this form in keeping with their fundamental essence, which is to be continually engaged in ritual-oriented metamorphoses.

There is little doubt that the emergence in Kuna shamanistic practices of the White Spirit as a possible manifestation refers to the long series of violent conflicts that have opposed the Kuna to the aggressors from the West. However, once inserted in the Kuna ritual tradition, stories of the traumatic past collapse and condense in complex images. Two processes seem to be at work in the elaboration of these images: one tends to obliterate the external facts to
allow the white man to be inserted into an indigenous conceptual frame, namely, the cosmology of the Kuna supernatural world; the other uses the ambiguities of Kuna cosmology to represent a salient aspect of the newcomers, namely, their association with suffering in the visible world. The result is an elaborate (and ritually powerful) "engram" of ritual tradition, and a significant part of social memory.

The study of the several ways in which the past can cause pain in the present was fundamental to Freud’s early work. In a sense, Freud conceived of the symptom itself as a symbol of the past. The way the ambiguous memory of the white man establishes itself in Kuna tradition shows a dynamic similar to the one described by Freud for the psychological elaboration of the trauma. These images work as mnemonic traces; they evoke the traumatic past through the shamanistic exploration of suffering, but they make it present without representing it in narrative.

The study of crucial images selected from the Kuna shamanistic tradition suggests how a complex symbol, rooted in the representation of a traumatic experience, can work as the mnemonic trace of an ever-returning past. A ritually recollected image of the past can strictly follow the definition of trauma: a reminiscence that, while refusing to fully emerge to consciousness, equally refuses to either find its way out or fall into oblivion. The images of whites, with their big hats, necklaces, painted shirts and trousers, roughly sculpted in balsa by Kuna shamans, once replaced in the supernatural landscape that situates them simultaneously “here in the body” and “there beyond the horizon,” reveal that tension better than any story.

Notes

2. My translation; Paul Ricoeur, Temps et récit, vol. 1, L'intrigue et le récit historique, Collection POINTS (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), 9; “réfigurer l’expérience du temps.” Ricoeur writes, for instance, “le temps ne devient humain que dans la mesure où il est articulé sur un mode narratif, et le récit n’atteint sa signification première, que quand il devient une condition de l’existence temporelle” [time becomes part of human experience only when it is formulated in a narrative way, the narration, similarly, only reveals its deep meaning when it is seen as a condition for human existence in time] (p. 105) [my translation].


5. One of the most common objections to the study of images in this context concerns what could be called the peculiar semiotic poverty of the iconic language. "Never mistake a drawing for a text," warned E. H. Gombrich, rightly, in his famous book The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 362. The way to produce the 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. As a consequence, as I have argued elsewhere, communication through signs tends to be easy and accurate, while communication through images is difficult, always arbitrary, inevitably vague; see Carlo Severi, "Kuna Picture Writing: A Study in Iconography and Memory," in Mari Lyn Salvador, ed., The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997). One of the reasons invoked for this vagueness is the impossibility, for images, to express a crucial aspect of language: negation. If nothing negative can be expressed in iconic terms, then images are to be considered logically too weak to become the support of any social memory.


9. The works of George Devereux and Gregory Bateson are, for different reasons, the most accomplished and competent attempts to develop an approach to the study of social facts that could enrich Freud's ideas. See, in particular, Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology (San Albans, Australia: Paladin, 1972); George Devereux, Ethno-psychoanalysis: Psychoanalysis and Anthropology as Complementary Frames of Reference (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978); and George Devereux, Basic Problems of Ethnopsychiatry, trans. Basia Miller Gulati and George Devereux (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).

10. Kuna statuettes representing white persons were collected in Panama before 1918 by C. L. Fitz-William, an American chemical and mining engineer, and in Kuna Yala in June 1927 by the Swedish anthropologist Esland Nordenskiöld. Fitz-William's collection is at the Field Museum in Chicago; see, for example, Mari Lyn Salvador, ed., The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama, exh. cat. (Los
Cosmology, Crisis, and Paradox


14. See, for examples, Nordenskiöld, An Historical and Ethnological Survey (note 10), 345, 426.

15. I will not address in this paper the question of sexual differentiation of the White Spirit. Let me remark, however, that spirits, in Kuna mythology, are usually supposed to come “in pairs,” in both male and female incarnations. For a good illustration of this aspect of Kuna mythology, see Nordenskiöld, An Historical and Ethnological Survey (note 10), 389–93.

16. See, for instance, Norman Macpherson Chapin, “Curing among the San Blas Kuna” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1983), 93: “the muchugana [fetal figurines or statuettes carved in balsa wood] are usually about a foot tall, and almost invariably are carved to look like non-Indians.” Chapin worked with Kuna specialists between 1971 and 1976.


21. Taussig, Mimesis (note 17), 252, 251.
22. Taussig, Mimesis (note 17), 252.
23. Taussig, Mimesis (note 17), 238, 253.
26. Since this kind of representation has passed generally unnoticed in the ethnography of the American Indian societies, the Kuna case is probably not an isolated one. Franz Boas witnessed among the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest coast, during the winter of 1895–96, two “play performances” of potlatches in which Europeans were impersonated and derided; see Franz Boas, “The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians,” in Report of the U.S. National Museum for 1895 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1897). Almost sixty years before Boas, writing while among the Osage on a tour of the prairies in 1832, Washington Irving noted that “the Indians that I have had an opportunity of seeing in real life…are by no means the stoics that they are represented; taciturn, unbounding, without a tear or a smile…. They are great mimics and buffoons, also, and entertain themselves excessively at the expense of the whites with whom they have associated”; see Washington Irving, “A Tour on the Prairies,” in idem, The Works of Washington Irving, vol. 6, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, Crayon Miscellany, author’s rev. ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1863), 51–52.
28. Basso, Portraits (note 27), 76.
30. This cartoon is reprinted in Basso, Portraits (note 27), 62.
31. Of the “joking performances” studied by Basso, 72 percent were performed “by men who were drinking with friends and relatives”; see Basso, Portraits (note 27), 32.
32. Basso, Portraits (note 27), 14 (emphasis mine).
33. Basso, Portraits (note 27), 14, 80.
34. Basso, Portraits (note 27), 81–82.
35. The notion of “foregrounding” as an aspect of communication has been defined as a way to signal “as relevant now a particular conceptual framework for understanding what is said and done”; see Basso, Portraits (note 27), 12.
37. Kuna Indians live today in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama. The population of Kuna land (Tule Nega or Kuna Yala) is about twenty-seven to thirty thousand persons who speak a language traditionally associated with the Chibcha family; see Nils M. Holmer, Critical and Comparative Grammar of the Cuna Language (Göteborg: Göteborgs Etnografiska Museet, 1947); and Nils M. Holmer, Cuna Christomathy (Göteborg: Göteborgs Etnografiska Museet, 1931). A small Kuna group, which still rejects all contact with the white man, lives in the Chocó region of the Darién forest, near the Colombian border. Essentially, the Kuna are tropical farmers. In his
brief historical survey, David Bond Stout speculated that Kuna society, one of the first to come in contact with white men after the discovery of the American continent, was "heavily stratified, and divided into four classes: leaders, nobles, citizens and slaves"; see David Bond Stout, San Blas Cuna Acculturation: An Introduction (New York: Viking Fund, 1947, reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint, 1964). Political power today is held by the onnab, an assembly of all the adult males in the village, supported by a varying number of elected leaders (kadilagas). The Kuna kinship system is bilocal, i.e., local and founded on strict group endogamy; see James Howe, "Communal Land Tenure and the Origin of Descent Groups among the San Blas Cuna," in Mary W. Helms and Franklin O. Loveland, eds., Frontier Adaptations in Lower Central America (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976); and James Howe, The Kuna Gathering: Contemporary Village Politics in Panama (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986).

A general survey of Kuna literature is to be found in Fritz W. Kramer, Literature among the Cuna Indians (Göteborg: Göteborgs Etnografiska Museet, 1970); James Howe, Joel Sherzer, and Marc Chapin, Cantos y oraciones del congreso cuna (Panama: Editorial Universitaria, 1980); Joel Sherzer, Kuna Ways of Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1983); Joel Sherzer, Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990); and Carlo Severi, La memoria rituale: Folla e immagine del Bianco in una tradizione sciaramanica amerindiana (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1993), which has been published in Spanish as La memoria ritual: Locura e imagen del blanco en una tradición chamánica amerindia, trans. Ricardo Pochtar (Quito, Ecuador: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1996).

38. See Severi, La memoria rituale (note 37), 49-174.

39. In the shamanistic tradition, the murderer and the murdered person are both potentially dangerous. On this point, see Severi, "Image d'étranger" (note 24).

40. A comparative study of this representation of the white man among American Indians is still to be done. Some interesting indications concerning the Amazonian groups can be found in Philippe Eriksen, La griffe des aînés: Marquage du corps et démargages ethniques chez les Matis d’Amazonie (Paris: Peters, 1996).

41. An earlier draft of this section was presented at “Totenriten und Jenseitslandschaften” (Death Rituals and Supernatural Landscapes), a conference organized by the Arbeitskreis Religionswissenschaft of the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, May 1596.

42. A version of the “Seckan Ikala,” in Kuna with a Spanish translation, is in Nils M. Holmer and Henry Wassén, Dos cantos shamanísticos de los indios cunas (Göteborg: Göteborgs Etnografiska Museet, 1963).

43. "After the mourners have gone, the last act of the grieving is to fasten a string to one of the protruding hammock stakes and lead it down to and across the river and tie it on the other side, the first person coming up or down the river must cut it; see Stout, San Blas Cuna Acculturation (note 37), 40. This rite of stringing and cutting the rope is repeated for three consecutive days after the death, as well as on the ninth day of the first month following the death and on the thirtieth day of the month for six months following the death. Anílto Prestán Simón adds that "a number of shots" are fired with a gun, "to let people know that the ritual is finished," and he also
mentions two aspects of this ritual that I will not study here: sharing a meal with the deceased person, and offering cacao beans to the spirits; see Arnulfo Prestán Simón, *El uso de la chicha y la sociedad kuna* (Mexico: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1975), 105, 106. For more details on this ritual, see also Severi, “The Invisible Path” (note 20).

44. This chant was published first in English and Kuna, in an incomplete version, in Nils M. Holmer and Henry Wassén, *Mu-igala; or, The Way of Muu* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1947), and then in a new, complete version in Nils M. Holmer and Henry Wassén, *The Complete Mu-Ikala in Picture Writing* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1953).


49. See Chapin, “Curing” (note 16), 216, 217.

50. See Severi, “Le chemin” (note 45); and Severi, “The Invisible Path” (note 20).


52. See “Serkan Ikala” (note 42), vv. 54–56.

53. “Serkan Ikala” (note 42), vv. 54–55, 130–32.

54. Velásquez, “El canto chamanico” (note 48), 735.

55. “To work” in this case means “to have sexual intercourse with.”

56. The *nuchumar* are the auxiliary spirits of the Kuna shaman, generally (though not always) representing trees or vegetal spirits; *nuchumar* is another word for *nuchugana*.

57. I collected this text, here translated from the Kuna, during my 1982 mission in the Kuna village of Mulatupu.
