HERE AND THERE:
SUPERNATURAL LANDSCAPES IN
KUNA SHAMANISTIC TRADITION
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"Look there: the village of transformations appears. Here the spirits are transformed into beings of every kind, here they are born, here they become younger, ... here they can become like us": these words, spoken by the chief of the auxiliary spirits of the shaman in the Chant of the Demon give a first vivid description of the supernatural world as it is conceived in the kuna shamanistic tradition. Spirits, and supernatural beings in general, live in "invisible villages."

These villages – once explained to me a renowned kuna specialist:

"are strange places in the forest, scarcely visible, made like little mounds of stones. They conceal ground that is full of cracks and holes. Through these holes the spirits ascend to the surface layer of the earth. One has only to touch a village of that sort to die straight away."

1 Kuna Indians live today in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama. Kunaland (Tule Nola or Kuna Yala) numbers from 27,000 to 30,000 persons, who speak a language traditionally associated with the Chibcha family (Holmer 1947 and 1951). A small Kuna group, which still rejects all contact with the white man, lives in the Chucunaque region of the Darien forest, near the Colombian border. Essentially, the Kuna are tropical farmers. In his brief historical survey, Stout speculates 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." Political power today is held by the onmakket, an assembly of all the adult males in the village, supported by a varying number of elected leaders (salakkan). The Kuna kinship system is bilineal, exogamous and founded on strict group endogamy (Howe 1976 and 1986). A general survey of the kuna literature in Kramer, Chapin, Howe and Sherzer; Sherzer 1983 and 1990.

2 Novalis, Fragment 20, p. 8.


4 On these comments, Severi 1982, pp. 33–34.
In fact, many of these villages are buried under the earth, in the forest. But others are situated in the sky, or hidden in the depths of the ocean. All of them are very dangerous places. Ordinary people cannot perceive them, at least during their life. They can only become vaguely aware of their threatening presence. Only seers and shamans can really see these villages, when, absorbed in their visions or reciting a chant, they travel "beyond the horizon." In the description given by the shamanistic chants, these villages are situated "far away," generally toward the East. The formula very often used to mention them is "there where the sun's canoe raises," as in another passage of the Chant of the Demon where they appear at the horizon, "in the open sea."

1. In the distance, there where the sun's canoe rises, the village of the sea appears
2. Old Balsamwood, the seer,* looks towards the village
3. The village is seen floating in the open sea
4. In the distance, the village that rises sinks slightly into the sea
5. In the depths of the sea, the village sinks slightly, the village re-appears on the surface
6. Borne away by the waves, the village rises slightly, the village sinks slightly in the waters
7. Old Balsamwood, the seer, looks into the distance up there, towards the top of the village
8. Old Balsamwood, the seer, looks into the distance, there where the sun's canoe rises
9. A great mist covers the place, there where the sun's canoe rises
10. Old Balsamwood, the seer, looks into the distance, to where the sun's canoe appears

These "villages" are also usually described as the "home" of a number of supernatural beings, like flying jaguars, legless animals or frightful sharks. Without apparent contradiction, however, these supernatural villages are also said to be "very close" to the villages where men and women live. The spirits that inhabit them, as it is said in the first passage we have quoted from the Chant of the Demon, can easily take our own appearance and come to live among human beings. A crucial feature of their power of metamorphosis is that they can, in any moment, take a human appearance.

In fact, the Kuna supernatural landscape is not only described as a world that awaits every human being after death. It is believed to be also an invisible dimension always immanent (though hard to perceive) in every day life. Any serious manifestation of pain, any misfortune, any illness opens its doors. A central theme of the tradition is that the world "of the spirits," though invisible, is never to be forgotten. It is here as well as it is there: as present and close to human beings as the real landscape.

In this paper I will try to study this double aspect of the representation of the Kuna supernatural space, which, in shamanistic tradition, is particularly developed. But let us start by asking a more general question: what kind of representation a supernatural landscape is?

Anthropologists are used to consider a supernatural landscape as a section of a general representation of the world, made to show how people "represent" the space they live in as well as its relationship to a "metaphysical world."

Let us take an example drawn from the remarkable work of Johannes Wilbert on the Warao: another shamanistic tradition comparable in many ways to that of the Kuna. According to Wilbert's detailed ethnography, the Warao conceive themselves as living in the center of the terrestrial disk, and at the foot of the world axis that connects the earth with the zenith and the cosmic vault. The earth is surrounded by water that extends to the horizon... Submerged in the ocean, and encircling the earth is the Snake of Being, a sea monster that adopts a uroboros position. A series of concentric circles marks the abode of other supernatural beings, among them the Lesser Gods and the Mother of the forest. Then every cardinal point has its own God: Toad at the South, Butterfly at the North; Bird and Macaw for the two equinoxes.9

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* On seers and shamans in Kuna tradition, see Severi 1987.
* The name of this spirit is, in kuna Nele Ukkuricar, which literally means Light Trunk, the Seer. He is always addressed in the text by the term "kulu" (literally "uncle"), which applies to elderly and respected persons. The term Nele ("seer") designates 1. The cultural heroes of the Kuna mythology; 2. the diviner to whom the task of establishing a diagnosis is entrusted; 3. The auxiliary spirits of the shaman-chanters, represented by wooden statuettes during the ritual recitation of the chants. On these topics, see Severi ibidem.
* The literal meaning of the kuna word kulu, here translated "village," as often in the anthropological literature devoted to the Kuna, is "enclosure," "enclosing wall." The enclosing wall of the kuna traditional hut is in fact called also kulu. On these matter see for instance Herrera, Cardale and de Schirmpff.
As shown in Fig. 1, every being conceived in the Warao Weltanschaung finds its location and displays its function. Naturally, we are not concerned here with the details of this complex conception of the universe, so precisely analyzed by Wilbert. Let us focus instead on the image itself, and on the function it assumes in anthropological discourse. In fact, this particular kind of cosmological maps, are by nature static, classificatory images. They are made to clarify distinctions, that usually simplify and translate in visual terms, as it is often said, an indigenous discourse about the structure of the universe. What happens in the course of this translation in visual terms? A number of remarks, while looking at the example shown in Fig. 1, comes to the mind: from what point of view this representation is traced? Who, in the Warao society, holds this point of view? This image certainly contributes to our knowledge of an indigenous view of the Warao cosmological space. Undoubtedly, it "catches" something of the indigenous con-

ception. However, it is evidently drawn following Western criteria (geometry, partial perspective view, symmetry in a flat space, etc.). Is this particular style of graphic representation (or translation in images) really faithful to the categories of the indigenous discourse? Can it possibly make us misinterpret or miss some aspect of it?

Many aspects of this process of translation (and in particular the relations here established between the image and its anthropological comment) would deserve a critical analysis. Let us consider a first point: an image of this kind, being by definition the representation of an order, tends to avoid the representation of superpositions, or ambiguities. It hides possible conflicts, changes, transformations of beings into other beings. Consequently it can often lead one to believe that the thought operations underlying these representations of the cosmological space are confined to mere classifications, and only based on static distinctions. Cosmological distinctions (the Earth, the Sea, the Upper and Lower Sky, for instance) become a way for establishing ontological categories: the Beings of the Earth, the Inhabitants of the Sea, etc.

I would like to show that this kind of imagery, though useful in a first phase of the ethnographic description, can be misleading, and make us mistake the logical status of the image (drawn, one has to remember, by an anthropologist) for the logic of what it seeks to represent: the mental representations typical of a "primitive" thought. If we avoid this simplification, and look to images made by Indians and not by anthropologists, supernatural landscapes will appear on the contrary as polythetic, condensed and quite complex representations. It is the nature of this complexity, as it emerges in the Kuna shamanistic tradition, that I would like to explore in this paper.

Landslides: 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, often linked to the coast by a long log bridge, are usually flat and barren. The horizon is marked off on one side by the ocean and on the other by the Darien forest. Farming and hunting supply the Indians’ main livelihood and are performed entirely in the forest on the mainland. Fishing has been practised only recently, often in the area within the coral reef that protects the inhabited islands from the Atlantic, making the shallow water around them particularly calm and navigable. Often densely populated, the villages are made up of large reed huts built one next to the other, and housing the extended Kuna uxorilocal family. As described by the Kuna, this spatial arrangement, typical of the entire archipelago,
is rigidly divided among the Living, the Dead, the Animals and the Great Trees. Thus, 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, usually possessing no water sources, are the place where social life and rituals occur. On the mainland in front of the island, at the mouth of the river which supplies fresh water, there is an unusual clearing in the forest. Here lies the village of the dead. Thus, the dead inhabit the same territory as the animal spirits who are the constant source of illness and death. In some cases, dead persons might become themselves spirits. In fact, there is no place in Kuna tradition for the concept of natural death. Those who die have been attacked by a hostile spirit. They are always victims of revenge or a fatal error. The forest is a difficult, perilous place; it conceals (as we know) the "villages" inhabited by spirits who attack men if they venture too close. These spirits kill such men, drive them mad, or make them ill. A village of this kind can materialize on a rocky cliff overhanging the ocean, under a thornbush, or in a swamp. But the more familiar "spirit village" (the one known to everyone) is the cemetery, the "village" built to celebrate the funerary rituals. Let us describe briefly two of these rituals.

In kuna society, when an adult or elderly person dies, the corpse is clothed with the best cloths of the deceased person, and put on a hammock, with her or his head turned "toward dawn," the East. A cotton rope is put in the hands of the dead person, "in order to help" him or her in crossing the underworld rivers during his or her travel to the sky. The rope, it is said, "will serve as a bridge." The corpse is then covered with a white cloth, and a long funerary chant, the Serkan Ikala, is chanted. The day after, the family of the deceased moves to the village of the dead, at the first light of dawn. After the procession of canoes has reached the mouth of the river, the corpse is laid out in a hut with no walls, and buried. On the body, some offerings of cooked food and some leaves of banana tree are left. Then the corpse is covered with dirt, which is beaten with shovels and baked with the flame of a brazier until it forms a smooth, compact layer. The brazier will remain at the burial place, where relatives will keep it burning constantly. Bunches of multicoloured feathers hang from the balsawood poles that hold up the roof. They accompany the corpse on its perilous voyage to the sky, where the final realm of the dead is situated. To facilitate this voyage, the living also build small ladders in bamboo and a small boat, which contains the hunting weapons the dead man or woman will need to defend him or herself. Like the village that represents it, the realm of the dead is an exact replica of the world of the living, with one exception. There, beyond the blinding light of the sun, everything is golden. The Kuna say that the gold is the color of the realm of the dead. What is invisible here, is "shining as gold" there.

At sunset, the participants at the ritual go back to the island, where everyone shares a meal and then has a communal bath of purification. Two ritual gestures have to be accomplished before leaving the village of the Dead. First, some seeds of red pepper, 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 travelling: first downward, through the eight chthonic layers of the earth, and then toward the sky. At the same time, the performers of the ritual will tend a rope (obviously recalling the one that has just been put into the tomb) on both sides of the nearby river, and cut it. The final separation from the deceased person, and from the dangerous "villages" that he or she will have to visit is achieved and explicitly symbolized by this cutting of the rope. The travel of the dead person begins, and the ritual is over.

When a child dies, the ritual becomes much simpler. The body is buried in inhabited earth, inside the family hut, beneath the hammock where the living 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. Thus, whereas proximity with an adult corpse is strongly precluded, close contact with the child inseminates the barren land (usually sterile) inhabited by the living. This in loco burial introduces to a second repartition of kuna space along vertical lines: from the top of the sky to the depths of the underworld. Here, quite unexpectedly, the "golden world" is no more situated in the sky. It becomes instead an underground place, and is described, for instance in the Way of Mu (the chant devoted to the therapy of difficult childbirth), as a "pure golden layer of the earth."

10 Prestán p. 168.
11 A version of this chant, in kuna and Spanish has been published in Holmer and Wassén 1963.
In fact, the kuna underground world is made of eight layers. The four upper layers are the birthplace and hideout of the evil illness-bearing spirits, the mias. At the very bottom of the fourth layer lies the source of the „golden river“ which leads to the lower layers of the earth. It is through these regions that a dead Indian’s soul must travel to reach the eighth and lowest layer, home of the Old Balsawood, the Seer, and then ascend to the sky. By burying the child beneath the hammock in which she or he always slept, the Indians hope to keep her or his „soul“ from having to enter the perilous world of the spirits, through which the sick Indian’s soul must always travel after death. Indeed, even though the first underground layer may be potentially hostile, it is thought to be as fertile and populated as the mainland across from the island. Burial into this place transforms the child’s body into a plant which can reproduce and return to a woman’s womb as a „bleeding fruit“:

For a long space of time fruits have grown on you, your fruits are all red
For a long space of time the red bird Nalukukule has entered into your fruits

says the shaman in the chant devoted to difficult childbirth. In another memorable passage from this text, the mother is then described as a „well-rooted tree-woman“:

In the pure golden layer of the earth the root holds up its trunk as deep as the golden layer your root is planted solidly (in the earth); ...

(your root goes) ... as far as the golden layer (of the earth) your root transforms (everything) in pure gold...

One by one, the animals climb your spotted branches, every single one of your spotted branches emits juices, dripping with blood ...

When the North wind blows, when ... it blows through you

Your branches curve and bend down with the wind, beaten by the wind your limbs send forth a piercing sound like ropes on the white man’s silver boat

The symbolism of these two rituals (and the background conception of death involved in them) is particularly complex, and we cannot here ex-

15 Holmer and Wässen (see footnote 13) vv. 164–65.
16 Ibidem v. 183/187. Here I correct the Holmer and Wässen translation (the „foreigner’s boat“). The kuna word waak used here only applies to Whites.

amine it in detail. However, there is little doubt that, despite their differences both the rites, the one devoted to the child and the other to the elderly person, are built on the same analogy between the human body and the supernatural world. Through the burial underneath his or her hammock, the body of the child transforms itself in a fruit, and consequently the mother in a cosmic tree bearing a „bleeding fruit.“

The other ritual, devoted to the elderly persons, is built on the same symbolic basis. If we consider the crucial sequence of actions which characterize the burial of an adult, (the covering of the body with a white cloth, the rope first given and then cutted, the offering of a banana leaf, left on the corpse before burial) we find that the earth that will cover (or maybe „embrace“) the corpse of the deceased person is gradually transformed in the body of an original Mother. A series of indications go in this direction. We have seen that the corpse is „given“ a cotton rope and is then covered with a white cloth. In the symbolic language of the chants this „white cloth“ (posed on the corpse just after death) always designates the vagina. Here are two examples drawn from the Mu Ikals:

From the midst of the woman’s white cloth a human being descends

Her secret white cloth blossoms like a flower

It is to be noted that in the same text the female sex can „expand“ and literally become the sex of the Earth:

The sick woman body lies weak
When the spirits light up the Mw’s way,91 exudations run over, all like blood
Her exudations drip down below the hammock, all like blood, all red
The inner white cloth extends toward the bosom of the earth ...
Into the bosom of the earth her exudations gather in drops, all like blood, all red

Another symbolic object used in the ritual, the rope given to the dead „to be used as a bridge“ in order to cross the rivers of the chthonic world is very often in the chants compared (and indeed assimilated) to an umbilical cord. As we shall see later, when the Flying Jaguars descend from

17 Ibidem v. 90.
18 Ibidem v. 432.
19 Another expression to designate the female sex.
20 Ibidem v. 86–92.
the sky to go and hunt human beings, they are suspended to a rope, which is both called kewlökakar (rope given to the dead) and simuw (om-bilical cord). 21

The final "cutting" of this rope, which at the end of the ritual marks the separation of the deceased person from the living, might then be interpreted as a return to the body of the mother, or even as a re-birth of the person after death. A clear allusion to this re-birth as a son or daughter of the Mother Earth is the plantain (or banana) leaf left on the body in the burial site. A plantain leaf (itself a metaphor for the female sex) is, from a mythological point of view, precisely where the first human beings were born, and is still used today to put the baby on at the childbirth. The final part of the Way of Mu, is very explicit on this point:

Into the bosom of the earth the child is descending
Into the bosom of the pale plantain leaf the child is descending
It reddens the whole plantain leaf 22

All these indications are clearly gathered in a beautiful myth collected by Prestân and devoted to the origin of the rivers:

In the ancient times, our Father started to think: "What am I to do?" Then the Father thought of making the Mother menstruate. He did so opening with a knife her sex. In this way, when the Mother started having menstruations, rivers and streams appeared on the earth. Then the Father made a plantain leaf using the Mother pubis, for the newborn child to sit on it. For this reason, the women in the Kuna islands always put the newly born baby on a plantain leaf. 23

In fact, this double reference to a cosmological body and to a corporeal universe 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, 24 or even "whirlpools", like rivers and streams, that are visible parts of the Mother. In other studies devoted to this shamanistic tradition, I have tried to show, that this representation of the supernaturial world in the Kuna chants is associated in particular to the representation of pain. 25 The chants devoted to the therapy of illnesses, always describe the soul's journey through the invisible world of the spirits as a metaphor of the experience felt by the sick person. The shamanistic journey then primarily describes that state of perceiving without seeing which is the feeling of pain. 26 In this context, 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 dimension is described as an "inner body" that no visual perception can reach, and the cosmological one as a world inaccessible to normal perception. In this perspective, properties of invisible world (like the "bleeding rivers" of the myth we have quoted) refer to the human body, and invisible properties of the body (for instance the pain generated by delivering in the Way of Mu) refer to the external world.

According to this principle, and by virtue of his second sight or of his knowledge of the chants, the Kuna shaman sees the hidden presence of the spirits in the body of an ill person behind what is visible in the world. He is able to interpret the signs of pain because he is familiar with a particular kind of landscape: the inner theatre of the human body constituted by the "invisible villages" where the spirits live. If we refer to the chant accompanying the dead person in her/his travel, the Serkan Ikala, 27 we discover that death itself is strikingly described in these cosmological/physiological terms. In order to explain why the eyes of the dying man are becoming pale, 28 and to describe the process through which the body becomes progressively cold, the text says:

54. The spirits of illness let a wind enter in his body
55. The spirits of the Crocodile, the Seer
56. In his body they let a wind enter 29

Later, this wind becomes a river which penetrates literally into the body:

130. Beside the river, they call the female-spirits that bring about the cold.
131. They call now the female spirits of the black clouds.
132. And now the river is penetrating into your body 30

21 Gómez and Severi vv. 145 and 149. See also infra pp. 14–15. This meaning is confirmed also by the symbolism used in the female initiation rituals, where a "cotton rope" designates an umbilical cord (Prestân p. 52). In another chant, the one relating the origins of Light Trunk, the "threads" are always identified with the genital matrix of the First Mother, Velásquez p. 702 and following.

22 Holmer and Wassén (see footnote 13) vv. 640–642.


25 Velásquez p. 702 and following.


28 Serkan Ikala, int. Holmer and Wassén (see footnote 11).

29 Serkan Ikala v. 35 and following.

30 Serkan Ikala v. 54/56.

31 Serkan Ikala v. 130/132.
We can then draw a first conclusion. In the perspective of Kuna tradition, "invisible" things can be simultaneously "there" (in the forest, in the depths of the ocean, in the sky), and "here" (among us, in the inhabited village) because they are within us: these invisible landscapes lie in the human body.

Let us now come back to the landscape and to the contrast between the visible and the invisible. We have seen that the kuna universe is conceived as a dense mosaic of differing, antagonistic territories, shared by the Living, the Dead, the Animal, Vegetal (and Rocks) spirits. A cosmological map designed by the great E. Nordenskiöld, the pioneer of kuna studies, illustrates clearly this vision of the cosmological order:

![Cosmological Map](image)

Fig. 2. The structure of the kuna universe according to E. Nordenskiöld. The superficial layer (A) is opposed to the Chthonic world (B). The letter S marks the journey of the Sun in the celestial vault. (From Nordenskiöld 1938)

In this image, the state of the kuna cosmos seems to be clearly described: the underground world, with its "villages" inhabited by the spirits layer after layer, appears to be an orderly representation of the organization of the mythological universe. Humans belong to the earth, spirits to the chthonic world. In order to reach the sky, the dead person's soul has to cross, layer after layer, the underworld. The drawing traced by Nordenskiöld can obviously be criticized in the same terms we have proposed for the one devoted to Warao cosmology.

Yet there is something true about it: in Kuna cosmology a being is defined by the territory to which it belongs. This particularly applies to the distinction between human and non-human beings. While our culture seems to establish a continuity between the human, animal, vegetal and mineral realms in terms of an homogeneous corporeal nature, the Indians the physical situation of beings seems to be marked rather by an irreversible discontinuity. In the Kuna world each being has its territory, and these territories are arranged on the pattern of an archipelago of separate islands rather than on that of a single structure organized along hierarchical lines. On the other hand, where Western thought establishes a radical discontinuity between man and the outside world, that is to say, at the spiritual level (or, in modern versions of the same idea, at the psychological and linguistic level), the Indians see only continuity and continuous exchange (realized, for instance, precisely by the performance of rituals). This continuity always leads to the representation of the realm of nature in indigenous thought as a culture. According to the Kuna, animals marry among themselves in accordance with their customs; they build their villages in the forest; and speak their own language. Neither organized social life nor the fact of speaking a language (and assigning it the status of a form of knowledge) can give the Indian a privileged place in the world. What gives to any being its own specificity is, from the Kuna point of view, its territory: the space to which it belongs in universe.

Nonetheless, once we leave this external point of view (which is here the point of view of the anthropologist), and we enter the supernatural landscapes described in detail by the kuna chants and drawings, clear-cut distinctions between categories of beings become less clear, and what we could call ontological ambiguities appear everywhere. What emerges is the representation of a complex, even contradictory space, where supernatural beings, far from being only defined by the territory they occupy in the universe, can simultaneously belong to different ontological levels. This is the case in the symbolism of death rituals and chants, where locations "in the world" and "in the body" can be simultaneous. This aspect, however, is developed further in kuna tradition and goes beyond the analogy established between the body and the world.

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53 Stout writes however, that also the sky has eight layers. The Kuna conceive of the world as an earth-plane on which people live, with a heaven of eight invisible layers above and an underworld of eight layers below... Stout p. 40.
We have seen that the kuna supernatural landscape is organized following two axes: a vertical one (sky/underworld) and an horizontal one, reflecting, in metaphysical terms, the opposition between the island and the mainland. However, in all the Kuna traditional sources that we have been studying, both the horizontal and the vertical limits of the world designate the dimension where the spirits live. The two axes earth/sky and island/forest seem to be equivalent, even interchangeable: in many cases what „faces toward the east” is also located in the underworld. In The Way of Mu, as well as in other shamanistic chants the spirits are said to live both at the „interior of the earth” and „beyond the horizon”. In the Chant of the Demon, when the shaman’s spirits are preparing themselves for their search of the lost soul, they peer „beyond the cardinal points”, thereby seeing the underground world of the spirits. The two axes, horizontal and vertical, of the cosmological space live side-by-side and complement each other in this representation of the supernatural landscape. Here we find an aspect of the indigenous conception of the space that neither the cosmological schema drawn by Nordenskiöld, with its useful but limited distinctions in different „parts” of the world, nor the symbolic analogy between „world” and „body” can help us to understand. How is it conceivable that „some” aspects of the world are situated simultaneously in different points of the universe: beyond the horizon and in the underground world? What kind of beings can inhabit this ambiguous ontological dimension? What is the meaning, if there is any, of this double location in space? Before we try to answer this question, let us see some more examples of this double locations, apparently expressed in pure geographical terms.

During a dialogue with the venezuelan anthropologist R. Velasquez, the kuna chief and shaman Odis Navas, while underlining the importance of the fifth layer under the earth, remarked that

„the sky lies underneath, after the eight layer of the earth,”

and indeed a pictographic passage of the Chant of the demon that I have collected confirms and illustrates this point. A landscape is seen here accompanied by its inverted image:

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93 Velasquez pp. 719–720.
In the same perspective, the Serkan Ikala very clearly states that clouds can be found “at the interior of the earth”:

1. You . . . the clouds
2. You have again obscured the interior of the earth
3. You see, I speak to you
4. You the black clouds
5. You have again covered the interior side of the earth”

In fact, even if no correspondence between body and cosmos is involved here, it should be remembered that these spatial indications (according to the principle that everything is defined by the territory to which it belongs) are always related to the definition of the nature of a spirit. “The sky lies after the eight chthonic layer of the earth” does not mean that the sky is not also “above us.” It means that the sky is also below us. Or, rather, that an invisible sky lies under the earth. In the real world, clouds, winds and rivers are not everywhere. Only in the world inhabited by spirits these situations can occur.

In shamanistic texts, spirits are often said to be “here” and “there”. We have seen that according to kuna tradition, only a mythical imperative uttered at the beginning of time compels human society to be separated — and even not in its 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 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 this world. Every being that inhabits there is of a double nature, and always on the verge of a transformation.

Let us then study some other examples of the use of simultaneous and contradictory spatial indications in a single landscape and see how the description of a landscape relates to the definition of the nature of a spirit. Let us consider three cases drawn from the Chant of the Demon: the description of Balsa, the Old Seer (the “chief of the auxiliary spirits”), the representation of the Jaguar of the Sky, and the description

of the “birth” of the animal spirits, the nias, in the Village of Transformations, at the fourth chthonic level of the earth.

Spirits, images and voices

Speaking of a statuette representing Balsa, the Seer, a spirit, a kuna specialist told Velasquez: “you see there the image of the spirit. It is here. But its spirit is not here. It lies far away, deep down under the earth.”

From a western perspective, this statement could seem obvious: the image of a spirit, one would be tempted to understand, simply is not the spirit itself.

The statuette represented for instance in this figure:

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36 Contrary to what Holmer and Wassén write, there is no way to translate this text referring to an “obscure ill”. Holmer and Wassén (see footnote 11) p. 27, note 1. The kuna text, and namely the expression nekulu ekarkwenasti murubpi, leaves no doubt on the meaning of this passage. Nekulu always means “under the earth”, and the same expression kulu ekarkwenai appears in the Chant of the Demon with the same meaning: “the village is covered of clouds”, Gomez and Severi p. 152-153.

37 Velasquez p. 735.
shamanistic commentary is founded on an entirely different perspective. What "counts" in a representation like this one, is not its (roughly human) form. The important aspect of it is the matter from which it is build: the balsa wood itself. From a shamanistic perspective, this wood associates the visual appearance of a powerful tree and the extraordinary lightness of the wings of a bird. We will see that this conjunction of contradictory elements betrays the nature of Balsawood, the Seer in a far clearer way than its form. This is how the secret part of the Chant of the Demon describes the mythical birth of Balsawood, the Seer: 

In this way the Balsa Tree was born. At the spring of the river called Maekati at the beginning of time, only animals existed. They were like human persons, and they lived in the river. The porks, the pecarios and the other animals were like human beings. The Father looked all around. Evil beings were everywhere. The nias, 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 nias 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 out, making a sound similar to the chant of the nighthawk: "shu". 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 was the one who had worked in order to build them. The Father told Light Trunk: "You will be the chief of all the nuchumas." 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.

This text describes the "birth" of the Seer as a sequence of extraordinary metamorphoses. Its being seems to result from a series of transgressions of the "normal" way of the generation of the beings. Balsa is born from a cup of sperm without any intervention of a Mother, the son of a Father alone. Then the cup of sperm magically becomes a nighthawk egg. This bird is interesting here for two reasons: it becomes visible only at sunset between the realm of day and night, and it has a chant that the kuna explicitly relate 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, the birth of Balsawood is described as the simultaneous presence of a being appearing in three different and separated territories: the realms of Trees, Birds, and Humans. He is neither bird, tree nor young man. He is intended to be simultaneously all of them. His nature is to be multiple.

Let us now turn to another part of the Chant of the demon and see how the intervention of another supernatural being is represented. This extraordinary being is the jaguar of the sky, the antagonist of Balsa, in the shamanistic tradition and the spirit capable to make a man or a woman crazy. Let us start with two stories the kuna tell about what they call locura, or madness. When human beings, men or women, 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 animal speech in an Indian's body.

Behind this image of the fit of delirium, uninteringly repeated, like a stereotype, there are two dream stories. One relates a hunting dream, the other, a dream of copulation. The hunting dream is a daytime dream and is dreamt 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 then immediately afterwards 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 be able to 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 furthest 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 – boar's skin, "intertwined"
antlers of a deer in flight, red feathers of a parrot. He can only match his voice to their cry, make their hunting call or shake the leaves of the trees as monkeys do when they flee before the hunter. Never will he come in sight. But this mythical being is not just a hunter of animals. He is also and above all a hunter of human beings. And this is where the second dream story comes in, the dream of copulation. Invisible in the light of day, the jaguar appears in image form in certain dreams. He then discards the image of the threatening hunter in order to assume the equally dangerous guise of an intensely desired sexual partner. He or she who sees him in their sleep will fall in love with this vision for ever and will be driven mad by it.

Shamanistic tradition weaves these stories and draws from them a complex conception of madness on which we shall not dwell here.\(^{41}\) Let us focus instead on the way the chant describes the intervention of the mythical Jaguar of the sky, and the space where this mythical being lives: its "village", the village of darkness.

126. Beyond the sun’s canoe, another Village appeared
127. The Dark Village\(^{41}\) 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 dims
130. The Village grows dark, the Village dazzles with light, the Village grows dim

Amidst the storms that constantly wrack this place of night (the text describes the rhythmical movement of the waves and the transformation of the foam they produce into a great mist that covers the Village) he is seen setting off in pursuit of his prey, suspended, as we already know, to a "rope" to accompany the dead in her or his travel in the underworld (vv. 145/147).

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

\(^{41}\) In particular, a study of healing chants reveals a theory of the exchange of spiritual doubles between the animal spirits and human beings which is linked, without replacing it, to the theory of sickness as a "soul theft", or "absence of a spiritual principle" in the sick person’s body. In Kuna tradition, the shamanistic voyage becomes as one and the same time the tale of a shamanistic quest for the lost "soul" and a description of the various stages in the metamorphosis of the madman’s spiritual double.

\(^{42}\) In the shamanistic tradition the Village of Darkness (kula sekoton), where the jaguar of the sky lives, is situated on the borderline between day and night. It lies, as the text says at line 126 "beyond" the "canoe" supporting the sun in its flight across the sky. The word "dark" (here translated "Dark") refers to that sudden moment of darkness that immediately follows the sunset.

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 interlace, 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 interlace, 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
138. 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
139. The countless threads that weave the sea foam fall, the threads that weave the sea foam fall from the sky like drizzle
140. 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
141. The lords of the storm hurl themselves into the sea, the lords of the storm hurl themselves into the sea
142. 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
143. The jaguars of the sky move through the air, the jaguars of the sky hang in the air, they cry "swa-swa"
144. This part of the Village resounds, the Village resounds, from afar one can hear the Village
145. From the top to the bottom of the Village the Golden Dish\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) This "gold dish" (Olabac), representing a mythological incarnation of Tatipe, the sun, is the subject of many Kuna myths. See for instance Holmer 1951, pp. 140–145. Chapin pp. 15–27; Helm p. 86 and following discusses the relationship of this mythological being with the political and religious meaning attributed to gold in Kuna society.
The Jaguar, though (here in its village just as he is in its appearance to the hunter in the forest) is never wholly himself: now a bird sounding like a jaguar, now a jaguar sounding like a bird. "Birds" and "Jaguars" are progressively assimilated in the text:

149. Hanging from an umbilical cord, the ilukwa bird calls; hanging from an umbilical cord, just like a jaguar of the sky, he is calling
150. The palukwa bird roars; hanging from an umbilical cord, the palukwa bird roars like the jaguar
151. 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
152. The jaguars of the sky move through the air
164. The jaguar sings like the ilukwa bird, his teeth are makep color, his nails are makep 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. At the end of the Dark Village, clinging to an umbilical cord, the palukwa bird calls, the bird roars out; clinging to an umbilical cord, the palukwa bird calls, the palukwa bird roars; clinging to an umbilical cord, the askokoar bird calls, the askokoar bird roars

A threatening incarnation of death and madness, the Jaguar of the sky is above all defined as an animal of metamorphosis: it is at once a being of the forest and a being of the sky, a bird. It is precisely this partial ontological coincidence of two animal species which represents here its supernatural status.

The Jaguar appears in the Village of Darkness as a double being. It is both hunter (as a being of the forest) and singer (as a being of the sky). In fact, eyes and ears see it in different ways: the visual signs of its presence are different from the sounds that designate it. The signs change following the different territories it comes to occupy. Its presence "here", before the hunter (or the ill person) is only acoustic. Its presence in the "other world" (that can appear in dreams and in shamanistic travels) is only visual.

Let us now look at another supernatural village where this contrast between different perceptions of the same being is developed further: the Village of metamorphosis

248. Here the spirits are transformed in 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. Let us refer to the verbal formula with which the text describes this process of transformation. At lines 251–252, this process of birth and metamorphosis, concerns for instance the peccaries:

250. Here the nias are transformed into peccaries, the peccaries are there with their black clothes, they cry "ya-ya-ya-ya"
251. The peccaries are now changed into nias, they are transformed into nias, the nias are transformed

The text describes here the birth of the nia (the evil, animal spirit) through two separate logical movements: first the invisible spirit is transformed into an animal, which is to say that it takes the visual form of the animal; next, in the following verse, the relationship is inverted, and the text states that the animals in turn are now transformed into spirits. This dual 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: fireflies, butterflies, snakes, deer, monkeys etc.) dress in "black clothes" and let out their hunting cry. We thus have a sequence of the following kind:

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44 The makep, (buza orellana) is a red-colored substance that plays a considerable role in the painting of the body (face, arms, chest) which the Indians consider to be a powerful means of sexual seduction. It is worth mentioning that the face of the dead person is also decorated with this substance.

45 Gomez and Severi v. 248.
the nia is an animal

the animal is dressed in black clothes

the animal lets out its hunting cry

In fact, it is by showing a different appearance of the animal (always described in the text according to this conventional formula) that the text gives the proof—from an indigenous point of view—of the spirit’s transformation into an animal. The black clothes which conceal from sight the peccary’s fur can only refer in this context 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 in every kind of creature. The introduction of the idea of black clothes enveloping the animal’s body then becomes a way of expressing at one and the same time the invisible, nocturnal character of the spirit and its visible incarnation in 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, and the jaguar of the sky, 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 his or her presence (his or her voice) is always to be perceived here, close to the human village.

We have seen that in Amerindian cosmologies, distinctions drawn between different territories of the universe (the Earth, the Sea, the Sky, the Underworld) become a way for establishing different ontological categories. A being is defined by the territory to which it belongs. We see now, in the three examples that we have examined here, 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.

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 they also acquire the nature of other beings. This 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 perspective not only a river can flow into the body of a suffering woman, but a Jaguar, a Balsa Tree and a Pecari can be said to be, in supernatural landscapes, in dreams, and after death, invisible “here” and shining as gold “there”.

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