

suggest an opposition between a public and a private domain. Meals are a kind of public activity in that they are taken in full view of passers-by, all doors of the house being open, and passers-by are always invited to join those who are seated at the cloth. The fact that conventionally one politely refuses the invitation does not negate the general kinship obligation that is inherent in the invitation.

- 3 This notion of ritual as rule-governed appears to clash with that of tradition (*cakacaka vakavanua*, under which 'ritual' is subsumed) as processual, a notion I have explored elsewhere (Toren 1988). As I showed in that paper, it is the very fact of being made explicit that 'fixes' what is done, thus history is understood as unchanging and tradition as flexible, processual. In other words, what is not explicit in ritual, or about ritual, is allowed to change; what is explicit is held to be immutable.

8 Talking about souls: the pragmatic construction of meaning in Cuna ritual language

Carlo Severi

Instinctively we use language rightly; but to the intellect this use is a puzzle.

(Wittgenstein 1930[1980]: 1)

The anthropological study of ritual symbolism has paid little attention to the transformations of meaning that the ritual use of language can bring about. In this chapter, I will study the case of the Cuna¹ society, where a complex religious category, usually translated as 'soul' or 'spiritual presence', may seem almost meaningless in ordinary talk, and yet plays a crucial role in the shamanistic representation of the human experience. My claim will be that such a situation is caused by a complex web of relationships between the ritual chanter, the ill person, the auxiliary spirits and the shamanistic chant. These *pragmatic*² conditions both constrain the semantic field of the notion and generate the principles of its use. Although the performative aspect of ritual language has been clearly recognised in the literature (Bloch 1974; Tambiah 1985), anthropologists generally lay stress on the ontological or cosmological aspects of ritual discourse. A good example of this situation is the stance taken by Tambiah, who introduced the 'performative' approach in the study of ritual. Although Tambiah believes that ritual is 'a medium for ... creating and bringing to life' (1985: 129) what he calls the 'cosmological scheme' of a culture, he still relegates the pragmatic aspects of ritual to the restricted, secondary function of producing 'indexical meanings' (*ibid.*, 165) about the social context of ritual action. A pragmatic analysis of a ceremonial language, thus, can only refer to the rank, or social status, of the ritual actors. For Tambiah, ritual is a process of construction of social reality in which the semantic content, that is, the 'cosmological scheme' of the culture, remains logically prior to any formal aspect of communication. In this perspective, the *form* of a ceremony – that is, 'the pattern of presentation of the ritual language, the physical gestures and the manipulation of substances which accompany it' – is the mere 'arrangement of its contents' (1985: 143). As a consequence, the pragmatic aspects of ritual are either secondary for the analysis of the symbolism, or even, in extreme

cases, completely dissociated from its meaning.³ His conclusion, thus, is that 'one should guard against attributing to all ritual the priority of functional pragmatics over semantics' (*ibid.*, 165). I think that this conception of the ritual use of language is misleading, in that it implies a reification of the 'cosmological scheme' which is supposed to be the intellectual core of a culture. If we recognise, on the contrary, that some fundamental features of a tradition are *produced* within ritual contexts (and often have no existence elsewhere), then the study of the principles of language use becomes crucial in order to understand them.

I will therefore try to show that in the Cuna case, rules about the ceremonial use of language (reflecting a specific categorisation of ritual speakers and of their addressees) play an essential role in the generation of ritual symbolism, and suggest a new approach, focused on the pragmatic construction of meaning.

The Cuna call 'talking about souls' (*purpa namakke*) the ritual recitation of therapeutic chants (*ikala*), which apply to a wide range of mental and somatic diseases. An *ikala* generally is the narration of a journey during which the auxiliary spirits of a shaman travel in the underworld, searching for the lost or kidnapped *purpa* of an ill person. In Cuna terms, to be ill is in some way 'to lack *purpa*'. This absence is always described by shamans as a *transformation* of the 'inner body' of the ill person, caused by the intervention of evil spirits. The first aim of a therapeutic chant is to represent this transformation of the *purpalet* dimension of someone's body.

In order to describe the implications of the use of this concept, I will try to show the following:

- 1 How ordinary, non-initiated people represent the notion of *purpa* and what the logical aspects of this representation are.
- 2 How shamanistic tradition constructs a pragmatic context for this category.
- 3 How we can derive, from an analysis of this context, a general interpretation of the use and logical status of religious categories in traditional discourse.

Talking about *purpa* in everyday life

Cuna Indians currently speak about three spiritual principles presiding over the perceivable existence of every living body: *nika*, *purpa* and *kurkin*. According to Erland Nordenskiöld (1938), the pioneer of Cuna ethnology *nika* relates to the idea of physical force, *purpa* to the immaterial double, or replica, *kurkin* to the more abstract ideas of 'character', 'talent' and 'personality'.⁴ In Nordenskiöld's interpretation, long

accepted by most scholars (see e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1958 or, more recently, Kramer 1981: 115) *purpa* appears to be roughly similar to the Western concept of 'soul'. Some of his early examples seem to confirm this point: *purpa* is a man's shadow, the echo of an animal's cry in the forest, even the mirror image of someone. Moreover, this notion is closely associated with the idea of life: a body without *nika* is a weak body; a body without *purpa* is lifeless (Nordenskiöld 1938).

Although *purpa* is said to leave the body after death, this notion never applies to the human body as a whole. Every part of it (hair, eyes, nails, hands, etc.) is thought to possess its own *purpa*. The combination of them gives to the body its *kurkin*. This word, which literally means 'hat', refers to a complex set of *purpa*, seen as a whole. It designates, then, any 'spiritual power' as opposed to physical force. For instance, a diviner (*nele*) is typically endowed with a powerful *kurkin*, while a good hunter, or peasant, has only a great *nika*. Sexual seduction is a typical example of using *kurkin* to influence someone, and the shamanistic chants often describe the power of the spirits as a result of a 'battle with hats' (*kurkin*).⁵

This interpretation, however, does not account for all the contexts where the notion of *purpa* appears. *Purpa* is present in stones as well as in every living animal, trees or men. Rocks, clouds, stars and the depths of the sea are, due to the presence of *purpa*, as alive as human beings. Every living thing owes its perceivable appearance (its *wakar* 'face') to the invisible presence of *purpa*. The metaphors used to describe it (a shadow, a far-away cry, the dim depths of the sea) show that, unlike the Platonic idea of the soul, *purpa* does not refer to an image of the person. In this perspective, the body is not purified of its matter and then duplicated in some far-away invisible world. Rather, *purpa* describes the combination of different invisible properties inherent in every living body: 'the sun's heat is *purpa*. Seated by the fire, you can feel its *purpa*. If you hear an unseen hunter shoot his gun in the forest, you have heard *purpa*. The sound of thunder is *malpurpa*. The notes of a flute are its *purpa*. The hiss of the wind is *purpa*. Even the voice of a man is called *purpa*' (Nordenskiöld 1938).

These examples may give us a better understanding of the notion. In fact, regardless to the contexts in which it appears, *purpa* seems to designate only what one can hear, feel or perceive *other than by sight*. The Cuna language itself distinguishes between 'to hear-and-see' (*ittoe*) and 'to hear-without-seeing' (*tuloenai*).

Moreover, it is remarkable that one meaning of the word *nikapurpalele*, which combines *purpa* with the idea of physical strength (*nika*) is 'foetus'. Before acquiring the 'face' (*wakar*) of a human being, the invisible living body inside the mother's womb, perceivable only by the sense of touch, is the most precise incarnation of the concept of *purpa* (see Severi 1987a, b).

At first glance, we may recognise in this concept a typical example of what Boyer (this volume) calls a 'pseudo-natural-kind' term. It is true that, from an ontological point of view, *purpa*, like the magical stones studied by Brown among the Aguaruna (Brown 1985), has the two defining properties that, according to Boyer, define a pseudo-natural kind. Indeed, anything called *purpalet* (lit. 'purpa-like') has typical, but not necessary features (which means that it might be recognised, but not defined) and yet is thought to possess some 'underlying, though undefined properties'. None the less, it is worth noting that the content of this concept is never fully understood, or represented by people. This is why semantic analysis, and *a fortiori* etymological speculations are of little use here. When speaking of *purpalet* properties of the world, people seem to know very well what they have in mind, but regularly show themselves unable to define it in a positive or consistent way. Paradoxically enough, they seem to know better what this term *does not* mean than what it actually means.

A good example of this situation is the use of the classifier *so-*.⁶ This classifier, usually applied to situations involving a relation between two actors (a fight, for instance) or to 'double faced', Janus-like objects (a pencil sharpened at both ends, or a statuette carved on two sides, etc.) designates any occurrence of *purpa*, and therefore refers to the general domain of shamanistic activity. Talking about an illness that needs the intervention of a chanter, people will currently say that they suffer from a *sokwen ailikkusa*, a 'double wound', caused by a *sokwen poni* a 'double evil spirit'. This means that their state transcends the context of ordinary experience, since it is related to the presence of invisible, vaguely defined beings.

We may conclude that, at least from a logical point of view, the only general feature of anything called *purpa* (or designated through the classifier *so-*) is to be always defined in negative terms. *Purpa*, then, is *something one cannot see*. Its presence transforms an object, a natural phenomenon, a state of the body, in a *so-* thing: something related to the unseen. In these terms, 'to be *purpalet*' (that is, to belong to a dimension that only diviners can see) means only 'to be different' from ordinary things. Everyone knows what a stone or a fire are. Only shamans, however, can interpret the *purpa* aspects of reality as signs of the presence of the spirits. In order to represent them, ordinary language only provides negative clues. This is the reason why, in Cuna terms, shamans must master another language, if they are to establish an effective relationship with the *purpalet* aspects of the world.

This somewhat paradoxical property of being defined only as 'different' does not necessarily imply that a special ontological category is posited. I

would argue that this logical status is generated by *any* negative representation: to say that something is *not* to be identified with something else is to describe a relational, contrastive aspect of it which leaves the definition almost empty. Moreover, when an object, or a property are defined *only* in this way we can say that they are represented negatively even if the logical form of the statements produced about them is apparently positive. From this point of view, 'the heat is the *purpa* of fire' means only 'heat is a property of fire which I cannot see'. Thus, we can say that, as far as ordinary talk is concerned, *any* statement about a category like *purpa* is only apparently positive.

These statements share another important property: they make manifest the speaker's uncertainty about their veracity. At least in everyday life, their truth-value is always undecidable. Everyone knows what a stone or a fire is. But no-one of them may be certain of what a *purpa*-property or a magical stone really stand for. In order to represent them, current language provides only for negative clues.

Speaking differently

The notion of *purpa*, as we have described it, seems to refer to a context-less, almost meaningless idea of a mysterious presence. The question that naturally arises here is: how can people make use of such a term, which lacks any consistent semantic field, and potentially applies to any object, being, or phenomenon? Should we see in this concept the foundations of some exotic 'cultural metaphysics' or an illustration of a 'different' (i.e. primitive) mode of thought? I will try to show how, in Cuna tradition, the notion of *purpa* can find an empirical domain of application. So far, we have only described the usage of *purpa* in ordinary speech; but how can a *purpa-namakke*, in other words, a 'way of speaking', as J. Sherzer puts it (1987), be defined by the presence of *purpa*?

In his books on Cuna socio-linguistics (1983, 1987), Sherzer has provided a first answer to this question. *Purpa-namakke* is a variety of the Cuna language, which is not understood by common people. Also called 'the language of the auxiliary spirits of the shaman' (*swarmimmikaya* literally 'the trees' sons' tongue'), *purpa-namakke* has its own morphological, semantic and syntactic properties.

As one of the four major Cuna linguistic varieties, the language of the auxiliary spirits is mainly characterised by lexical differentiation. If we compare its vocabulary to the common Cuna, we can distinguish three aspects of this lexical differentiation: (1) words of the common language are metaphorically used in ceremonial songs as in 'flower' for vagina, or 'young deer' for child; (2) special prefixes or suffixes (such as *olo-*, *esa-*,

-*kachi* or -*appi*) are adjoined to common words; (3) a same meaning is designated by distinct lexical items as for water: *tii* in common Cuna and *wiasali* in the language of the spirits. From a Cuna point of view, this lexical differentiation has a metaphysical significance: in the universe described by the chants every ordinary thing is called by its true name, virtually unknown by common people. Using his secret language, the shaman both uncovers the hidden nature of ordinary objects and shows his power over them.

Purpa-namakke, then, is not only 'talking about invisible things'; it is also 'to speak the tongue of the trees' sons', the auxiliary spirits, themselves called 'diviners' or *nelekan*, who help the shaman in his attempt to cure the ill person. This ceremonial language differs from common language in three ways: (1) it designates 'invisible' things; (2) it has a different linguistic morphology, which makes it incomprehensible; and (3) it is described as the language spoken by supernatural beings. When a shaman recites a chant, he is supposed to speak *their* language. In order to understand *purpa-namakke*, we will have to analyse these three aspects. For the moment, let us make clear who, in Cuna society, learns and speaks it.

The Cuna shamanistic tradition distinguishes two different kinds of knowledge, innate and acquired. The possessors of innate knowledge, which, at least in principle, leads to the 'vision of the invisible', without any learning of the chants are called *nele*, diviners or seers. A child is recognised as a *nele* when, during delivering, he comes out with his mother's placenta on his head. People will say that the child 'is born with a hat on his head' – the 'hat' (*kurkin*) being here the visible sign of the presence of a spiritual power – because, during sexual intercourse, the sexual *purpa* of his father and mother 'slipped' in the body of the child. For this reason, his parents' life depends on the health of the child, since his body contains their *purpa*.

However, this sign is only a necessary condition for being recognised as a seer. In the subsequent behaviour of the child, people constantly look for other signs of an extraordinary nature, praising, for instance, his brilliant mind, the strength of his memory, the vividness of his wit, etc. Once recognised as a *nele*, his initiation will consist mainly in a series of ritual immersions in a solution of medicinal plants, which are supposed to build a magical protection around his body.

The chanters, who learn the songs during a long apprenticeship, are, on the contrary, the possessors of acquired knowledge. They are simply called *inatuleti* ('medicine men') and no particular faculty of vision is attributed to them. They become therapists by learning a chant from a master. This apprenticeship, which, in several cases, can last for years,

often leads to a political career in the village. A chanter is, however, always thought to be less intimate with spirits than a *nele*. Using his knowledge, he can increase his political influence, not his control of invisible beings. In fact, the therapeutic intervention of a chanter is always preceded by a diagnosis made by the seer. In his vision, the latter will tell the former what 'path' has been taken by evil spirits for coming to attack the ill person, and therefore what chant has to be performed. In this situation, he is the guide of the therapist, who follows his instructions.⁷

In this context, the notion of *purpa* (which is neither given a new name nor used metaphorically in the ceremonial language) takes on a special meaning. In order to understand this point, let us consider the case of a short shamanistic song published by Sherzer (1981), the *naipe ikar* ('the snake chant'), which is thought to enable its possessor to grab safely a snake and raise it in the air.

Like most Cuna *ikala*,⁸ this chant describes a verbal duel between a shaman and an evil spirit. The chant opens with the setting of the scene. The man-who-knows (specialist) (the *wisit*, in Cuna) is working in his jungle farm, as the snake appears:

The specialist is at the edge of his field
The specialist is surveying his farm
...
When the sun is half way up in the sky
The specialist is sharpening his little knife
...
As he is cutting small bushes
As he is clearing small bushes
Machi Oloaktikunappi *nele* [the snake's spirit name] is present

After a brief description of the snake ('His chin seems white under the grass cuttings', 'he sticks out the point of its tongue', 'the point of its tongue salivates'; *ibid.*: 310) the snake, as Sherzer rightly states, 'verbally challenges the man':

[the snake] calls
'How well do you know the abode of my origin?'
At this, the man responds to the challenge declaring:
Indeed I know the abode of your origin
I have come to play in the abode of your origin!
and then, displaying his powerful knowledge:
The specialist knows well your *purpa* [soul]
the specialist is saying
He captures your *purpa*
The specialist is saying
Indeed how your lips were placed on
the specialist knows well

the specialist is saying
 How your chin was put in place
 How your lower chin was formed
 The specialist knows well
 The specialist is saying

...

Having thus claimed his knowledge of every part of the snake's body, the possessor of the formula can show his magical power on the animal, uttering the performative formula: "'Simply I raise you" I am saying' and the snake, as Sherzer writes, 'admits defeat'. In this text Sherzer, like Nordenskiöld, translates everywhere *purpa* by 'soul'. In some cases, we may accept this as an unusual, approximate translation of the ordinary sense of it, as for instance, in a statement like:

Indeed the specialist fortifies his *purpa*
 Indeed he augments his *purpa*
 He gives *nika* to his hand.

(Sherzer 1981: 311)

However, there are cases where this translation becomes meaningless. Consider the line: 'the specialist knows well your *purpa* [soul]'. What could this statement mean? A first answer is given by the text itself, which qualifies in these terms the knowledge of the shaman:

The specialist knows well ...
 how your chin was put in place
 how your pupils were formed
 how the point of your tongue was put in place
 how your golden arrow was put in place
 how your spinal cord was put in place
 how your spinal cord was made flexible

How could the concept of *purpa*, defined only as an 'invisible presence perceived by all senses other than sight', justify this description, which refers to the origin of the snake's body? In fact, when applied to shamanistic knowledge, *purpa* assumes a special meaning, and implies the idea of a secret. Every *ikala* (a word which means both 'path, way' and 'shamanistic song') is always accompanied by a second text. This text, which the Indians call *secreto* in Spanish and *ikala-purpa* in Cuna ('the soul of the chant', but also 'the invisible part of the path') generally describes the mythical coitus during which a spirit (evil or benevolent, but always himself a *nele*) has been conceived. In fact, if we refer to the *purpa* of the *naipe ikar* that I could record and translate during fieldwork in a Cuna village, we can have a better understanding of the nature of the knowledge the shaman proudly displays here, facing his enemy:

When God Olopilero wished to give birth to snakes, he took a hair from the pubes of the First Woman [*Tionuchunana*], masturbated, and put a drop of his semen on the hair. Then he put the hair in the woman's vagina.
 'This is how you were born, snake, I know your *purpa*.'

An *ikala-purpa*, as we have seen, always contains a definition of the nature of a spirit. However, for a Cuna shaman, the importance of this text goes far beyond the knowledge of the origin of the form of the snake's body (which is here conceived as recalling the form of the hair taken from the pubes of the First Woman). To him, the knowledge of this secret is the only source of the chant's effectiveness. Before ritually reciting the chant, a chanter must repeat the *purpa* silently. Were he not to evoke the secret origin of the snake, his chant would be ineffective. The knowledge of the secret establishes a kind of pact between the man and the snake. This silent agreement implies not only that the snake will do no offence to the man, but also that the possessor of the *purpa* should be on friendly terms with the snake. The final lines of *naipe ikar* mention this part of the agreement: 'How indeed could I kill you? [says the man] We have just become good friends' (Sherzer 1981: 314). Knowing the *purpa* of his enemy, the chanter is therefore able to force him, using a classical performative statement ('I raise you') to a friendly attitude.

This meaning of *purpa* makes manifest that, beyond the apparent opposition between innate and acquired knowledge, Cuna tradition seems to rely upon a unitary conception of the ritual intervention on the world. Despite the fact that they undergo different types of initiation and play different roles in therapy, seers and chanters are both defined in terms of their access to *purpa*. The *nele* has a direct access to it, from his birth. The *inatuleti*, at the end of his initiation, acquires a certain power on the *purpalet* dimension of the world, by learning a secret (the *purpa* of a text, or the unknown part of a path) which concerns the origin of a spirit. As compared to the vision of the *nele*, his knowledge is indirect and incomplete. However, the silent recitation of the secret before chanting is essential in order to understand the therapeutic intervention, since the idea of a silent agreement, a sort of treatise between the shaman and the spirits – made possible by his knowledge of *purpa* – holds true for any therapeutic song. It is therefore necessary to come back to the conception of illness and summarise how the notion of *purpa* is used in this context.

Suffering and the *purpalet* world

For non-initiated Cuna, as I have already pointed out, illness is just the absence of *purpa*, whereas the cure comes by re-establishing its presence. For them, the cure is a journey in search of the lost *purpa*, and at the same

time it is conceived of as an exploration leading to the knowledge of the mythical, invisible world where the evil spirits live.

The ritual formula used by shamans for establishing a diagnosis of illness seems to proceed from an altogether different point of view. This formula is *purpa-nai*, which we can translate as 'there is something invisible [though not a replica, or an image] hanging around [the person's] body'.⁹ The shaman, thus, does not say that *purpa* is lost or absent from the body of an ill person. On the contrary, he literally says that *purpa* is where the first signs of pain are. A confirmation of this point is given by the fact that the Cuna language, for mentioning pain, uses the classifier *so-*: 'a sensation of pain 'is, in Cuna, a *sokwen numakke*, a 'double pain', both referring to the body and to the invisible world, 'situated beyond the horizon', which is inhabited by the spirits.

However, this *purpalet* world, which an *ikala* is supposed to describe, is not conceived as a separate realm of the universe. Rather, the songs always describe the soul's journey through the invisible world of spirits as a metaphor of the experience felt by a sick person. The shamanistic journey primarily designates that state of *perceiving without seeing* which is the feeling of pain (see Severi 1987: 81-4). Indeed, 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. This idea of a metamorphosis of the invisible aspects of experience, that the Cuna call *pinymai*, is central to the shamanistic understanding of illness.

Let us see, as an example, how these two notions, the 'soul' and the 'transformation', are related in the *nai-ikala*, the chant devoted to the cure of madness. From the shamanistic point of view, the mentally ill person exhibits a contradiction between the visible and the invisible dimensions. What is *seen* of him is obviously a human form; but since, according to the local theory of mental illness, he 'speaks the language of the animals' what is *heard* of him, his *purpa*, is something inhuman and belongs to an invisible animal. For the shaman, the man suffers this contradiction because an evil spirit has taken possession of him, and actually lives in him. The crucial point here is that this spirit is literally defined as the reverse of the ill person: it is an animal who took an *invisible* human form, which can appear only in dreams. Its image is used as an interpretation of the inner body of the ill person: while the ill man is a man with an animal *purpa*, the spirit is an animal with a human *purpa*. The transformation of a living being, thus, necessarily implies a change in the relationship to its *purpa*. This holds true for human beings as well as for any being in the world. Rock crystals, clouds, trees and, above all, animals can transform

themselves into spirits, and intervene in human affairs by *exchanging purpas* with human beings.¹⁰

This conception of metamorphosis as a universal exchange of *purpa* can help us understand one characteristic ambiguity of the chants. We have seen that, through the metaphor of the shamanistic journey, they describe an invisible world in order to represent the experience of the sick person. But, they also portray, conversely, a world where mountains can palpitate and rivers bleed. In other words, the experience of illness is represented through the combination of two usually separate dimensions: the physiological and the cosmological. This is clearly shown, for instance, in the sections of the *Mu Ikala* (the song supposed to facilitate delivery) where the extremely painful experience of the woman is described in the following way:

The sick woman lies in the hammock, in front of you
She is lying in her white clothes, her white clothes are budding like
flowers
The woman's body lies weak
When they light along Muu's way, it drips with secretions, all like
blood
Her secretions drip from the hammock, like blood, all red like the
ikkwi plant
The inner white cloth extends towards the bosom of the earth
In the middle of the woman's white garment, a human being is
descending
The woman is sitting, breathless, towards the East, legs open,
secretions dripping like blood,
Into the bosom of the Earth her secretions gather in drops like blood,
all red.

(Holmer & Wassen 1953: lines 80ff.)

Into the bosom of the Earth the child is descending
Into the bosom of a pale plantain leaf the child is descending
It reddens the banana leaf
Towards the East, a river breaks through the place
A golden river breaks through, the golden calabash is drifting along
The evil spirits are carried off by its flow, far away, towards the mouth
of the river
The evil alligators are carried off by its flow, far away, towards the
mouth of the river
The trunks of the trees are carried off by its flow, far away, towards
the mouth of the river
A silver river breaks through the place, the golden calabash is drifting
along
The evil spirits are carried off by its flow, far away, towards the mouth
of the river
The evil alligators are carried off by its flow, far away, towards the
mouth of the river

The trunks of the trees are carried off by its flow, far away, towards
 the mouth of the river
 Towards the East, a golden fan causes a draft
 Towards the East, a silver fan causes a draft
 Towards the East, the golden wind is blowing
 The child is descending, the child has arrived
 A child is descending, a child has arrived

(Holmer & Wassen 1953: lines 640ff.)

This text provides a good example of the alternation of 'realistic' and 'mythical' descriptions which characterises the Cuna chants. In fact, this representation of childbirth supposes *two* transformations. The first concerns the woman's body: magically situated at the 'centre' of the world, her vagina becomes part of an inaccessible, invisible dimension of the universe. The second concerns this mythical world, which appears to undergo a dramatic turbulence which symbolises the painful contractions of the woman's body.

It would be utterly misleading to understand this parallelism between the body and the world as a simple correspondence between an external macrocosm and an internal microcosm, since both these dimensions, from the shamanistic point of view, are *purpalet*. The physiological dimension is described as an 'inner body' that no visual perception can reach, and the cosmological one as an inaccessible world, situated 'beyond the horizon'. In this perspective, invisible properties of the world ('bleeding rivers') refer to the body of the woman, and invisible properties of her body (the pain generated by delivering) refer to the external world.

We can see now how Cuna discourse can generate meaning using a negatively defined notion: the shamanistic representation of the experience of the ill person is the result of a systematic relationship established between *two negatively defined dimensions of the universe*, an invisible landscape within the body and an external, though inaccessible, world described as an invisible body.

The contrast with the use of *purpa* in ordinary talk is striking. There *purpa* has no definite meaning, and is always surrounded by a halo of uncertainty. Here the same notion acquires a crucial position, referring both to the essential features of therapeutic intervention and to the field of its application to illness. In particular, *purpa* becomes here the key concept for a description of the experience of pain.

How is this passage realised, from a vague, contextless idea to a complex representation of experience? A first, obvious answer is that if the category of *purpa* itself is normally uncertain and contextless in ordinary talk, the ritual use of *purpa-namakke* is, on the contrary, always applied *only to one* context: the representation of the experience of pain.

Indeed, the relation established between two different dimensions of reality, which makes possible the shamanistic description of the experiences felt by the sick person, can only be established under ritual conditions. As we shall see, the representation of a *purpalet world*, is not achieved here by elaborating the content of the notion of *purpa* itself, which remains negatively defined, but rather by establishing a set of prescribed conditions on the ritual recitation itself. In order to realise the transformation of the meaning of *purpa*, Cuna tradition imposes strict and explicit constraints on the context of *purpa-namakke*. Since these conditions are constitutive of the action of ritual chanting about the *purpalet* world, the study of the generation of the meaning of *purpa* coincides with the study of the construction of this context. It is therefore necessary to examine how this context is generated in the ritual performance.

Performing *purpa-namakke*

The ceremonial language of the Cuna shaman is 'different' from ordinary speech, not just because it involves the use of an incomprehensible language or is a way of designating the esoteric knowledge of the shaman. *Purpa-namakke* is, above all, defined *as an action*. It requires – if the ritual recitation is to be effective – an elaborate set of rules concerning the behaviour of the chanter. The tradition, and in fact the chants themselves,¹¹ minutely describes the position of the *purpa* speaker, his alimentary and sexual prohibitions, the place and time of recitation, the ritual setting in which the shamanistic journey will be narrated. Before singing, the shaman sits for a few minutes in silence, burning cacao grains or crushing acrid-smelling red pepper pods in a small hearth. The recitation must occur in a separated, semi-darkened corner of the hut, always at night. The song is chanted in front of two rows of statuettes facing each other, beside the hammock where the patient is lying. These auxiliary spirits drink up the smoke, whose intoxicating effect opens their minds to the invisible aspect of reality, and gives them the power to heal. In this way, the spirit-helpers of the shaman, as several songs state explicitly,¹² are believed to become themselves 'diviners' (*nelekan*).

This empirical description of the performance of the chants, however, does not allow us to understand a crucial point: who is supposed to be singing to whom? It is clear that the communication between the chanter and the patient is merely apparent, since the latter, like most non-initiated Cuna, cannot understand what the shaman is saying. As a consequence, it is also difficult to describe the relationship established between what is actually formulated (the description of a progressive, invisible metamor-

phosis which has generated the suffering body) and the conditions imposed on the act of chanting itself.

In order to understand this point it is necessary to analyse the dynamics involved in the ritual scene, as well as the relations that the ritual action establishes between the magical vision of the diviner and the incomprehensible words of the singer.

The offering of the smoke to the auxiliary spirits is considered the only way to *generate* an effective knowledge about the experience of pain. In other words, by offering them the smoke, the shaman ritually regenerates the *kurkin*, or 'power of vision', of his statuettes. Moreover, we should not forget that by reciting the chant, he does not only describe their journey in a *purpalet* world; he also speaks both *like* them and *for* them their secret and incomprehensible tongue, and it is in this language that he finally engages in a verbal duel with the evil spirits. In this way, the shaman acquires an intermediary position between two *nele*: the human one, the diviner who has made the diagnosis of the illness (with whom he shares the knowledge of the secret), and the supernatural one, his spirit-helper. The narration of the shamanistic journey itself could be understood as the description in words of the vision of the *nele*. Performing *purpa-namakke*, the shaman-chanter identifies himself – and speaks on behalf of – a *nele*. On the other hand, the ritual conditions imposed to the act of chanting tend to identify the real shaman with the supernatural beings whose language he can speak, that is, the *neles* represented by the carved statuettes. The latter's power results from an accumulation of therapeutic functions which remain always separate in real life. Usually, as we have seen, a human *nele* can only *see* and a chanter can only *speak*. In the ritual situation, a statuette can speak with the voice of the chanter while seeing with the penetrating eye of a *nele*.

What is said in the chant aims at building an image of the disease as the result of a relationship between two *purpalet* dimensions of the world. The ritual principles of language use tend to define the ritual chanter in the same terms: as related to the *purpalet* world, he too incarnates a contradiction between what is seen of him (a human body) and what is heard, the language of the supernatural diviners.

In order to represent, or understand the metamorphosis of the ill person, the chanter has to transform himself into (or to speak on behalf of) a literally semi-divine being: half-human, half-supernatural. This transformation, not the unrealistic idea of a therapeutic communication with the ill person, is the aim of the sequence of gestures that define *purpa-namakke*. In this context, 'to speak a different tongue' always supposes a parallel transformation of the speaker.

Thus, the performance of *purpa-namakke* relies upon a process of

double identification: one associates the description of the suffering body to the presence of an animal spirit, and is achieved in the song itself; the other, which is silently realised by a sequence of actions that guarantees the effectiveness of chanting, progressively identifies the human chanter with a supernatural *nele*. From a formal point of view, then, *purpa-namakke* is an attempt to *define the nature* of the spirits, rather than an act of fictitious communication with them. When shamans speak their language, they personify them.

Purpa and symbolism

We may conclude that the complexity of a notion like *purpa* is the result of the complexity of its ritual usage. In order to define this category, it would not be enough just to uncover a network of related ideas (as 'force' or 'character' or 'personality'). We also need to uncover the pragmatic conditions that ritually define the action of chanting. In other words, knowledge is shared among the Cuna about the technique of ritual recitation that enables a shaman to cure an ill person, not about the content of the category *purpa*. Rather than elaborating a clear-cut definition of the invisible properties of the world, the shamanistic tradition conveys a complex representation of the action of *chanting about the purpalet* world.

Among the Cuna, there is no general, commonly shared mythology of illness which could influence and actually regulate a therapeutic ritual. No 'cosmological scheme', in Tambiah's terms, is transmitted in Cuna culture about the experience of suffering. What is primarily and positively encoded in Cuna tradition is a set of principles for generating a ritual context. Thus, the pragmatic dimension of the ritual recitation, that is, the study of *purpa-namakke* as a sequence of actions which define the ritual speaker and his addressee, is not only a useful tool for understanding what *purpa* can mean; the rules concerning *purpa-namakke* in fact establish and designate the conditions for generating its meaning.

This is, I am tempted to say, the feature which makes a 'simple' (or a negatively defined) category a complex one. In fact, to say that a traditional category is 'complex' may imply two very different hypotheses on the nature of tradition. The first is that a category is 'complex' only when it has a very large and elaborated semantic field. In this perspective, the analysis of traditional knowledge becomes akin to the study of a text, or a system of symbols. The second hypothesis is that people use very simple (even, as in the Cuna case, virtually meaningless) notions in very complex ways. In these terms, ritual tradition can no more be considered as an illustration of a general 'cosmological scheme'. It has to be analysed,

rather, as a set of techniques leading to the generation of traditional representations. The study of the category of *purpa* in Cuna shamanistic tradition, which finds its way to complexity through the elaboration of rules about the ritual use of language, suggests that this latter hypothesis may be the right one.

NOTES

- 1 The Cuna Indians live today in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama. Cuna-land (Tule Neka) numbers from 27,000 to 30,000 persons, who speak a language traditionally associated with the Chibcha family (Holmer 1947, 1952). A small Cuna group, which still rejects all contact with the white man, lives in the Chucunaque region of the Darién forest, near the Colombian border. Essentially, the Cuna are tropical farmers. In his brief historical survey, Stout (1947) speculates that Cuna society, one of the first to come into 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 (*sailakan*). The Cuna kinship system is bilineal, uxori-local and founded on strict group endogamy (Howe 1976).
- 2 For a tightly-argued discussion about the definition of the field of pragmatics, on which there is no general agreement among linguists, see Levinson (1983). For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to refer to the minimal definition provided for by Carnap (1956), who calls 'pragmatics ... the study of aspects of language that require reference to the users of it' (quoted in Levinson 1983: 3).
- 3 Remarking that ritual 'oscillates in historical time between ossification and revivalism', Tambiah sees the decline of the meaning of a ceremony as the progressive revelation of its pragmatic aspects: 'cosmological ideas, because they reflect the epistemological and ontological understandings of the particular age in which they originated, and because they are subject to the constraint of remaining accurate and invariant, are condemned to become dated over time, and increasingly unable to speak to the minds and hearts of succeeding generations facing change and upheaval. During these periods of ossification, ritual may increasingly lose whatever semantic meaning they previously had and may carry primarily indexical meanings which derive from rules of use and from pragmatic or functional considerations' (Tambiah 1985: 165). For an example which shows, on the contrary, that the decline of a ritual's meaning (though not its ossification) can be caused precisely by radical modifications of the pragmatic conditions, cf. Severi 1988.
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of the Cuna theory of souls, see Severi (1981b, 1987).
- 5 In the *Mu Ikala*, the chant devoted to the therapy of difficult childbirth, the auxiliary spirits of the shaman engage in a verbal duel with the evil spirits. The declaration of hostilities is made in these terms: 'Let us play now with our golden hats! Let us play with the hats, in order to see who has the stronger

- hats!' (Holmer & Wassen 1953: verses 384ff.). On this point, compare the remarks of Lévi-Strauss (1958), who, though, was working on an earlier, and incomplete, version of the text, published by the same authors in 1947.
- 6 A complete analysis of the Cuna classifiers is still lacking in Cuna studies. Some indications are in Holmer (1947, 1952) and Sherzer (1987: 37-44).
 - 7 The seer and the chanter, though, can exchange roles on the occasion of an epidemical outbreak of disease. In this case, the seer falls asleep, and himself travels to the underworld in order to make peace with the spirits who attacked the village. On this occasion, it is the chanter who, singing a particular chant, 'guides' the seer in his travel (Howe 1976).
 - 8 For further instances of this *topos* of Cuna therapeutic literature, see Holmer & Wassen (1953, 1958). The expression 'verbal duel' as applied to Cuna chants, can assume two meanings: it can be a challenge *verbally described* (and concluded by a performative statement), like in the *naipe ikar*, or a battle *struggled by means of words*, as in the *Mu Ikala*.
 - 9 The verbal suffix *-nai* (usually applied, for instance, to necklaces), means 'hanging on'. Here *purpa* takes its general sense of *purpalet* (the invisible).
 - 10 A detailed description of this process of metamorphosis is given in the *Nia-Ikar-kalu* – the central episode of the chant devoted to the therapy of madness (Gomez & Severi 1983). For an analysis, see Severi (1982: 56-62).
 - 11 This is clearly shown, among many other instances, in the initial part of the *Mu Ikala*, the chant devoted to the therapy of difficult childbirth (Holmer & Wassen 1947: verses 1-64). In a communication presented at a conference on 'The Transmission of Knowledge', held at the University of Rome in 1986, I have argued that Cuna shamanistic tradition makes the conditions of chanting *transmissible* by including in every *ikala* – usually at the beginning of the text – a detailed description of the chant's ritual performance (Severi 1989).
 - 12 The intoxicating effect of the smoke is always compared, in the chants, to the effect of the alcoholic *chicha* prepared by the Indians on the occasion of the ritual which celebrates the first menstruation of young girls. The *Mu Ikala* even describes some auxiliary spirits as 'drunk of chicha' (Holmer & Wassen 1953: verses 160ff.). It is because they are thus intoxicated that they can, as this chant letter states, 'give form to the invisible things using their powerful vision'.