

A Cuna shaman's box of wooden carved figurines representing auxiliary spirits. (Photograph by A. Parker, from Parker and Neal 1977)

The invisible path

Ritual representation of suffering in Cuna traditional thought

CARLO SEVERI

The representation of suffering is a crucial issue in Cuna traditional thought.¹ In a previous study of a Cuna therapeutic chant devoted to the therapy of mental illnesses (the *nia-ikala kalu*: "Villages by the Wayside of Madness" [Gomez and Severi 1983]), I described the characteristic Cuna cosmological framework for the interpretation of sickness. In that study, based on both the verbal and the pictographic versions of the *nia ikala*, I showed how in Cuna tradition the classical shamanistic explanation of evil and pain as the result of a voyage of a human "soul" in a mythical world is associated with a more specific theory of soul exchange between animal spirits and human beings. The memorized chant of the Cuna medicine man, while narrating the adventurous voyage of a "lost soul," gradually describes a process of invisible metamorphosis of the "inner body" of the sick man. This transformation explains, in traditional terms, the symptoms of mental illnesses (Severi 1982).

That analysis of *nia ikala* also showed that Cuna picture-writing technique plays an essential role in the transmission of this esoteric interpretation of illness. Cuna pictography is not to be viewed as a primitive stage of an evolution toward the phonetic notation of

language, but as a refined art of memory, which helps the shaman in preserving, interpreting, and teaching the traditional texts (Severi 1985).

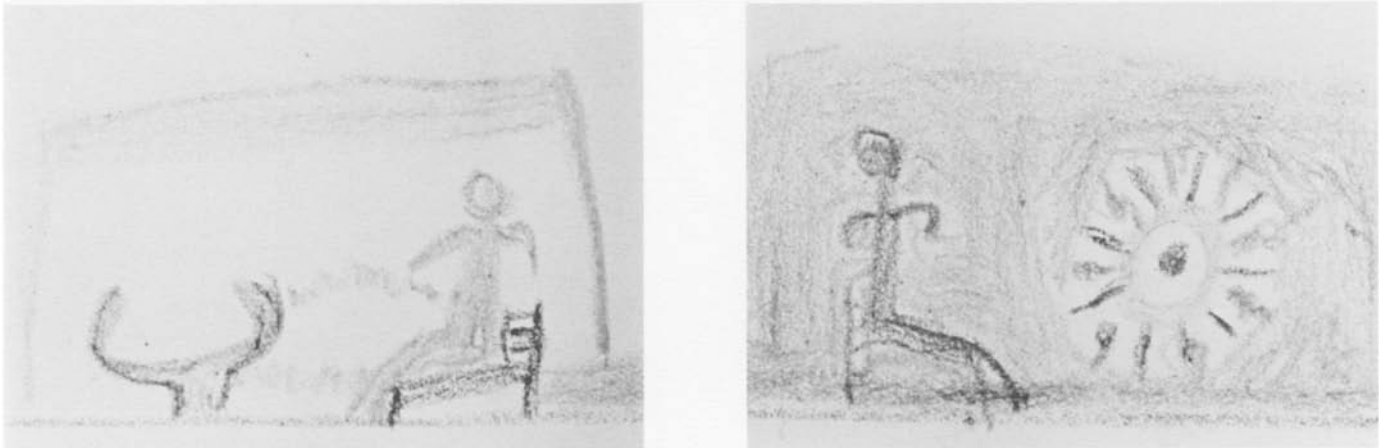
In this paper, which represents an attempt to introduce the basic features of Cuna traditional representation of suffering, I shall focus on the ritual conditions of the application of *nia ikala*.

At first glance, very few gestures accompany a Cuna healing chant. Before singing, the shaman sits for a few minutes in silence, his face expressionless as he burns cacao grains or crushes acrid-smelling red pepper pods in a small ceremonial brazier. Then the chant begins. The ritual may be performed by day or by night, but it must always occur in a separate, semidarkened corner of the hut. A monotonous musical refrain, the chant is pronounced before two rows of statuettes that face each other around the hammock where the ill person lies. These figurines represent auxiliary spirits.

When the shaman creates smoke by burning the grains and pods, he is performing perhaps the only metaphorical gesture that accompanies the chant. To the shaman, the word itself is like smoke. This visualization of the word attracts the spirits, establishing the first, and decisive, sacrificial contact with the statues that witness the ritual.

The 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 his chant, the shaman addresses long invocations to the spirits, telling a story in which neither he nor the sick person's body play a dominant role. The true protagonists of the chant are the army of watchful spirits, themselves seers or *nelekan*, who live in the crudely sculpted wooden statuettes arranged near the chanter's brazier. Their task is to find the human soul, wandering lost through the invisible world inhabited by evil spirits, the soul whose absence has brought pain and physical disorder to the Indian lying in the hammock. The *nelekan* will face the dangers and adventures of the voyage; they will duel with the spirits of evil. Thus an *ikala*, the Cuna word for "path" and "route," as well as for "healing chant," is the story of a voyage through the invisible. Each

1. Fieldwork among the Cuna has been supported in 1979 by a Grant of Collège de France (Paris) and, in 1982, by the Fondation Fyssen (Paris). Gabriella Airenti, Bruno Pedretti, Pascal Boyer, and Michael Houseman read an original draft of this paper, and reacted with thoughtful remarks. K. Jarrat helped me in translating this paper into English. I wish to thank them here. Today, most Cuna live in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama. Cunaland (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 Darien forest, near the Colombian border. Essentially, the Cuna are tropical farmers. In his brief historical survey, Stout (1948) 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, uxorilocal, and founded on strict group endogamy (Howe 1976).



From the pictographic version of the Cuna therapeutic chant for mental illnesses (*nia ikala*): The shaman-chanter sits near his ritual brazier.

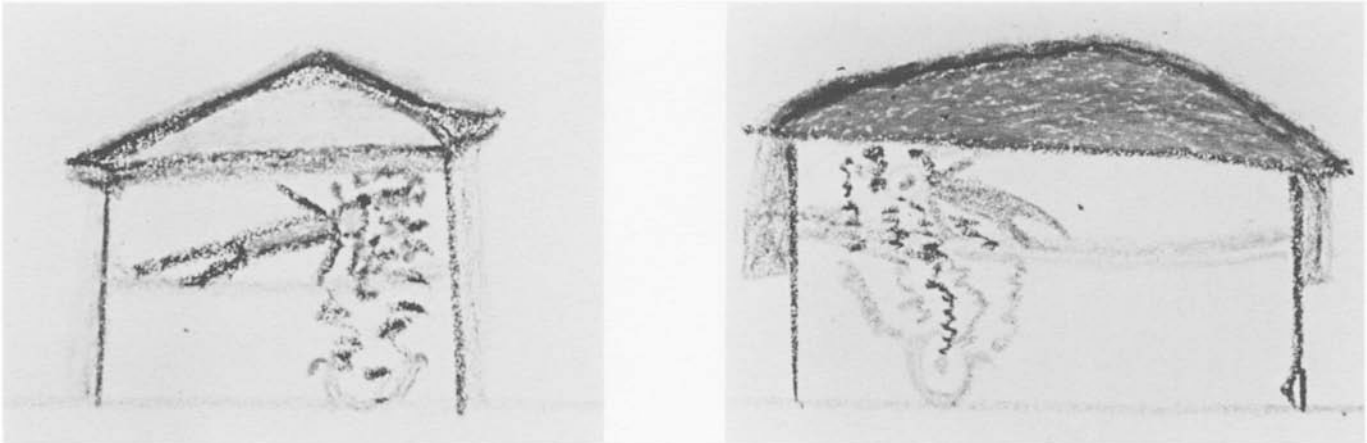
known illness corresponds to a different *ikala*, but the voyage, the duel, the search for the soul, are present throughout all the native tradition. Each time, the smoke is offered to the warrior spirits; each time, the shaman asks them to return “beyond the horizon” (Holmer and Wassén 1953) to seek out and challenge the enemy spirits.

When the shaman is seated before his brazier, both exhorting and impersonating his *nelekan*, he addresses the evil spirits in a language incomprehensible to the uninitiated Indians. The *ikala* are sung in a ritual language unknown to the profane and understood only by seers, healers, and leaders (Sherzer 1983). The uninitiated call this language *purpa namakke*, a term that means both “speaking obscurely” and “speaking of souls.” To them (as well as to many scholars of shamanism), the concept of relationship between visible and invisible, soul and body, which in the esoteric Cuna shamanistic tradition is extraordinarily refined, appears to be reduced to a sort of familiar, fairy-tale simplicity. Illness is the pure absence of soul, whereas the cure comes by reestablishing the soul’s presence. In this perspective, pathology and therapy are simply the reversal of each other. The shaman is an ideal intermediary, to whom the community entrusts its relations with the invisible. The contact between two conflicting corporeal states (and, as we shall see, between differing states of the entire world) is illustrated in the shaman’s “speaking of souls.” Much anthropological commentary on the shamanistic healing of so-called “primitive” societies (Eliade, Métraux, Lewis, are but a few examples) revolves around this mirrorlike relation between pathology and therapy—often simplified in the idealized representation of good

spirits challenging the evil sickness-bearers to a verbal duel. This outlook coincides with the beliefs of the uninitiated Cuna, and provided the initial, spontaneous response to our first questions about traditional healing practices, after we witnessed the rituals for the first time. During the first stages of fieldwork, the uninitiated Indian’s naive functionalism (“the shaman chants for such-and-such reason”) coincides perfectly with the anthropologist’s educated functionalism (“the ritual arbitrates a conflict, tending to re-establish order in the world of symbols and relations”).

For our interpretation of the Cuna chants, we shall adopt an entirely different procedure. Since, as we shall see, the Cuna idea of the body and the world cannot be completely encompassed in the concept of the soul’s voyage, we shall choose not to discuss Cuna traditional knowledge of illnesses in the framework of a general typology of shamanism. In reality, we may call the Cuna rite “shamanistic” only as long as we bypass the outdated problem of formulating a general definition for shamanism, and only because of the preeminent role of several concepts (soul, spirit, voyage, duel) traditionally considered “shamanistic” in anthropological literature. The study of Cuna healing chants makes it clear, however, that if we insist on applying these worn-out descriptive clichés to the Amerindian area today, the result we get may be likened to a long-neglected puppet theater, whose principal characters remain always missing, or whose backdrops are too often the wrong color.

By way of introduction, let it be said only that shamanism is understood here as a certain way of conceiving the invisible aspect of reality, and as a particular *style* of worldview related to it. I am



Nia ikala, pictographic version: The smoke exuding from the ritual brazier fills the shaman's hut, where the sick person lies.

convinced that the iconological study of the ritual scene can provide insight into this style of thinking. In this perspective, shamanistic chants² can be interpreted only if we also analyze the conditions required for their performance in Cuna culture: semidarkness in the ritual hut, alert silence preceding the chant, the smoking brazier. To examine these conditions I shall attempt to find the common logic underlying two perceptions of the rite: the chanter's sapient, dogmatic exegesis, and the more vague, but not less decisive view of the uninitiated. The study of these two perceptions will entail a discussion of the three problems posed by the ritual scene: the soul (*purpa*), the spirit (*nele*), and the setting (gestures and words, rite and chant) in which the soul and the spirit are evoked.

The soul and the secret

The human body is the best image of the human soul.
Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, II, IV

According to popular Cuna belief, which may give us a first, rudimentary explanation of the chant's meaning, the shaman knows the secrets of the soul and how to follow its travels through the world of the spirits. Traditional exegesis is inseparable from the learning of the chants. This learning is based upon three different spiritual principles that preside over the perceivable existence of every living body: *nika*, *purpa*, and *kurkin*.

2. I shall refer here to *Mu ikala* (Holmer and Wassén 1953), devoted to difficult childbirth, and *nia ikala*, dedicated to the therapy of mental illnesses (Holmer and Wassén 1958; Gomez and Severi 1983).

In his classic description, long accepted by most scholars, Erland Nordenskiöld (1938), the pioneer of Cuna ethnology, noted that this triad was made up of univocal concepts: *nika* relates to the idea of physical force, *purpa* to the immaterial double or replica, *kurkin* to the more abstract idea of "character," "talent," and "personality."

A few of Nordenskiöld's early examples show the meaning of *purpa* for the noninitiated Cuna: it is an object's shadow, a man's mirror-image, an animal's cry resounding in the forest. Like *nika*, *purpa* is closely associated with the idea of life: a body without *nika* is weak; a body without *purpa* is lifeless. *Purpa* is as present in stones as it is in living animals, trees, or men; only a corpse is devoid of *purpa*.

In Cuna traditional thought, life springs from the contrast between visible and invisible. Every living thing (and rocks, clouds, stars, and the depths of the sea are as alive as humans) owes its own perceivable appearance (*wakar*: "face," to the Cuna) to the invisible presence of *purpa*. A shadow, a faraway cry, even the reflection of one's image are feeble traces of an invisible presence whence life flows. However, unlike the Judeo-Christian idea of the soul, which is often portrayed as an image of the body, in the shaman's view *purpa* has no image. Rather, the Cuna traditional concept describes the combination of 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 gurgle of a stream is *purpa*. The hiss of the wind is *purpa*. Even a

man's voice is called *purpa*. When you hear an animal cry far off in the forest, that is its *purpa*.

Nordenskiöld 1938

These examples illustrate the shaman's view of *purpa*. From his esoteric point of view, one can never see *purpa*, as the noninitiated Indians naively believe. One can only hear, feel, or perceive it other than by sight. The visible world seems to issue from the invisible according to a generative model: one meaning of the word *nikapurpalele*, which combines the ideas of physical strength (*nika*) and invisible double (*purpa*) is "fetus." Before acquiring the "face" (*wakar*) of a human being, the living body inside the mother's womb, perceivable only by the sense of touch, is the most precise incarnation of the concept of *purpa*.

The idea that the body can be duplicated as immaterial presence (shadow, reflection) is common amongst noninitiated Cuna. Shamanistic tradition adds to it the concept that animate objects contain an inherent duality. Thus the body is not purified of its matter and then duplicated in some faraway invisible world, as in Western tradition. Rather, Cuna traditional thought focuses on the inherent invisible properties of the living body: like Janus (and as the seat of events and conflicts: illnesses), the human body is intrinsically double, because it is a living thing.

Nonetheless, the concept of *purpa* is not extensive enough to encompass the human body as a whole. *Purpa* can be applied only to separate organs recognized by Indian anatomy. When the Cuna shaman speaks of the human body, he does not mention "organs," but *nikapurpalele*: entities that describe, from the outlook of a world metaphysics, not only an "invisible body" but the very life that throbs through that body.

As we have said, *nika* means physical strength. But how does traditional shamanistic thinking represent this elementary force, and what role does it play in the organism's life? Rubén Pérez Kantule, one of Nordenskiöld's Cuna collaborators and coauthor of one of his most important books (1938), made a drawing of *nika*. His picture says more than any verbal description can.

The concept that ordinarily relates to simple physical strength (a good hunter's skill, a warrior's valor) is pictured here as a cloud hovering around the Indian's face. Rubén tells us that this cloud makes the Indian's face invisible to the evil spirits who unleash illnesses. Like *purpa*, this vision of *nika* as a shield that deflects the spirit's gaze is based upon the contrast between



visible and invisible. The two concepts are joined in the idea of *nikapurpalele*, which applies to each organ of the human body, whose spiritual double is the organized combination of the separate organs' *nikapurpalelekan*. This spiritual double possesses a third property: *kurkin*. Nordenskiöld is partly correct when he contrasts *kurkin* to *purpa* and *nika*, translating the former as "intelligence" or "talent." *Kurkin* does more than contrast with *purpa* and *nika*, however. It actually represents a complex combination of the two. *Kurkin* (literally, "hat") is the principle of the invisible strength that makes the human body resplendent and powerful, as opposed to *nika*, which hides its face from the spirits. When the shaman in *The Way of Mu* prepares for his duel with the spirits of illnesses, he "makes his hat [*kurkin*] grow" before the spirits that are the lords of the trees (Holmer and Wassén 1953).

Kurkin nikka (to have *kurkin*) means to have "invisible spiritual strength"—the gift of vision—as opposed to *nika*, the physical strength of the hunter and the warrior. Both spirits and shamans share the privilege of possessing powerful *kurkin*. *The Way of Mu* gives an example of the aggressive connotation of this notion when it describes the "great duel with the headdress" (*kurkin* in the text). During this duel, the *nelekan*, the shaman's auxiliary spirits, challenge the "animals of Mu," meaning the spirits of illness (ibid., v. 383 ff.), and claim that they have "more powerful hats."

We find another interesting interpretation of *kurkin* in *Villages by the Wayside of Madness* (Severi 1982, vv. 374–378), where "shaking one's hat in front of someone" means to seduce him or her and arouse

love. Finally, some species of mushrooms (presumably hallucinogenic, although, unfortunately, we still know nothing about their shamanistic use) are called the evil spirits' "hats" or "mental strength": *nia-kurkin*. In the shamanistic vocabulary this is one definition for hallucination.

We may now return to the popular belief that plainly describes the contrast between illness and healing, and try to reformulate it in the shaman's perspective.³ In this outlook, the idea of impaired equilibrium is always at the origin of the illness. The "main body" (*sailapurpa*), which is the *purpa* of the visible body, or the invisible part of the real body, is, in the shaman's words, "wounded by a double wound": both visible and invisible. The ritual formula for designating the first signs of pain, caused by the soul's flight, is *purpa nai*, which we can translate as "There is something invisible (though not a replica, or image) hanging around the Indian's neck" (the verb *nai* is usually applied to necklaces, and here *purpa* takes its general meaning of *purpalet*, "the invisible").

The common Indian belief will be that a "soul" (a *nikapurpalele*) has fled the body. But the shaman uses those same words to indicate the breaking of the primary relationship between the body and its invisible aspect.

Kurkin's energy, on which is based the shaman's healing power, is activated through the eyes. Literally, *kurkin* is the "strength of the eyes." Thus "seeing the invisible" is the Cuna shaman's first healing act. Likewise, no cure can be found if the shaman has not first "seen the direction" taken by the illness-bearing spirits. There are two possible ways to achieve this result: some people are gifted with innate wisdom acquired at the moment of their conception in the mother's uterus. Others may serve a lengthy apprenticeship with a teacher of healing chants. Shamans who possess innate wisdom are called *nele* (seers). The *nelekan* act daily upon illnesses, but they are also able to foresee the community's future. Those who have no innate gift but acquire their learning during an apprenticeship spent studying the healing texts (passed on by oral tradition) are called *inatuleti*, or "medicine men." These two categories are not equal. A Cuna with innate gifts can always become an *inatuleti*, by following a teacher. But the medicine man can acquire the *nele's* vision only rarely, and under exceptional circumstances (Nordenskiöld 1938).

3. I have discussed this topic in a previous study, devoted to the Cuna theory of souls (Severi 1981).

The *nele's* wisdom, which the community is asked to acknowledge from birth onward, comes from the child's innate knowledge of the sexual act whereby he was conceived. His vision springs from the knowledge of this secret, which confers upon the newborn's body an extraordinary spiritual strength. *Mimmi kurkin nikka kwalulesa*: "the baby was born with a caul" (*kurkin*), the midwives declare when a child's head is almost entirely covered with the placenta as it leaves the mother's womb. This condition, essential but insufficient, allows the Indians to recognize a real *nele*. The child's "hat" is the sign of an exceptional form of conception: during coitus the parents' sexual *purpakan*, in the form of sperm and menstrual flow (both called *nikapurpalele* by the Cuna), have "slipped" into the child's body. This supplement of soul, or abnormal concentration of sexual *purpa* in the *nele's* body, gives the child a power over his parents' lives, and also an awareness of the mysteries of sexuality, something that is rigorously hidden from his peers. It is this knowledge that supplies the *nele's* particular *kurkin*. The "hat" placed on his head by his mother's placenta symbolizes his vision, which is invariably conceived as a legacy of spontaneous and complete knowledge that can never be achieved through apprenticeship alone.

This unique, rare gift of vision (which Cuna attribute also to rock crystals) can in a human mind only grow, just as the child's body goes from the fragility of infancy to the vigor of adulthood. All it needs is *nika*, physical strength. As a consequence, a *nele's* initiation calls not for the study of the chants, but for a series of ritual baths called *nika okannoket* ("make strength grow") and *ipia okannoket* ("give the eyes strength"). These baths are strictly regulated according to the young boy or girl's age. Once again, we can see the characteristic interdependence of the two basic principles of the Cuna theory of souls: *nika* and *purpa*. Here, the *purpa* are the invisible properties of the medicinal plants contained in the baths the young *nele* undergoes. They expand around the seer's body (almost as a sort of invisible fumigation), forming the cloud-shield of physical strength (*nika*) that protects the *nele's* spiritual strength (*kurkin*) from the attacking spirits.

Just as the *inatuleti* and the *nele* undergo differing initiations, they also play two separate healing roles. Cuna shamanism makes a strict distinction between two stages of healing. The diagnosis includes identifying the nature of disease, of the attacking spirits, and of the stricken body sites. This role is always performed by the *nele*, with his divining techniques. The true healing

cure, which calls for the application of medicinal plants or the ritual recitation of a chant, is always the duty of the *inatuleti* alone.

There is a further distinction between the role of the *nele* and the *inatuleti*, depending upon whether they are healing an individual illness or a collective disease. When a collective illness threatens the existence of an entire village, not even the most prestigious *inatuleti* can oppose it. In this case and in this case alone, the *nele* steps out of his role of seer and diagnostician to combat the pathogenic spirits directly. At such times, the *nele* falls into a deep, prolonged sleep, while the villagers observe a series of prescriptions, first and foremost of which is sexual abstinence. In his dreams, the *nele* travels to the world of the spirits, to whom he offers a handful of ashes taken from his ritual brazier. This offering inebriates the spirits, just as *chicha* (an alcoholic beverage distilled from corn) inebriates humans. In this state, the spirits are harmless and willing to accept a truce with human beings. To keep the *nele* from losing his way, one of the oldest and most experienced *inatuleti*, called the *apsoketi*, guides him by singing the *apsoketi-ikala*. This chant "clears the vision" and literally orients the *nele*, telling him about the places he travels through in his dreams and identifying the spirits to whom he will make his offering (Howe 1976). Clearly, in this case the two main categories of shamans exchange roles: the *apsoketi* shows the seer the "invisible way" to the illness, while the *nele* takes direct responsibility for the healing role. Here Cuna shamanistic tradition accumulates and hands down the knowledge of the spontaneous, almost "natural" source of innate wisdom: the birth of the newborn seer. The *apsoketi-ikala* (literally, the "chant of chanting," or "the chant of healing word") virtually contains that knowledge.

Thanks to his infallible vision, the *nele* is always considered superior to the *inatuleti*. But there is also a hierarchy within learned knowledge, as shown by the institutional organization of shamanistic learning. During the *inatuleti* apprenticeship, the teaching naturally begins with the study of relatively brief texts used for the healing of less serious illnesses. The young *inatuleti* will approach the great texts only later, and only if the teacher decides that his apprentice possesses the necessary skills. The only *inatuleti* who can become the *nele*'s teacher or guide is one who, through many years of apprenticeship, has acquired the knowledge of the *apsoketi-ikala*, one of the "higher chants" in the hierarchic order of shamanistic learning. By slowly

ascending through the hierarchy of the healing chants, the *inatuleti* can thus establish a different relationship with the seer's innate knowledge and even hold some degree of control over it.

This complex set of relationships between role and knowledge can be understood only if we refer back to the key concept of Cuna soul theory, that is, *purpa*. It has already been said that the *inatuleti* has no innate gifts; he acquires his powers through the study of healing chants that, like the *nele*'s body, are exceptionally endowed with *purpa*. As we have seen, *purpa* is the basis of the Cuna idea of organic life. For the noninitiated Cuna, it is the mirror-image, a shadow, or an echo. For the shaman, it is the essential property of a living body, something that is never visible but can be felt or perceived like the heat of a fire, the voice of a man or the cry of an animal. When applied to shamanistic knowledge, *purpa* implies the idea of a secret.

Each healing chant generally tells of the shaman's travels with his spirits in search of the kidnapped *nikapurpalele*. But every chant is accompanied by a second text, which the young *inatuleti* learns only at the end of his apprenticeship. This text, which the Indians call *secreto* in Spanish and *ikala-purpa* in Cuna ("soul of the chant," but also "invisible part of the path"), is the only true source of the chant's effectiveness. A *secreto* generally narrates the origin of the illness, describing the mythical coitus that conceived the evil spirit that created the illness.⁴

Before ritually reciting the chant, the *inatuleti* must repeat the *secreto* silently, for his hearing alone. Were the *inatuleti* not to evoke in silence the secret origin of the illness, his chant would be ineffective. The *inatuleti*'s other source of power lies in his *nelekan*, the ritual statues arranged around the hammock. These spirits are also endowed with *purpa*, and the *inatuleti* always performs his ritual chants before them. Their power is linked to the idea of vision: as it says in *The Way of Mu*, the *nelekan* "bring things to life with their eyes" (Holmer and Wassén 1953). They do not derive their power from their likeness to certain supernatural beings. On the contrary, they are strong because their bodies, the very wood from which they are carved, are animated by *nika-purpa*. Once again, it is not their physical appearance (*wakar*) that counts. Only the *purpa* contained in their bodies allows them, as the

4. On this point, see also Sherzer (1983).

chants say, to “use their vision to penetrate” the world of the spirits. Thus the *inatuleti*, unlike the *nele*, has no direct access to the invisible. During his apprenticeship, he obtains only indirect access to *kurkin*—spiritual strength—by acquiring extra *purpa*, which is inherent to the chants and makes them effective.

All the complex Cuna conception of *purpa* is based upon this idea of the secret, which links the soul to the shaman’s word, and that word to the knowledge of the invisible. But if we take the idea of *purpa* one step further, beyond the mere identification of the secret aspect of material things, and include all the corporeal perceptions other than vision, we will have a better understanding of the logic underlying shamanistic knowledge. In light of this interpretation, the soul’s voyage becomes a metaphor for the experiences felt by the sick person. In other terms, the spirits’ invisible world describes not only a separate realm of the universe, but also that state of *perceiving without seeing* which is the feeling of pain.

Expanding upon the traditional Cuna way of thinking, we may recall that because the *purpa* has been lost in an unknown place, *the illness is also a secret*. That invisible presence hanging around the neck of the sick person in which the shaman recognizes the first symptom of illness designates a perception that the common man cannot explain. During a second, parallel voyage, the shaman must uncover, but never publicly reveal, that secret, using his knowledge of the chant’s hidden part. His prestige, along with that of the tradition itself, depends upon the ritual confrontation of these two secrets.

In other words, as long as we limit our analysis to the theory of souls, which the specialist sees as both the cause of illness and the source of his power to heal, we may think that Cuna traditional healing is based upon an orderly hierarchy between two categories of indigenous specialists—seers and medicine men—who share the same secret knowledge. But what kind of knowledge is this? From a theoretical point of view, the theory of *purpa* essentially reflects a traditional way of organizing the living body’s *qualities*. As a theory regarding the properties of the world, it leaves the relationship between the visible and invisible largely unexplained. In exoteric Cuna terms, it appears to be a paradoxical confrontation between two secrets. To shed further light upon this problem, let us return to the legend of the Cuna soul and follow his meanderings along the *ikala*, that invisible path which leads from the Indian village to the mythical world.

The island and the spirits

Wherever our language leads us to believe there is a body, but no body exists, there is a spirit.

Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1, 36

Seated near the sick Indian’s hammock, the shaman silently recites the secret part of the chant (*ikala purpa*). Next he speaks aloud, to evoke a familiar landscape: the Indian village, the nearby river, the ocean, the forest. Progressively, and with ever greater visionary force, the chant will contrast the description of the Cuna territory with an imaginary geography that lies beyond the horizon. Before we proceed, it may be useful to reflect upon the thin line between visible and invisible that delineates the different spaces of the shaman’s view of the world.

Today, most Cuna live on small islands of coral origin, located in the San Blas 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 practiced only recently, often in the area within the coral reef that protects the island from the Atlantic, and makes the shallow water around the island particularly calm and navigable. Often densely populated, the villages are made up of large reed huts built one next to the other, housing the extended Cuna uxori-local family. As described by the Cuna, 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. This first impression, however, with its naive, dichotomous view of Cuna space, is immediately complicated by a paradox. On the mainland facing the island, at the mouth of the river that 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. There is no place in Cuna thinking 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 the *kalukan*, 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 *kalu* can materialize on a rocky cliff overhanging the ocean, under a thornbush, or in a swamp (Prestan 1976). Paradoxically, the land of the dead is also fertile; here the living find their nourishment. When it is time to observe the great funerary rites, the entire population of the village moves to this spot. Let us briefly describe two such rites, which will lead us to a more accurate vision of their symbolic organization of space.

In Cuna society, when an adult or elderly person dies, the whole community moves to the village of the dead, at the first light of dawn. After the procession has reached the mouth of the river, the corpse is laid out in a wall-less hut. The dead person's head "faces toward dawn," and the whole body is covered by a white cloth. In the symbolic language of *Mu Ikala*, this metaphor always designates the vagina: "From the midst of the woman's white cloth a human being descends," "Her secret white cloth blossoms like a flower" (Holmer and Wassén 1953, vv. 90, 432). Next, the corpse is covered with dirt, which is beaten with shovels and baked by 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. We are reminded of the observation of Wittgenstein (1967): "The destruction of fire is total, unlike that caused by laceration, beating and so on. It must have been this that impressed the human being." The brazier is surrounded by two woven-reed stars, designating the passage into the realm of the dead; the skull of a dog ("to keep the animals away," says Paolino, one of the chiefs of the village whom I knew best); several stones; a cup; and red pepper seeds. Bunches of multicolored feathers and flutes hang from the balsawood poles that hold up the roof. At times, during the funeral chants, these feathers are threaded into the flutes, almost as if to represent sound; they accompany the Chant of the Dead (*masar ikala*) that leads the corpse on its perilous voyage to the realm of the dead. To facilitate this voyage, the living build a small boat, which contains the hunting weapons the dead man will need to defend himself. 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 everything is golden. The Cuna say that the gold is the *color* of the realm of the dead. At sunset, the whole community goes back to its island, where

everyone shares a meal and then has a communal bath of purification. This rite is repeated for three consecutive days after the death, plus the ninth day of the first month and the thirtieth day of the next six months.

When a child dies, the ritual aspect decreases considerably. The body is buried in inhabited earth, inside the family hut, beneath the hammock where the living child slept. The Cuna believe 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 inhabited by the living.

In loco burial is one way to introduce a second repartition of Cuna space along vertical lines: from the top of the sky to the depths of the underworld. Here the world of the dead is an underground place, the "pure golden layer of the earth" mentioned in *The Way of Mu* (v. 183 ff.).

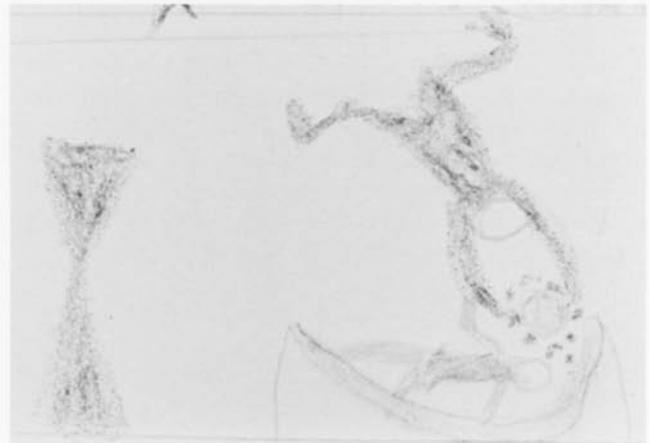
This underground world is made of eight layers. The four upper layers are the birthplace and hideout of the evil illness-bearing spirits. At the very bottom of the fourth layer lies the source of the "golden river" that leads to the lower layers of the earth. It is through these regions that a dead Indian's *purpa* must travel to reach the eighth and lowest layer, home of the spirit of the balsa tree (*nele ukkurwar*). Considered a powerful seer, this spirit is the shaman's main helper and leader of all healing spirits.

By burying the child beneath the hammock in which he always slept, the Indians hope to keep his *purpa* from having to enter the perilous world of the spirits, through which the sick Indian's soul must always travel. 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. Moreover, it transforms the child's body into a forest plant that can reproduce and return to a woman's womb as a "bleeding fruit" (Holmer and Wassén 1953, v. 165). This is why, in one memorable passage from *The Way of Mu*, the mother is 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]; . . . as far as the golden layer [of the earth] it transforms [everything] in pure gold. . . . One by one, the animals climb your spotted limbs dripping with blood. . . . Your limbs curve and bend in the wind; beaten



Nia ikala, pictographic version: Here the auxiliary spirits of the trees come down to drink the smoke from the shaman's brazier. The traditional belief is that smoke is an inebriating beverage for them.



by the wind your limbs send forth a piercing sound like ropes on the foreigner's silver boat.

Ibid. vv. 183–187

In this dramatic description, where birth is likened to a tree bearing fruits in the forest, it should not surprise us to find an allusion to the white man's world, such as the one Lévi-Strauss (1949) has called an example of the "myth's plasticity." Both the horizontal and vertical limits of the world designate a confused space in which spirits, illnesses, natural disasters, and foreigners may cohabit. We shall consider later this aspect of Cuna cosmology. For the moment, let us point out the interchangeability of the earth/sky and island/forest axes. In *The Way of Mu*, the spirits live both "underground" and "beyond the horizon." In *Villages by the Wayside of Madness* (Gomez and Severi 1983),

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 images, horizontal and vertical, live side by side and complement each other in Cuna thinking. The result is a world full of dangers, where enigmatic "fractures" in visible reality give hostile force a hiding place.

To this we should add a Cuna tradition according to which the universe is made of an endless cloth woven with infinitesimal threads. In *Villages by the Wayside of Madness* there is a description of the "innumerable threads that weave the ocean spray" (*ibid.*, vv. 137 ff.). Thus the traditional Cuna idea of the "village of the spirits" is conceived as a tear in the invisible cloth of which the world is made. In *The Way of Mu*, this idea

of the world's invisible pattern is expressed through the image of an enormous net held up at the horizon by the seer spirits. The chant says that this net is invisible not because it is hidden in the underground world, but on the contrary because it "has assumed the color of gold" (ibid., v. 486), by reflecting extremely intense sunlight.

Thus an invisible village, a *kalu* can be concealed anywhere in the world: not only underground or at the edge of the horizon, but also beyond the heavenly vault, which a chant recorded by Densmore (1924–1926) describes as a gigantic mirror of the world. "When I look into the distance, I see clouds like big trees / clouds like boulders, made of tall, grey rocks / I see the clouds like men moving and bending forward / The clouds move nearer / there are clouds that look like a crowd of men advancing. . . ."

For the Cuna, the universe is a dense mosaic of differing, antagonistic territories. Both the horizontal and vertical axes emphasize the *defensive, temporary* character of the earth's upper layer, home of the living. Thus the island, a spot of barren earth emerging from the ocean, resembles the smooth, baked layer of dirt that covers the corpse in the village of the dead. Both places are littered with signs and symbolic objects, threatened on all sides and defended by ritual weapons.

In this ceaseless conflict between the Indians and their enemies, even the spirits are weapons. In this perspective, the double row of statues that witness the shaman's chant, to whom he gives both the word and the power to heal, becomes a decisive element in Indian healing. As the only one able to travel through the world of the invisible, the category of "seer spirit" is crucial to shamanistic theory of souls.

Nevertheless, spirits always maintain an ambiguous character: caught in the eternal conflict between good and evil, they dwell in the no-man's-land between the everyday and the unknown. Obviously spirits are enlarged projections, a hypertrophy of the ideal Cuna identity, which includes the splendor of physical strength as well as the idea of mental prowess. But this identity also refers to an outside world, unknown and perhaps hostile, which includes the animal and the foreigner (Severi 1981). The clear-cut distinction between good and evil spirits—the vegetable spirit *nele* is a "friend" and resembles us, whereas the animal spirit *nia* is an "enemy" and unlike us—is only an apparent one, for the realm of the spirits has a negative definition only ("their world is *not* like ours"). Thus it is a place of constant ambiguity, of torturous uncertainty, of a disorder that not even the seer can always predict.

No one can ever guarantee that the forest hides no animal seers, or that a tree or medicinal plant conceals no poison. Above all, as elsewhere in America, the spirit is not an ancestral presence for the Indians. The statues do not commemorate the past of the Cuna; rather, they represent a need to understand the present-day world, to interpret the worries and conflicts weighing upon the Indian village *today*.

Although the personage of the foreigner may appear to be absent from shamanistic tradition, the ambiguity of the healing chant's negative character, the hostile spirit, forces us to reconsider this impression. Paradoxically, it may be precisely the outsider who actually commands the rite's most secret transformations. Let us contemplate the most banal example: the white man. The defensive nature of the inhabited island, with its correlate of a symbolic universe divided into antagonistic territories, as described above, is not simply the result of some "primordial fear" of nature and of its forces (although from a realistic point of view this element does exist). Its configuration derives from Cuna history, marked by tenacious resistance to European and American colonization. It is only relatively recently that the great majority of Indians have migrated to the San Blas Archipelago. The Cuna of the islands are the only ones who have accepted living in relative, albeit wary, proximity to the white man. Indeed, if the historical surveys of Nordenskiöld (1938) and Stout are correct (1947), these islands are the very refuge to which the Cuna have been banished by colonization.

Farther away, in Chucunaque, the Darien forest touches the Colombian border. The Indians who have refused to accept any external change in their lifestyle still live there. A busy exchange of messengers keeps the two groups connected, but the strict rule is that the Chucunaque Cuna will "speak" only to the island Indians. Even today, the mainland Cuna will not accept any relations with the Panamanian descendants of Latin, Eastern, and Afro-American invaders.

Naturally, one admires the Cuna's constant struggle to maintain their tradition and identity. Still, it would be unfair to them to limit ourselves to a superficial representation of the facts. Certainly, pride and anxiety have played an equally important part in keeping both mainland and island Cuna isolated. Competition, fear, and attraction seem to combine in the Cuna general attitude toward all strangers.

The Indians call the white man *waka* ("evil spirit"), not *tule* ("man"); *merki*, the other term reserved for *gringos*, is anything but complimentary. But although

he may often be despised as a nonhuman being, the white man remains a carrier of power. If he is deprived of his strength and sufficiently controlled, he may even become a kind of trophy. In this case, the white man's much-flaunted power can become the symbolic booty in a conflict between rival villages. Thus, for instance, one of the two communities of the island I came to know best "possesses" a Protestant mission. In response, the other community has allowed a few Catholic missionaries to start a settlement and found a small hospital near the village. Colonization has introduced the white man into the Cuna's conflictual context, touching off a kind of competition between intracultural and intercultural strife.⁵

Certainly, the present dynamics of Cuna competitiveness are not unrelated to their forced restriction in space. Consequently, the illusory possession of a white hostage seems to be a reward, albeit bitter, for these people, who find themselves cut off from the world, while tragically locked in the conflicts generated by this isolation. Ironically, it is this situation that today enables the white man, temporarily low economically and militarily, to effectively overcome the strenuous resistance raised against him for centuries by the Cuna.

It should never be forgotten that the American Indians, particularly those of Central America, have been living side by side with the white man for several centuries. Even when, as in the case of the Cuna, they have been able to combat effectively a generally destructive physical contact, the Indians have still maintained that this now inevitable presence has irreparably lacerated their world, upsetting once and for all the balance of forces regulating it. Transformations not directly produced by the repeated military expeditions, Spanish and other, are now linked to this deeply rooted and obsessive certainty that something has been torn apart. The ultimate crisis that the Golden Men (*Olotule*, as the Cuna call themselves) have always managed to repel from their world now insinuates itself surreptitiously, threatening the very transmission of traditional knowledge. The result is a struggle that pits elders who feel betrayed against youths trapped between dissatisfaction with their own world and attraction to, but fear of, a world of which they have little understanding. Today white penetration is more subtle and widespread than it once was. Despite their

stubborn heroism, the old men have been unable to fence it off completely.

The healing chants are also rooted in this crisis, as we have indicated elsewhere in our discussion of the madness-chant's image of the foreigner as illness (Severi 1982). But it is in the ambiguous definition of the evil spirit that the crisis most thoroughly unfolds. The relationship between the white man and the spirit that delineates the Cuna theory of madness is still alive and clearly defined. Not all evil spirits are subject to summary association with the foreigner, but there is no doubt that *all* foreigners are spirits. This explains how the "invisible village of the white man," the big-city *kalu*, has become a legitimate part of the language used to narrate Cuna history and politics, and how it is that the spirits of the forest are traditionally believed to have participated in the Spanish-Indian world. Indian accounts portray the animal spirits as enigmatic tricksters consistently present in the countless clashes and ambushes that for centuries have pitted the Indians against the whites. The Indians know perfectly well that it was men, and not mysterious animal spirits, who fought those battles. Still, they *also* think that war *produces* spirits and that a conflict cannot take place without their help. For analogous reasons, these same spirits show up in descriptions of illnesses.

This aspect of the conception of the spirit leads us to recognize one of the basic functions of Cuna shamanism: to represent, in a symbolism only partially dependent upon mythology, the ambiguous and anxiogenic dimension of the unknown. In terms of Cuna cosmology, this dimension is described as an unknown, yet possible space, a *terra incognita*, in which traditional thought represents the foreign, the new, and the incomprehensible. As we shall see later, the description of these ambiguous, ever-changing aspects of the world is always linked to the representation of pain.

Let us return to the spirits, to examine their positive incarnations. The ritual representation of the land of the spirits, as minutely described in the shaman's travels, reveals what we would call a reverse function of the representation of the unknown. By this we mean the image of the auxiliary spirit of an ideal Indian identity, which is in turn built up as a striking reversal of the afterworld. This work of legitimation of identity is certainly the most spectacular and public of the shaman's functions, although its foundations are kept well hidden from the ordinary Indian.

We shall come back to this identity-building aspect of the shaman's discourse. First, however, it should

5. Such a situation is analogous to the one described, from the viewpoint of analytical therapy, by H. Searles (1979), especially in the essay "The effort to drive the other mad."

be remarked that this new image of the shaman's activity will not fit easily into the orderly hierarchy of shamanistic roles that a simple analysis of the traditional theory of souls would lead to. The ambiguity of the spirit can be understood only by recognizing the unstable balance that exists between the ever-changing everyday world and the fixed categories of the mythical world. If even the seer spirit of balsa wood, the shaman's chief helper—whose job it is to restore the lost soul to the sick person's body—is itself fraught with the ambiguity between good and evil (and resemblance and dissemblance to the human form), we cannot simply claim that "using some spirits to protect man from some other spirits" reflects the traditional thought of a small group of shamans, themselves the product of a society seeking a way of settling its conflicts. We cannot just say that the shaman evokes evil merely in order to exorcise it by traveling through the unknown territory of the stranger and bringing back its tamed image.

Only by seeing the complex symbolism of the shaman through the restrictive lens of soul theory can we uphold an image of the healer as intermediary between the spiritual world and the community. If we concentrate instead on the idea of the spirit itself, with its ritual manipulation and its predominance in the chants, it will lead us to a different view of the intricate web of social relations expressed in the ritual recitation of shamanistic chants.

In reality, the traditional image of the spirit, the tale of its voyage (mirroring the travels of the lost soul and foretelling its "return"), the chant's repeated comments about the spirit's personality, hesitations, angers, and so on, all define the perspective from which Cuna thinking approaches the general problem of the *relationship with the invisible*. This is the very dimension that the theory of souls leaves unresolved. At first, Indian tradition seems quite clear about this. The spirits live in an invisible society where, as in human society, one may run into leaders and subjects, the brave and the cowardly, and, as in *The Way of Mu*, even drunkard and temperate beings, wise seers and mindless thugs. Too often, the anthropological interpretation has been that these symbolic relations are simply "replicas" of the real relations that exist in society. But this approach is merely a transcription of the exoteric Indian conception itself, which postulates a fundamental specularity between this world and the other, tending to explain real relations on the basis of symbolic ones.

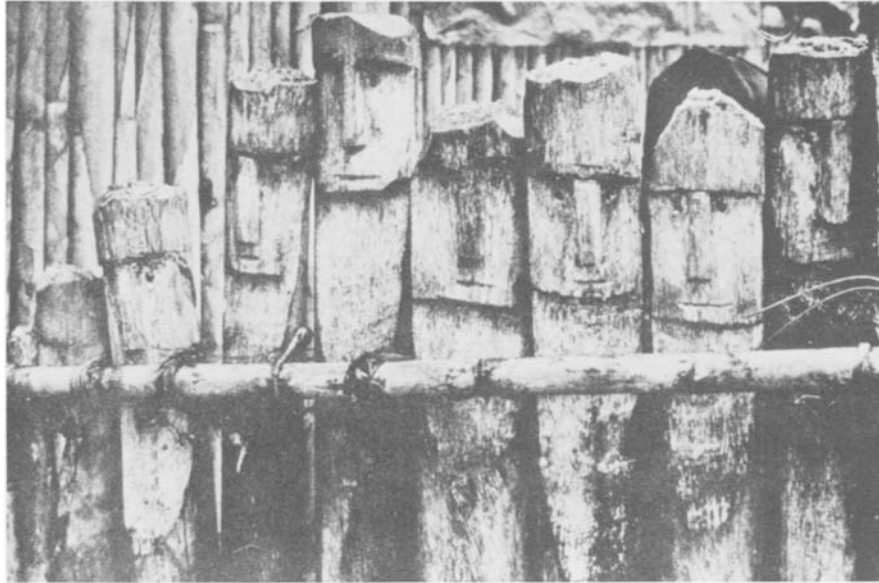
Actually, the true nature of the relationship between the spirits and Indian society emerges only if we

acknowledge that relations "among spirits" are not a "reflection" of relations among Indians, except as a gross caricature. Rather, the analysis of the relations among spirits reveals the set of *relations among relations*, which constitute the deeper dynamics of all shamanistic tradition. Two groups of relations are the foundation for the shaman's chant, as well as for the healer's public image and even for the very idea of his voyage. The first group defines the shaman's relations with the spirits during the rite; the second includes his relations, after the long process of initiation, with the Indian community. If we want to understand the dynamics of the shaman's activity, we must study the nature of relationships established between these two sets of relations that crystallize in the representation of the spirit's world. From this point of view, the spirit becomes *the key to conceiving any relation in traditional thought*. In other words, to understand the relations among the spirits who people the chants, we must take a closer look at the society surrounding the shaman, comparing the relations *among Indians* with the relations *between spirits and Indians*.

This more complex outlook leads us to Bateson's crucial observations on ritual symbolism, and to his concept of "progressive differentiation" or schismogenesis: "Schismogenesis," Bateson wrote in 1936, in his all-too-neglected classic, *Naven*, "is a process of differentiation in the rules of individual behaviour, which results from a combination of cumulative interactions among individuals" (Bateson 1958: 175). In this perspective, the study of an individual figure's roles in a set of relations—which we now intend to apply to the social image of the Cuna shaman—must consider the "reactions of individuals to the reactions of other individuals" (*ibid.*).

This crucial remark takes us away from vague considerations on individual personality, which may or may not be compatible with the group's cultural imprint. What we have now is an abstract and purposely formal outlook concerning a combination of relations and the dynamic behind their evolution. Bateson theorized two fundamental types of schismogenetic relationship: complementary and symmetrical:

Many systems of relationship, either between individuals or groups of individuals, contain a tendency towards progressive change. If, for example, one of the patterns of cultural behaviour, considered appropriate in individual A, is culturally labeled as an assertive pattern, while B is expected to reply to this with what is culturally regarded as submission, it is likely that this submission will encourage



Some auxiliary spirits perched in a Cuna hut. These spirits are supposed to witness the ritual recitation and help the shaman in his therapy. (Photograph by A. Parker, from Parker and Neal 1977)

further assertion, and that this assertion will demand still further submission. We have thus a potentially progressive state of affairs, and unless other factors are present to restrain the excesses of assertive and submissive behaviour, A must necessarily become more and more assertive, while B become more and more submissive. . . . Progressive changes of this sort we may describe as *complementary schismogenesis*.

There is another type of relation, however, that in Bateson's words "equally contains the germs of progressive change. If, for example, we find boasting as the cultural pattern of behavior in one group, and that the other group replies to this with boasting, a competitive situation may develop in which boasting leads to more boasting, and so on. This type of progressive change we may call *symmetrical schismogenesis*."

Later (1972), Bateson expanded on this formulation. More generally, we can say that symmetrical schismogenesis is the "progressive separation" that occurs when competition is based upon the accentuation of a single relational response, whereas complementary schismogenesis is founded upon the progressive exaggeration of different types of relational behavior. Following these ideas, it can be argued that the process of schismogenesis, be it complementary or symmetrical, is not only a way for individuals or groups

(not necessarily only *real* ones) to differentiate themselves from each other, but also an essential means of coexisting, establishing unstable relations, and sending messages (Houseman and Severi 1986). Thus the ultimate separation of individuals and groups should be understood as the final *degeneration* of the schismogenetic process, which actually points to the conditions of an unstable relationship. In this perspective, Bateson's proposal of a theoretically endless series of cumulative interactions provides us with a model for the transient relationships that link sets of relations.

Armed with these new ideas, we may break away from the static concept of hierarchical relations between seer and healer, which had developed out of our analysis of soul theory. We can now go on to examine the specific way in which the shaman *builds meanings* by manipulating spirits. The preservation, representation, and administration of his secret knowledge—chanted in a language the profane cannot decipher—is certainly his way of differentiating himself from the other Cuna, after his lengthy initiation. On the other hand, the community's very identity is deeply rooted in the shaman's secret and in the tradition whence he derives his authority. To the "golden men" (as the Cuna call themselves), the shaman's knowledge is the summit of their history and culture. Thus when

the shaman—who knows not only the secrets of the invisible souls, but also the *lingua franca* that enables him to make pacts with the animal and vegetable spirits—shows himself to be as different as possible from the others, he is confirming the group's shared rules of behavior. The case of healing epidemics, in which the seer's sleep requires the entire village to observe a series of rigorous prohibitions (related to food and sex), is the clearest example of this complementarity between the shaman and the group (Howe 1976).

We have here the prerequisites for describing these dynamics as *complementary schismogenesis*, in Bateson's terms. The more unique the shaman declares himself to be, the more exceptional and rare his qualities and powers, the more the group will reiterate his conformity to an all-inclusive, single model for collective identity. Furthermore, we can now discard the idea that relations among spirits are a reflection of real relations among men, and thus explain the community's relations with the spirits. Precisely because it concentrates only on defining relations among relations, the theory of schismogenesis *does not distinguish* between symbolic and real relations. Indeed, from this point of view, such a distinction may even seem meaningless: not only do symbolic relations fail to represent social relations, but all relations are *both* real and symbolic, albeit at different logical levels. Thus visible and invisible cease to appear as two fixed poles, or two distinct cosmological regions. Rather, they become two qualities of everyday experience, continually intertwined in the most varied relations. As a consequence, the relationship with the spirits, as described in the ritual recitation of a therapeutic chant, *competes* with real relations, rather than reflecting them. Contrary to a persistent anthropological belief, the shaman is certainly not the only person able to contact the spirits. In Cuna society, quite literally, *anyone* can do it. It might even be said that communicating with the spirits is not the exception, but the rule. The forest is teeming with invisible presences and almost every Indian knows short formulas, invocations, or magic spells with which to address them.

We must add, however, that the very initiation process whereby the shaman becomes a "seer" like the spirits (and learns to speak *their* language) sets off a parallel process of differentiation *between the shaman and the spirit*. To avoid losing his identity and thereby forfeiting his healing powers, the shaman must ritually negotiate contracts that will *control* both his own

auxiliary spirits and the rival pathogenic spirits. Thus the chanter's invocation of the spirit's help necessarily implies two contradictory schismogenetic processes. On the one hand, the shaman strives to preserve the *difference* between himself and the group, to maintain a distinction between his own behavior, which is ostensibly transgressive, and that of the community, which conforms to pre-established rules. On the other hand, when he relates to the spirits he must act on the basis of a conventional but precarious bond with them. This does not mean that the shaman "identifies" with the spirits. On the contrary, performing a symmetrical behavior, he *competes* with them. It is clear that, in differentiating himself from the human condition he is *moving closer* to the world of the spirits, along the lines of a *symmetrical schismogenesis*: the stronger the auxiliary spirit, the more powerful the shaman must be. And as the pathological spirit grows more threatening, so must the shaman be able to respond accordingly. The shaman's ritual recitation is completely immersed in these unstable dynamics. The chant is both invocation and duel. When the shaman silently repeats the chant's secret and then feeds the inebriating beverage to his own auxiliary spirits, thereby reinforcing their "headdresses" (i.e., their mental strength), he is walking a thin line between these two rival sets of relations: complementary to the other Indians and symmetrical to the spirits.

Thus the healer-chanter must always *remain different*, both from the other Indians in day-to-day life and from the spirits in the rite. This crucial position is the foundation of his power, as represented in his chant to the spirits and reconfirmed each time he pronounces it. Such a complex network of relations, with its abstract implications, is quite clear in Cuna society. The Cuna are extremely careful in scrutinizing and evaluating the healer's position as it continually changes in the vast range of relations between humans and spirits. And the shamans themselves, with their constant struggles for supremacy, always keep an eye on one another.

Unlike the knowledge handed down in myths, the power to heal is under constant exposure to the jealous and critical surveillance of the social group. If the personality of the shaman (the *nele* or the *inatuleti*) is not sufficiently differentiated from normal behavior, the power to heal can disappear. The reverse is also true: loss of power can become a threat to the shaman himself. If he seems unable to control his relations with the spirits, he will appear to resemble them too closely.

This behavior may be viewed as excessive symbolic transgression, leading him to social marginalization and even, in some extreme cases, to capital punishment. In many Amerindian societies (see, for instance, Devereux 1963 for the Mohave case) the shaman's chances of losing control of his own powers are foreseen and described in detail. Such a failure is felt to be a threat to the entire community. As a result, the shaman becomes a terrible danger, and often is killed.

Thus, precisely because of the interconnection between the various differentiation processes, shamanism risks becoming (in societies other than the Cuna) what Bateson called a *degenerative system*, that is, one that eliminates itself through loss of meaning. This aspect of ceaseless danger, of borderline socialization, makes shamanistic tradition particularly sensitive to outside stimuli, and seems to characterize the social image of the Cuna shaman. Many ethnographers have pointed out that shamanistic symbolic systems (albeit acknowledged as such by intuitive methods) are extremely sensitive to anything new, foreign, or different. It appears that in many societies (certainly for the Cuna) shamanism is one of the most sensitive points of encounter with the outside world, the aspect of most rapid transformation in traditional knowledge. Yet because its renewed form dynamically adapts its basic coordinates to their new context, it is also one of the more durable.

Little is known about the history of Cuna shamanistic tradition, nor is this the place to dwell upon it in detail. There is almost general agreement on at least one point, however: the chants are relatively recent. As we will see, the Cuna themselves proudly recall the passage from ritual performances to the chanting. The available information is too scarce to permit any definitive conclusions, but we may reasonably suppose that if the chants existed in the rites described by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century observers, they probably were—as they still are in some Amazonian societies—a limited and minor part of a broader system of symbols and ritual gestures. It has only been in recent centuries, thanks to the Indians' contact, and especially to their direct or indirect *confrontation* with the white man, that the chants have grown to the unusual size and central importance recognized today. We may tentatively agree with those who have described the Cuna shamanistic tradition as the progressive transformation of a ritual system founded upon symbolic gestures (which still flourish in other societies neighboring to the Cuna), and we may support

their claim that this evolution coincided with the "birth of an epic" founded upon texts and preserved in picture-writing, although still transmitted mainly by oral tradition (Kramer 1970).

Careful examination of the few great chants that have been published confirms this hypothesis, from the references to Spanish cannons to the spyglass of the seer spirits in *Villages by the Wayside of Madness*; from the foreigner's "silver boat" found in *The Way of Mu* to the modern chant "of the scissors" (*Tisla ikala*: Holmer and Wassén 1963). This evolution involves positive and resilient qualities, yet it is tormented by the presence (intermittent; not, as elsewhere, victorious and overwhelming) of a besieging civilization. With exceptional clarity, the traditional elaboration of this intermittent presence sheds light on the chant's hidden function: to construct a *terra incognita*, populated by symbols and continually redesigned, depending upon the disturbances imposed by history. We believe this to be an identifying trait of every traditional representation of suffering. If the Cuna shamanistic tradition strikingly reveals that function, it is because of the remarkably explicit way in which its discourse of the spirits and their ambiguities have provided a successful means of reacting to real and imagined encroachment by the white man. As a result, we can today recognize some of the traits of our own culture in the *terra incognita* of the Cuna healing chants.

Metamorphosis and pain

At first glance, the chants bear few traces of the elaborate mosaic of different symbolic spaces we have described above. The shaman's invocation almost neglects the mythical universe, dwelling upon the actual conditions of the rite. This leads us to the setting of the ritual scene, as reflected in the chants.

As we have seen, the etiological myth, relating the origin of evil and illness, is a secret in Cuna tradition. This unformulated text is the heart of the chant, and yet it is not entirely a part of it. The chant involves the idea that the unchanging partition into different worlds, which creates the permanent appearance of all beings in the universe, was never completed.⁶ It is as if the static spatial order of the world had *already* been upset, merely by the appearance of illness. From the moment that this mythical universe, which can be orderly only inasmuch as it is abstract, is exposed to the

6. The reader will find a version of this myth in Severi (1982).

happenstance of daily life, and thus to the rhythm of time, the world is suddenly revealed to be the realm of disorder.

The healing chant must not only represent, but also explain—in its own perspective—pain. The mental model of the world it creates must withstand time and chance; suffering and mythical order must be able to coexist in it. From this dilemma arise the idea of metamorphosis—the ceaseless interpenetration of differing worlds, which is the true abstract horizon of the chants—and the narrative style of these texts, based predominantly upon formulaic enunciations, which are then varied almost imperceptibly (Severi 1985). Finally, apart from the mythical circuit to which the chants never stop alluding, the Cuna healer always describes a true *chain of transformations* in the *ikala*. This is the crux of the entire issue.

At the core of the chant, and of the entire ritual manipulation of illness, we find the Cuna idea of *binyemai*—the incessant changing appearance of men, animals, trees—everything in the world. Thus the jaguar in the *nia ikala* can soar through the sky, blazing like the sun, or sing in the night like an invisible bird in the forest (Severi 1982). Indeed, the jaguar *is* the sun, just as those sounds in the dark *are* the jaguar. This idea of a changing world, light-years away from the fixed consistency of the myth, allows the *Mu Ikala* woman in childbirth to become a tree whose leafless limbs are broken in the wind. Likewise, the fetus can become a bleeding fruit hidden among those limbs, or a log swept off by an impetuous river; and the shaman can transform that fetus into a bead or a cacao bean, perhaps even one of the same cacao beans burning at the foot of the sick Indian's hammock during the chant.

Thus is the shaman's voyage: not some simple fairy tale of the soul as many have believed, but the traditional form of describing the metamorphoses of a world immersed in time. Seen in this light, the Cuna shaman's voyage reminds us of Wittgenstein's definition of comprehension in a memorable passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953). Wittgenstein remarks that the process of comprehension—defined by him as the logical movement of thought as unrelated to any kind of intentional psychology—objectively leads man to create *intermediary terms* to link different phenomena, while simultaneously “discovering pathways” through that “maze of streets” which is language. Such an elaboration of intermediate terms, here deriving both from cosmology and from the

experience of pain, creates the impression that the shaman's chant is narrating nothing. Actually, the healer is minutely reclassifying a few fragments of his own reality into an entirely different framework: the world of the spirits. As we have said, the Cuna tradition defines “being sick” as “feeling without seeing.” Thanks to the model of the soul's travels, Cuna traditional chants construct a net of intermediary terms around the experience of disorder and pain.

To pronounce the healing chants—in Cuna terms, “to follow the path”—is to use the word to explore the way leading to the many invisible replicas of the world, while creating a model for the experiential crisis that suffering always represents. The keywords in the Indians' commentary of the chants now acquire a deeper meaning: “to travel” means to attempt to understand the world's modifications, perceived through a model of physical pain, or the anguish that accompanies the delirium. “To establish a new pact with the spirits” means to weave this net of comprehension toward and beyond the limits of the known world, building a model for this *terra incognita* and simultaneously one for the experience of pain.

Thus although I have attempted to study the social dynamics of shaman activity from the double perspective of the soul and the spirit, and of the system of their relations, I would venture to say that shamanism is not to be considered *only as an institution*. Rather, its ultimate function appears here to be the construction, by way of traditional concepts, of a paradigm to balance the inner *terra incognita* revealed in suffering and the twin *terra incognita* situated at the limits of perception. The confrontation of these two aspects of experience—one situated *too far* and the other *too close* to everyday perception—reveals the fundamental features of the traditional representation of suffering.

Let us now recall again that the chants are probably the outcome of a recent evolution of an ancient ritual tradition. According to Kramer (1970), the “chant of chants” (*apsoket ikala*) records this most recent transformation of shamanistic tradition. It tells of a highly improbable, solemn, ecumenical assembly of chiefs and shamans from all the villages, in which it was decided that the chants, and the chants alone, would thenceforth narrate and preserve traditional knowledge. As a result, some therapeutic rituals disappeared, and the word became the sole, all-powerful instrument of the shaman.

Although it is formulated in the emblematic, sententious style of myth, this story can perhaps be taken literally. The origin of the shamanistic text is indeed the ritual gesture. Here the myth is so explicit that it almost acquires the character of a saga. It is as if one day a collective decision was made never to dance again, but to describe dances; to avoid masks and body paint, but to list them endlessly in minute detail; to stop mimicking the behavior of the animals, but to learn and speak their language.

Herein lies the essential paradox of this text: certainly the chants are descriptions of rites, just as the images of the spirits that populate the chants dance and perform symbolic gestures that the Indians may once have performed publicly in the middle of the Cuna villages. But today the chants are still very close to the ritual gesture itself: there is so little difference between the gesture and its description that the latter can almost be called a rite in itself. Emotions, images, ordinary objects, and rituals are brought forth in seemingly haphazard fashion, no longer arranged in any order of discourse. These fragments of reality appear together, both in the ritual scene and in the shaman's narration of his voyage. When ordinary objects are named in the ceremonial language, they are transformed, arranged in a different type of order, redimensioned to fit the theater of metamorphosis that is the rite.

We have spoken at length of the subtle relations between the soul, the secret, and the word. Almost as though confabulating to eliminate the superficial image of the world, in league with the spirits that redelineate the boundaries of visible and invisible, these relations turn the ritual into an incandescent crucible, where a world lying parallel to our own is evoked. From the esoteric viewpoint of shamanistic dogma, the paradox is explained in one word: *purpa*, the sonic dimension of the invisible. Thus the chant appears as a long sequence of pure sounds that keep the uninitiated from seeing the *Nia Ikala's* world of invisible villages, or the *Mu Ikala's* woman in childbirth, with her "inner body" torn asunder by the stormwinds of suffering. Once the ordinary objects (fruit, trees, beads, calabashes, brazier) have been minutely detailed in the *inatuleti's* mystery language (which is also the language of the animals), they can no longer be seen with normal vision. To chant is to indicate the way—the *ikala*—to step out of the world. It is to remove evoked reality from the power of the eyes, just as physical or psychic pain appears to consciousness as an invisible internal



A one-legged spirit, with an impressive expression of pain on his face. (Photograph by A. Parker, from Parker and Neal 1977)

presence. It is as if the *ikala*, the path that dictates the logic of traditional chants, always beginning with a minute description of all that has preceded it, gave access to the invisible by using only sound.

Thus "pathway of metamorphoses" might be the best way to describe the shaman's own view of the spirit's voyage. This metaphor helps us to understand a crucial aspect of Cuna chants: the minutely detailed realism that always precedes the narration of the voyage. As the *Mu Ikala* makes perfectly clear, the rite—reduced to pure words—must always begin with the real world, as represented by the ordinary but authentic image of the person (a friend, a relative, an older woman) who has

sought the shaman's help. The rite cannot proceed without first patiently recording these people's gestures, the tiniest modifications of their faces, the movements that express their anguish from the minute they sense that pain is felt by someone. Thus, setting in motion a sort of time reversal, the rite actually starts by returning to its antecedents: the entire beginning of the chant is a lengthy narration of the person (the old midwife in *The Way of Mu*, the wife of the madman in the *Nia Ikala*) who has asked the shaman to begin the rite. This realistic image reminds us, however, that the premise of any mythical voyage is real pain. Too many observers have considered the shaman to be a sort of bureaucrat of the soul, a peaceful negotiator of universal discord. In observing the shaman's actions, and especially his words, few have emphasized that they are always a complex representation of the *undecidable states* caused by uncertainty and conflict, both in the universe and in personal experience. Yet neither *The Way of Mu* nor *Villages by the Wayside of Madness* can be construed as mere accounts of a reestablishment of order, as a triumphant struggle against the forces of evil, illness, death.

In the chants the presentation of an interminable list of gestures, with its insistent repetition of objects and situations, is actually a continuous allusion to a tacit premise, the rigorously unspoken word that guards the secret. As in Amazonian cultures, in Cuna tradition power lies in knowledge and in the eloquence that knowledge bestows. Herein lies the power to transform and understand the inexpressible appearance of pain. The secret itself stands for the esoteric region of shamanistic tradition, that which describes the origin of the animals, the trees in the forest, the depths of the sea, the exploits of the stars. From the shaman's intimacy with this secret eloquence of the universe come the main rhetorical figures of the Cuna chant: the endless repetition, the continuous allusion to the gestures that accompany the shaman's words, the pungent smoke issuing from the brazier, the color of the cacao beans, the inebriating power of the ashes, the sufferings of the sick body lying in the hammock.

In chants, language is only one dimension in the production of meaning. The language of the chants is *fragile*; often, as in *Villages by the Wayside of Madness*, it borders on pure sound or onomatopoeia. A perfect example is in the spirit village of metamorphoses (Severi 1982), where the echoes of animal cries accompany a complex classification of the

characteristic symptoms of madness. It is this fragility, reflection of a vision of the universe's complexity, that strikes us in conjunction with a powerful formulaic style. However, we do not intend to reduce the importance of these texts to the categories of the "birth of an epic" proposed by Kramer (1970). The very form of the chant—repeated pronunciation of formulas in varying tones—indicates that we are still far indeed from the creation of a literary genre. In the *ikala* the spoken word still serves as a ritual reconstruction of the experience of pain, delirium, or invasion by illness.

In this way we can understand the reason for the chants' obsessive realism, which always precedes and regularly intersperses the shaman's narration of his fantastic voyage. From this description of precisely defined bits of everyday life, we can clearly grasp the concrete connection of the chain of abstract concepts (soul, spirit, and path) implied by the ritual scene we have tried to analyze in this work. The suffering body stretched in the hammock, from which the soul is thought to have fled, the statues of spirits gathered around that body, the brazier with its dense cacao smoke: these symbols both materialize the text and indicate its ideal context. Almost by self-reference, the chant *contains* the ritual scene, just as the image of the ritual—deprived of gestures and reduced to the word alone—contains the chant. The ancient rite has disappeared, along with its symbolic gestures, but its style has been perfectly preserved in the intense traditional text, as still secretly intoned by the Cuna shaman.

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