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Narratives among the Mola Blouses of the Kuna: A Blending of the Old and New Worlds

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The Kuna of the San Blas (Kuna Yala) region of Panama are highly regarded for the mola panels that they make using appliqué and reverse appliqué. These panels form the front and back of blouses that the women and their daughters wear both in their daily lives and for special occasions. Mari Lynn Salvador found, when doing her research on the making of mola panels, that there are different types of designs and that these categories are recognized by the Kuna women themselves as being distinct.¹ Each of the different categories requires a different approach to its manufacturing process.

One particular category has a narrative quality, that either tell stories of daily life in a Kuna village, recount one of their many stories that explain their world view and/or depict an image of a Christian parable or event. These narrative mola panels are worth examining for several reasons. They are made in a fashion unlike any of the other mola panels. They demonstrate a similarity to other media used by the Kuna. Using the mola blouses in the collection of Denison University as examples, it also becomes clear that the Kuna absorb the Christian stories as their own and use them not only to explain Kuna realities, but also picture themselves playing parts in these stories. This discussion will begin with a brief history as it relates to the development of the mola blouse.

The Kuna are an indigenous people who, because of their location, came into contact with the early Europeans explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Also, because of this location, they have seen much strife since the arrival of the Europeans. Many governments have tried to claim the land as their own; the Spanish government, the Panamanian government, the Columbian government and even the American government when plans were being established for the Panama Canal. Throughout, the Kuna have remained cohesive, to the point that they have retained sovereignty over their lands, one of the few indigenous groups to do so.²

The first written account of the Kuna dates to the early seventeenth century. They were a peaceable group and, rather than fight against the incoming Spaniards, they relocated. From the beginning their tactic for survival was one that involved evasion. As people of other origins moved into the Isthmus of Panama they forbade intermarriage of any kind. This policy has, over time, ensured a strong cohesiveness amongst the Kuna.³

The Kuna then lived a simple life, with the embellishment of their bodies and their homes an important part of their day. A great deal of time and effort was expended in the decoration of their bodies using natural pigments. Evidence seems to point to the fact that they were also cotton cultivators and that the women had the technology and ability to weave. They wove hammocks and sarong-like wrappings that they wore below their waists.⁴

¹ Salvador, Mari Lynn, “Contemporary Kuna Women’s Arts,” in Salvador, M. (ed.) *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997), 172-75.

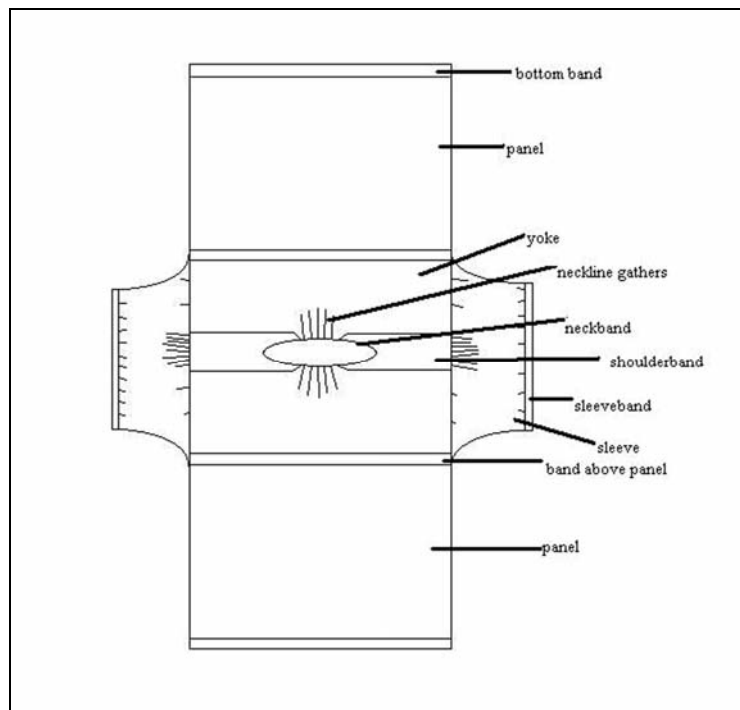
² Tice, Karin, *Kuna Craft, Gender and the Global Economy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 34-55.

³ Puls, Herta, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama* (Buckinghamshire, UK: Shire Publications, Ltd., 1988), 8.

⁴ Wafer, Lionel, *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1903, Reprint from original edition of 1699), 136-39.

The Spanish withdrew from the region in 1611. From 1625 until 1725, French Huguenots lived among the Kuna. For reasons that are unclear, the Kuna permitted the men to marry Kuna women, resulting in a blending of traditions and information. In 1726, due to heightened suspicions of treachery against them, the indigenous population rose against all those of foreign and mixed blood. The region remained destabilized until 1790, when all foreign interests were retracted and the Kuna regained their independence. The Kuna did not return to the coastal areas until the mid nineteenth century.⁵

Despite the independent nature of the Kuna, they adopted mola-making, which was an activity that relied totally on the introduction of western influences and materials. They required the importation of fabrics, needles, sewing thread and scissors as well as instruction on how to use them. The basic chemise format, as well as the strategy to assemble it, seems likely to have been a Huguenot imprint, however there is no definitive evidence linking the two. Regardless, once the framework was established and the potential of the tools made clear to the Kuna, they created something that was special. The elements of the blouse pattern were combined with traditional dress and patterns used for body embellishment to create a product that are, even today, uniquely Kuna.⁶



*Fig. 1. Diagram Illustrating the Parts of the Mola Blouse.
The side seams have been undone so the blouse lies flat (Source: T. Jennings-Rentenaar).*

Mola blouses are formulaic in their construction (fig. 1). There are five pieces to the blouse – the front and back panels, the two sleeves and the yoke. The seams joining the main pieces are all enclosed, thus hiding all of the raw edges. The neckline is created by simply cutting a straight line along the midline of the yoke, in the direction from one shoulder to the other shoulder, and

⁵ Puls, *Textiles of the Kuna Indians of Panama*, 1988, 13.

⁶ Salvador M. L., "The Clothing Arts of the Cuna of San Blas, Panama," in Graburn, N. (ed.) *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkley: University of California, 1976), 169.

large enough to fit someone's head. Bands, often embellished, are sewn around the neckline, at the top of the panel, at the sleeve end to create a sleeve band if it is a gathered sleeve, and at the bottom of the panel. The neckline band is underlined by another band that traces the shoulder to the sleeve. Occasionally, a decorative band will be sewn along the sleeve seam as it meets the yoke front and back. The band along the bottom of the mola blouse encloses all of the fabric layers making up the mola panel. All of these bands vary in their complexity.

The mola panel is constructed in a technique referred to as reverse appliqué. Layers of fabric are laid on top of each other. The design is cut through from the top revealing the colors underneath. Small stitches serve to hold the cut and rolled-under raw edges. Intricate designs can be created in this fashion. The Kuna aesthetic involves color and design that encompasses all of the available space. Increased use of color can be incorporated using small insertions of colored fabrics, in colors other than the colors of the individual layers. These colors are exposed through small lateral slits that are beyond those needed to execute the body of the design. Other design elements can be directly appliquéd. Embroidery is also used to embellish a design, however, in most cases the use of embroidery is frowned upon as it is a very quick way to incorporate additional color.⁷ There are two separate panels, one on the front of the mola blouse and one on the back. Although the designs are not identical, the theme is usually the same and a similar palette of colors is used.

The Making of a Narrative Mola Panel

One category of mola panels depicts stories of varying subject matter – stories of the Kuna history; stories that explain their world view and beliefs; and stories that relay the Christian message. This narrative style appears unlike any of the other panels. They are often done in two layers, however, if a third layer is used, it is of little more significance than if only two were used. The top layer is typically red, whereas the bottom layer is usually black or navy blue. The top layer, and if there is a middle layer, can be cut away around the periphery, thus exposing the bottom layer on which to build the characters and set the stage for the story. Body shapes, foliage and furniture are added on top as dictated by the storyline, each object acquiring its own supporting middle layer as if existing in its own space. A sense of layering begins to take over the image. The middle layer, if there is one, is usually turned under showing a fine edge of color along the cut edge of the top layer. Often, other pieces of folded fabrics are also included giving the perception of many layers. These pieces are often not continuous, showing breaks and even changes of color, providing the clue that they are not a complete layer. This technique of inserting other bits and pieces adds to the complexity of the panel and is somewhat confounding for the observer. It also gives the impression of a story being told, rather spontaneously. All of these characteristics set this style of panel making apart from other styles (fig. 2). This is also the style used for stories based on events in the Bible, therefore clearly placing this latter group in the same category as the village stories (fig. 3).

⁷ Salvador, *Molas of the Cuna Indians: A Case Study of Artistic Criticism and Ethno-Aesthetics* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1971), 137.



Fig. 2 (left). Narrative Mola Panel Depicting a Village Meeting.

DU1972.327 (Source: T. Jennings-Rentenaar).

Fig. 3 (right). Narrative Mola Panel Depicting Noah's Ark.

DU1972.378 (Source: T. Jennings-Rentenaar).

Other Media as Precursors to the Design of the Mola Narrative Panel

The Kuna do not possess a written language, rather they write in the form of little images that follow lines across a page.⁸ Denison University has within its collection pictographic manuscripts that relate closely to the pictograph script of the Kuna. The manuscripts are more complex and are typically written by the traditional chieftains and medicine men. They detail a specific event, with different figures and shapes included to extend the meaning. Figure 4 depicts the "Journey of the Soul." The relationship to the narrative panels is clear. The circle draws the frame, in this case heaven with the crowned deity, within which the notable activity occurs. This is not unlike the mola panels that have used the bottom layers to create a frame around the activity (figs. 2 and 3). The body sizes are not related or proportional and the shapes are flat. Perspective is not an important aspect of the design. Also, shapes and forms seem to be added ad hoc, as the storyline develops. Local flora and fauna embellish the image, much as they would fill in the surrounding area if it were a mola panel.⁹

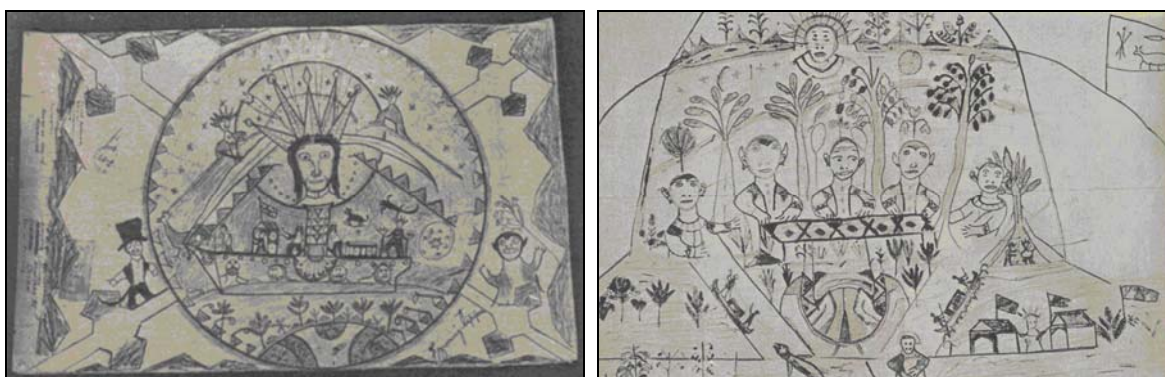


Fig. 4 (left). Manuscript depicting "The Journey of the Soul."

DU1973.157 (Source: Denison University).

Fig. 5 (right). Manuscript depicting "The Creation Story."

DU1973.152 (Source: Denison University).

⁸ Nele and R. P. Kantule, *Picture-Writings and Other Document* (Goteberg, Sweden: Erland Nordenskiold, 1928-1930), 13.

⁹ Steven Rosen, *Art and Artifacts of the San Blas Cuna: An Exhibition from the Denison University Collection* (Granville, OH: Denison University), 1972, 15.

The “Creation Story” (fig. 5) shows the crowned deity above, with all of the leaders at a table below. Funeral barges are removing the evil spirits. The entire space is framed, similar to the framing seen in some of the mola panels. Included in the image are the local flora and fauna and stylized human forms that are flat and lack perspective, again not unlike the mola panels. The narrative tradition in mola-making parallels the narrative tradition in picture-writing.¹⁰

Kuna Characteristics and Aberrations to the Christian Story

Some narratives panels that tell stories from the Bible have curious elements that seem to indicate that the Kuna have absorbed the Christian stories as stories of their own history by imbedding Kuna characteristics into the panels (figs. 6 and 7). In figure 6 the story of Adam and Eve shows both characters wearing hats worn by the Kuna. The panel on the other half of the blouse pictured in figure 7 depicts the story of Noah’s ark and the flood. Figure 7 tells the mythological story of the Kuna’s flood which brought them to their new lands of San Blas. The lines of separation between the Christian story and the Kuna story are blurred.



Fig. 6 (left). Narrative Panel Depicting Adam and Eve Wearing Kuna Hats.
DU1972.139 (Source: T. Jennings-Rentenaar).

Fig. 7 (right). Narrative Panel Depicting the Kuna Flood.
DU1972.312 (Source: T. Jennings-Rentenaar).

Conclusion

The Kuna have taken European materials and techniques to begin a tradition that would become uniquely their own. Within this new tradition, the Kuna women have developed a category, consciously or unconsciously, that permits them to fully exploit their storytelling ways. The style is similar to the narrative manuscripts produced by village men. Evidence for this becomes clear when examining their respective layout, their use of images and their sense of spontaneity. The old world also brought Christian stories to the Kuna. They absorbed these stories as their own, intermingling their world view and history with the Christian stories, so much so that it is difficult for them to separate the sources. We can see evidence for this when examining the mixing of images and stories within a panel and between panels on one blouse. In this way, the Kuna have taken old world ideas and materials and reconfigured them into a new world aesthetic.

¹⁰Rosen, *Art and Artifacts of the San Blas Cuna: An Exhibition from the Denison University Collection*, 1972, 17.

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