

METAPHORS SUNG BY CHIEF CIMRAL COLMAN
TO REPRESENT THE DANGERS FROM OUTSIDE

During the early 1920s, while the struggle between the Panamanian government and the Kuna was at its height, Chief Cimral Colman of the village of Ailigandi, sang to his followers in village meetings about the threats to Kuna culture and autonomy, describing them in poetic metaphors. Through this medium he would focus his followers on the dangers facing them and exhort them to action against their enemies.

Colman often phrased his metaphors in terms of dreams he supposedly had. Often he would begin by singing of good dreams, which represented the way things should be, in which the Kuna were in harmony with their deities, Great Mother and Great Father; they were free of outside control; and they could support their families:

"...Then I lie down, I sleep. No sadness," he said... "I just lie thinking of Father... When I sleep, would that Mother puts good dreams on me, that I wake from sleep having seen only good things in the spirit of the place... Then I sleep. I will see the spirit world, but I won't see the world of bad things..."

I slept feeling well. That I couldn't get food, that I couldn't get drink, I didn't think that at all, I was acting for my children. I felt fine. My great grandmothers were there too, all the cooks felt fine, they'd wake up happy, when the sun rose, the house was full of bananas. If someone went fishing, a whole rack was full of tarpon too," he said. "Twenty tarpon [huge fish], forty tarpon, were being speared... Sometimes peccary [wild pigs] were being shot..

"I'm not sad," he said... I've been feeling fine.. I have eaten, I have gotten things for my children, I have worked on the land, I have worked in crops... I foresee more children coming. In anticipation of those children, each day I cannot rest...

Now then, visitors, while living like that I thought, 'From where might suffering come upon us? What might come to sadden us? Would that such things not come out on us, that we continue happy'..."

Colman would sing about the relationship of the Kuna with their deities:

"... Great Mother is here. She sits in a hammock. Mother sings: 'You who are coming here, children, I see you with pleasure... would that you not suffer. Would that I might lead you for a long time,' Mother sings. She sings to the animals, she sings to all of us. 'This is what Father left me for,' Mother sings from her golden hammock." Thus Grandfather would sing.

"Now then, we are caring for the land, no one else has been watching over it, only we have been watching over it. 'That someone else would end up caring for you, that someone else would give you food, it won't happen like that. It is I who will be giving you food'"

As Colman sang about his dream, it would turn ominous:

"I am lying in hammock. I am lying in hammock at home. It is the midnight, I am fast asleep. Having reached midnight, the place is all still, the place is all silent. At midnight in my hammock, I feel as if my mother were giving me a shake-shake-shake," thus he sang.

"'Great boy, enough sleeping!' I hear mother call to me," he sang. "I woke up," he said. "When I woke up, I didn't feel sleepy any more," he said. "I rolled over in the hammock," he said. "I lay listening hard to the place," he said.

Grandfather Colman was singing, at Ailigandi, by himself, they say. "When I rolled over, in the still of the night, down on the fourth level, the golden archer-snake shook his rattle. 'Porrreee!' that's what I began to hear far off. On the fourth level, the place was being brought to life. Then it sounded as if things were happening on the second level," he said.

The Kuna hate snakes, so the symbol of the golden-archer snake is very unpleasant:

"...The phrase 'Golden archer snake,' that refers to the waga. The waga first began to intrude here, the place first began to come alive---that is what the golden archer snake making the sound 'poorree' on the fourth level, that's what it means. It was about how the waga first began to bring the place alive."

As Colman's dream is remembered, it continued with other spirit intruders:

Now then, I was like that, in truth, the singing would start again, from time to time. A frog would truly be heard singing underground. The frog, toorr, toorr, a great frog came rising up, through the levels of the underworld. 'What might the frog be saying to me,' I thought," he said. "'What does it say to me?' I lay listening. When I listened well again, I dreamt," he said, "and towards the land something else could be heard. A devil was shouting," he said. "A devil came shouting. 'You Kuna I will be surrounding-surrounding'---I lay thinking that it would surround us all"

The chant describes the spirit animals ascending through the levels of the Kuna underworld. The effort needed to hear the viper's rattle and the frog's croak, far off underground, suggests the difficulty the Kuna had in recognizing the initial signs of danger, while the gradual increase in sound as these specters move up from the lowest levels of the underworld evokes the

inexorable approach of capitalism and state domination.

'The vomiting spirit,' I said, 'has reached the second level.' Little by little things have begun to appear in the flesh, that means. The evil spirits little by little have begun to be strengthened, I said.

In addition to symbols of the general menace to Kuna life, Chief Colman would sing about specific threats. Leaf-cutter ants, which can shred a garden in minutes, represented policemen, while young women were called cacao plants.¹ The metaphor is about two things: sexual danger, and the government program to make Kuna women give up their traditional dress.

"The leaf-cutter ants come too..." Grandfather Colman was singing. "To the great-knoll the leaf-cutters arrived and crossed over. The soft leaves of the great-cacao plant began to be touched," he said. "The soft leaves of the great-cacao are being torn, that's what will happen to the earth place," he sang. On the knolls, the great-leaf-cutters are all stomach, the earth place is like that," he was singing.

That was Colman's chant. All about the essence of the waga. Saying leaf-cutter ant, that referred to the waga. Its arriving at the cacao (sia) grove, saying that it would come cut up the tender cacao leaves, he was saying that the waga would end up going around on [i.e.molesting] the girls (siamar).

Colman also portrayed the police as fearsome sea creatures seen in a nightmare marine landscape:

"I went bodily to the place where it was happening," he said. When I arrived there and saw the place, it was nothing but huge whirlpools. I saw the devil with tails," he said. Huge manta rays moved back and forth, along a beach, that's how I saw the place," he sang. There were sharks with four fins, turned upside down," he said. Tremendous groupers with gaping mouths went back and forth," he said. Grandfather Colman was singing, it was in Ailigandi.

The huge rays, the rays that catch people's canoes," he said, "like that, when the elders are going along, and right away the waga pursues them. The shark is much the same. When you see a shark, a shark is fierce too. So if a Kuna is going along, the police will right away be pursuing you. The elders are being caught, that's how it's been," he said. The devil with tails, that refers to jail.¹ The elders have begun to be thrown in jail, the elders have been punished---that's the devil with tails.

The most horrific representation of danger likens it to a cannibal deceiver, a demon masquerading as a young man. The Kuna believe that evil

¹ The name for cacao (sia) sounds the same as the word for niece or young girl (also sia).

spirits will sometimes provoke accidents and deaths in the forest by disguising themselves as familiar individuals, and less often, take someone's place in his own household. The shape-changer in Colman's narrative, who describes himself as someone who has lived in distant places and now, orphaned, wishes to return and settle at home, undoubtedly metaphorizes men like Charly Robinson who came home and tried to force change on the Kuna (who came home as an orphan).

"A boy is coming, a youth. The boy is coming from waga-land. When he arrives the boy speaks to the elders. 'Elders, I want to settle in your place; I used to have a mother, I used to have a father, but no more. . .

"So the boy lived there, he would go to the forest, he would shoot agouti; the elders looked him over, and one of the elders took him in---the boy took a wife. He would go to the forest, his young brother-in-law [his wife's brother] would go too.

Then one day he said to his wife, 'Brother-in-law and I want to go to the forest. He'll be carrying my sack for me.' He and his brother-in-law went off. At dusk, the boy returned. He brought back meat cut into pieces. 'Cook the meat,' he told his wife. His wife was cooking the meat.

The meat wouldn't cook through, the fathers saw that," he sang. People were dying, he said, their blood was spurting out---that means that the waga was killing Kuna, it was the essence of that situation that Colman was touching on. He was singing metaphorically, in the soul of things. Grandfather Colman was singing like that in strength.

In rousing his followers against the dangers facing them, Colman exhorted them to single-minded unity, comparing vacillation and dissension to a toucan [a large tropical bird with a big beak] whose head turns this way and that.

"The fathers learned from the toucans. 'Wele-wele-wele-wele,' round-and-round-and-round the toucans turn, sitting on the great-tree top," he said... "The toucan says to me, 'Concerning the land, don't spin round and round, think in only one way.' Therefore my heart is only one way, my heart is that way: I will fight!" he said. "No one will turn me around. That's what the toucan said to me, 'Don't spin round-and-round. Think only one way for the land.' I think only one way," Colman sang, so they say.

Land was the greatest symbol, the greatest good, and since the earth formed the body of Great Mother, defense of territory also implied defense of Kuna womanhood. Colman urged his listeners to protect the land from incursions from outside, such as those by forest workers, turtlers, and banana plantations, and he warned them not to give out information to foreigners.

"'Guard your mother well,' someone said to me... She lies there all sweet-smelling, she gives off mist, in the middle of the night, her skin gives off mist, like sweet basil,.. from far off it descends onto the land. Someone is coming to get you,' someone said to me. Guard her well. Someone will come say to you, "Who is your mother?" they'll come say that to you. Watch out for that. . . . thus grandfather was singing to the visitors.

Colman sang about the future, making both recommendations and predictions:

"As for schools, I don't fear them," Grandfather spoke... "Schools are excellent things, studying is an excellent thing," Grandfather was speaking. "Therefore I am not afraid of them. The only part I want, however, is the humor of its eye; only the measure of its tongue do I want. The waga's way of life, that I don't want...

Grandfather was singing about this and that, about all sorts of things. "I tell you truly, eighty years from now, I want my children to be studying in school," Grandfather began to speak like that... I want each child to have two soft cacao beans in its mouth." They didn't understand grandfather. "Visitors, what am I referring to? I'm referring to writing. That they should know English writing, that they should know Spanish writing too, that's what I said to you---'soft cacao beans, I want my children to have two in their mouths.'

He argued for schools as a device that would help the Kuna deal with future challenges, such as increased traffic between San Blas and the outside world. Fearsome sea creatures like sharks and whales, in other chants offered as representations of danger, in this context served as predictions not only of more boats and ships but also of planes and (so the Kuna now say) helicopters, which the Kuna themselves would learn to pilot if they had gone to school.

Grandfather was singing of things that no one had seen, things no one had seen at all... An airplane had yet to come here... Grandfather was singing of these things. "Therefore I don't fear schools, I tell you. Later on, eighty years from now, out to sea, huge sharks with four fins will be paddling away, huge porpoises with four fins will be paddling away... to come here. Before that happens I want my children to be studying," Grandfather was singing... "Inside little whales, I want my children to be turning the helm this way and that... Later on, that's what will happen to the children," Grandfather was singing.²⁵

1. The logic of trope "devil with tails" is unclear.

25. OH Samuel Morris of Ailigandi.