




49
(7)
Kuna Ways of Speaking
An Ethnographic Perspective

BY JOEL SHERZER

 University of Texas Press, Austin

frontispiece: The 'gathering house.' Mola artist unknown. Photograph by David Stark.

Copyright © 1983 by the University of Texas Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 1983

Requests for permission to reproduce material from
this work should be sent to Permissions, University
of Texas Press, Box 7819, Austin, Texas 78712.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Sherzer, Joel.

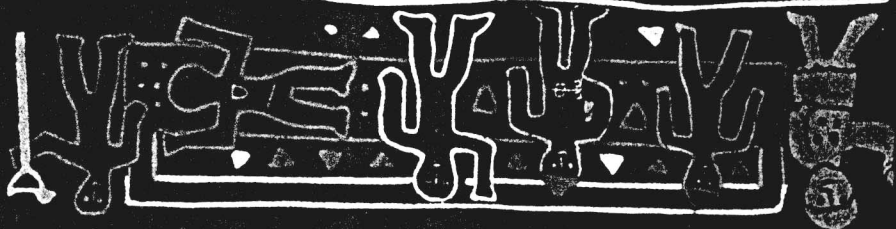
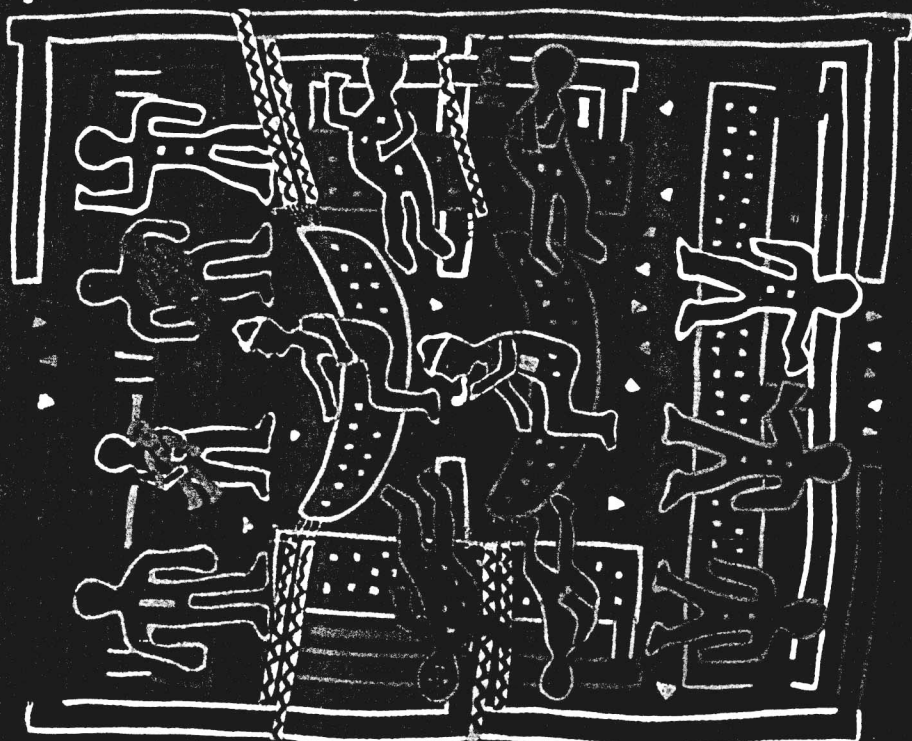
Kuna ways of speaking.

(Texas linguistics series)

Bibliography: p.

1. Cuna language—Social aspects. 2. Cuna language—
Variation. 3. Anthropological linguistics. 4. Cuna Indians
—Social life and customs. 5. Indians of Central America
—Panama—Social life and customs. I. Title. II. Series.

PM3743.S53 1983 498'.2 83-1318



To Manuel Campos, Nipakkinya, Olowitinappi, Pinikti,
Wipikinya, and all the Kuna women and men who in one way
or another appear on these pages and make them possible.

Preface

In December of 1968 I made my first trip to San Blas. I began extended field research in 1970. I have returned to San Blas many times since then. During each period of research, I acquire a deeper understanding of Kuna verbal life and become even more aware of how rich and complex it is.

I am most grateful to the *saklakana* (chiefs) or Sasartii-Mulatuppu, who have always granted me permission to carry out research in their communities and who have been helpful to me in innumerable ways. The Kuna have been superbly hospitable hosts, sensitive to, interested in, and supportive of my research. I have never been treated as a stranger or an outsider. Rather, I have had the unique experience of being able and invited to participate in all Kuna activities, from the most ritual to the most everyday. On each visit to Sasartii-Mulatuppu, I have been treated as a member of the community. I have been provided with both a traditional Kuna name and a playful, humorous nickname. People have been warm and open with me, friendly, and understanding of my interests. Above all, everyone, men, women, and children, young and old, has been willing and anxious to talk with me, to explain at length the most complicated and esoteric of metaphors, or to joke with me and poke fun at me. In all this I consider myself most fortunate.

I would like to thank those individuals whose verbal performances are included here, as part of this study: Chief Armando González, Manuel Campos, Spokesman José Cristiano, Chief Dionisio, Benilda García, Donilda García, Kantule Ernesto Linares, Arango López, Chief Mantiwekinya, Chief Mastaletat, Chief Mastayans, Chief Nipakkinya, Spokesman Olowitinappi, Chief Muristo Pérez, Franki Pilos, Chief Pinikti, Cecilia Quijano, Tilowilikinya, Tinilikinya, and Wipikinya. Jerónimo Cortez, Hortenciano Martínez, and Anselmo Urrutia aided me as assistants and consultants. Anselmo Urrutia es-

pecially has been a constant, sensitive, and interested collaborator in the analysis and translation of Kuna verbal performances.

I would also like to thank the government of Panama and in particular Patrimonio Histórico and its late director, Reina Torres de Araúz, for providing me the opportunity to carry out research in San Blas and inviting me to participate in Panamanian symposiums and congresses, where I was able to present the results of my research and discuss it with colleagues. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, in particular Olga Linares and Martin Moynihan, provided me with assistance and resources.

My research among the Kuna was supported by National Science Foundation grant GU-1598 to the University of Texas, a National Institute of Mental Health small grant, summer grants from the University of Texas Institute of Latin American Studies, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship.

I have greatly benefited from the valuable and insightful comments of the following persons on earlier versions of this manuscript: Keith Basso, Richard Bauman, Mac Chapin, Erving Goffman, James Howe, Dell Hymes, Judith Irvine, Scott Rushforth, Henry Selby, Dina Sherzer, and Dennis Tedlock. Dell Hymes has been a constant inspiration to me in all my research and writing. He first introduced me to the ethnography of speaking in a class at the University of Pennsylvania in 1965. Since that moment he has encouraged, constructively criticized, and always supported my individual contribution to the ethnography of speaking. This book would not have been possible without his teaching, writing, critical commentary, and encouragement. The title derives from one of his many significant publications.¹ Dina Sherzer has accompanied me on most of my research trips to San Blas and has been an active collaborator in investigations dealing with Kuna language, culture, and society.

Finally, I would like to thank Holly Carver, University of Texas Press manuscript editor, for her excellent editorial assistance in the last stages of the preparation of the manuscript.

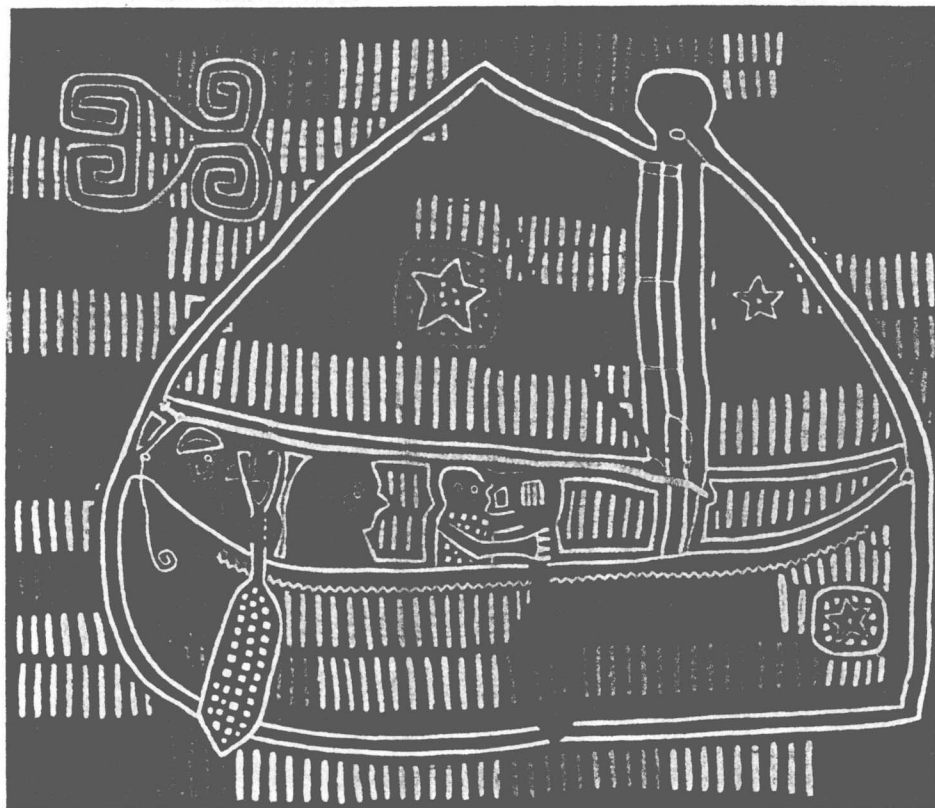
Contents

Preface xi

Illustrations follow page xii

1. **For a Kuna Ethnography of Speaking** 3
 - The Kuna 3
 - Language and Speech in Cross-Cultural Perspective 8
 - The Ethnography of Speaking 11
 - Related Perspectives 14
 - Theoretical Issues 18
2. **Language and Speech in Kuna Society** 21
 - Kuna Linguistic Varieties and Other Languages 21
 - From Vocabulary to Metaphor 25
 - Grammatical Structure 36
 - Language and Society 56
 - The Idyllic and the Conflictual 65
3. **The 'Gathering House': Public and Political 'Gatherings'** 72
 - Men's and Women's 'Gatherings': Chanting 73
 - The Typology of Chanting 76
 - The Purpose of Chanting 89
 - Visiting 'Chiefs' 91
 - Interisland Ritual 'Gatherings' 95
 - When 'Chiefs' Speak 98
 - Men's 'Gatherings': Village Affairs, Reports, and Relaxation 99
 - The 'Gathering House' as Informal Meeting Place 107
 - The 'Gathering House' as Verbal Nerve Center 108
4. **Curing and Magic: Counseling the Spirits** 110
 - Curing Events 111
 - The Typology of *Ikarkana* 112

Contexts for the Performance of <i>Ikarkana</i>	118
<i>Ikar</i> Structure and Content	120
What Makes Curing and Magic Work	133
Variation and Adaptation	134
5. Puberty Rites and Festivities	139
Puberty Events	139
The Structure and Content of 'The Way of the <i>Kantule</i> '	144
Official and Unofficial Activities	147
Tradition and Variation	151
6. Everyday Speech: From Morning to Night, from Birth to Death	154
A Focus on Setting: Times and Places for Talking	155
A Focus on Discourse: Speech Acts, Events, and Situations	158
7. From Everyday to Ritual: Configurations and Intersections	185
Patterns of Speaking	186
Intersections and Interpenetrations of Ways of Speaking	213
8. Continuity and Change	223
Learning and Teaching	223
Tradition, Change, Conflict, and Adaptation	229
Guide to Pronunciation	235
Notes	237
References	251



Men and a woman in a boat. Mola artist unknown. Photograph by David Stark.

1. For a Kuna Ethnography of Speaking

On arriving in San Blas, visitors feel at once that they have entered another world, perhaps an idyllic one. There is the tropical lushness of the Darién jungle. There is the beauty of the coral islands, with their thatch-roofed, bamboo-walled, oblong houses and the surrounding cool blue water. There is the striking color of the women's clothing, especially the magnificent molas, the appliqué and reverse-appliqué blouses. There live the Kuna, less than one hour away from modern Panama City. It is no wonder that San Blas has attracted so many visitors—from adventurers to tourists, from missionaries to anthropologists. The Kuna can be and have been studied from the perspective of their economic, political, or social structure, their religion, or their ecology.¹ It is my aim to enter their world through speaking, not just because the Kuna dedicate a vast amount of time to talk, which they do, but because their world is perceived, conceived, and especially organized and controlled by means of language and speech. An investigation focused on language and speech is thus a very productive way into an understanding of Kuna culture and society, perhaps the most productive way. First an overview, a glimpse of who, where, when, and why the Kuna.

The Kuna

There are Kuna Indians in both Panama and Colombia; the overwhelming majority live in Panama. Most of the Panamanian Kuna live in the Comarca de San Blas, a string of island and mainland villages along the Caribbean coast, from east of the Canal Zone almost to the Colombian border. According to the 1970 census, there were 23,945 Indians in San Blas. These Kuna are frequently referred to as the San Blas Kuna or the San Blas Indians.² The Comarca de San Blas is a reserve, belonging to the Kuna according to legislation of the Panamanian government; this reserve includes the islands and the nearby mainland jungle. The contiguous area across the mountain

range known as the Cordillera de San Blas along the Río Bayano constitutes a separate Kuna reserve. Along the Río Bayano there are small Kuna villages. Another group of Kuna live along the Río Chucunaque in the Darién jungle, within an area east of the Bayano reserve and also contiguous to the San Blas reserve. The population of these interior Kuna areas, along the Bayano and the Chucunaque, is between 1,200 and 1,500.

There is continual contact between the interior and the San Blas Kuna, there being a distance of one or two days' walk between most interior villages and the nearest island village. Interior Kuna walk to the coast to buy cloth, cooking utensils, and other goods and to study ritual tradition. They bring for sale or gifts smoked game, such as iguana, and certain plants which are used cosmetically. San Blas Kuna travel less frequently to the interior, but individuals do go there for medicinal purposes, and specialists and aspiring specialists visit for the study and performance of ritual. Visiting other villages, especially for traditional and ritual purposes, is important for the Kuna; such visiting explains in part the closeness felt between the two regions and their linguistic and cultural similarities. It is also important to point out, with regard to the population of San Blas, that large numbers of individuals, especially men, leave San Blas, for periods ranging from a few months to several years, to work in the Canal Zone, Panama City, or other areas such as the banana plantations of Changuinola in Bocas del Toro. Such individuals traditionally return to their San Blas village.

It is interesting to speculate about the original homeland of the Kuna. The Kuna moved to the San Blas islands from the coastal mainland in the early part of this century. The founding of the more recently settled island villages occurred within the memory of the oldest living inhabitants. This means that certain aspects of Kuna culture, especially those dependent on a sharp distinction between island-village and mainland-workplace, are relatively recent. The existence of tightly organized, nuclear villages, however, is characteristic of all Panamanian Kuna.³ The Kuna villages of the interior Darién jungle are probably close to the original homeland of the Kuna. Groups migrated across the mountains, first to the coast and ultimately to the islands. Kuna mythology talks of a Colombian origin. However, at the time of Kuna ethnic-geographic unity, there was no Panama-Colombia distinction. On the basis of current geographic distribution, linguistic differentiation, known migrations, and mythic tradition, we can posit the probable homeland of the Kuna in the Darién jungle, somewhere near the present Panamanian-Colombian border.

This study is based mainly on fieldwork in San Blas and, more particularly, on extended research on a single large island, Sasartii-Mulatuppu. I will refer to the island as the Kuna do, as Mulatuppu. Mulatuppu, located in the eastern portion of San Blas, is a large island in terms of population. According to the 1970 census, there were 1,626 inhabitants. These individuals are not all in the village at any given moment, since there are always people working outside of San Blas. In addition Mulatuppu owns land further east along the coast, where at all times of the year families spend time farming. They live there for periods ranging from several days to several months, in a work colony called Sukkunya or Puerto Escocés.

Mulatuppu is an active, exciting place in terms of both ritual and everyday life. At ten o'clock in the morning, it seems a sleepy, tranquil village. But at five in the afternoon, when all men and women have returned from working in the jungle and when small children are out of school, there is the hustle and bustle of a city. Kuna villages are densely organized: Mulatuppu is almost entirely covered with houses, and the relatively shallow sea around is being filled in in order to build still more houses. Houses are close to one another, their roofs often touching over narrow, sandy paths. Every inch of space, both inside and outside houses, is used to the utmost capacity. Mulatuppu does not offer the sloppy overcrowdedness of urban slums, however. Rather, there is a tight, well-ordered, dense use of space. Houses are impeccably neat; streets are swept clean; boats are carefully lined up along the shore; dogs are kept inside houses and taken to the sea to urinate and defecate, thus paralleling human behavior; pigs, the only other domesticated animals, are kept in specially built pens and bathed every afternoon. The dense organization of these villages is a manifestation of the Kuna aesthetics of space, according to which space should be used to the utmost and filled in with a tight, repetitive, well-ordered pattern. This organization is also found in social structure, visual art (the women's molas), and verbal discourse.

Because of the size and density of its population, Mulatuppu has certain features characteristic of cities, unlike the smaller, more isolated communities more typically studied by anthropologists and the smaller Kuna villages. There is impersonality; there is fear of robbery and other intrusions into property; there is the possibility that significant events occurring in one place within the village are not known about in another part of the village; and there is a complex overlapping of factions. But social, political, and ritual activity is alive and dynamic. Such recent developments as the spread of Panamanian schools, the building of a hospital, and increasing migra-

tion to the Canal Zone and Panama City have not diminished this activity. Every evening meetings are held in the large *onmakket neka* (gathering house) at which *saklakana* (chiefs) chant in their ritual language, long speeches are made, legal disputes are resolved, or village affairs are publicly discussed. During the day specialists gather medicinal plants in the mainland jungle and render the medicine effective by performing incantations to it. Chants are performed regularly as part of the curing process and for a variety of magical purposes. Puberty rites for young girls are held at various times within the year.

The Kuna are agriculturalists who farm the nearby mainland jungle, using the slash-and-burn technique. Bananas of various types are the staple food, the base of most meals; coconuts, which function as money, are sold to Colombian traders and are used in grated form in many dishes. Root crops, peach palms, corn, sugarcane, avocados, mangoes, lemons, and hot peppers are the other principal crops. Farming is both an individual and a collective enterprise. Collective groups range in size, sometimes including the entire village; bananas and coconuts are the crops most frequently farmed collectively. Food is also acquired through fishing in the sea near the island and through hunting, although game is becoming relatively scarce in San Blas, especially near the more populous islands.

A striking feature of the Kuna economic system, especially of agriculture, is that the Kuna do not live on or adjacent to the land which they farm. Rather, the island-village is the place of family life, leisure, politics, and ritual, and the mainland is the place of work. For ecological and especially for social and political reasons, the Kuna have chosen to live in tight, nuclear villages rather than to spread out and use the land maximally. The land they farm may be quite far from the village, but they return home every day. The Kuna believe that they should live in such villages in order to carry out their political and ritual business as a group.⁴ This sharp division between workplace and village, between mainland and island, stresses the island-village as the place of leisure and of ritual and political activity.

The San Blas Kuna carry on a lively commerce with Colombians from the port cities of Barranquilla and Cartagena. The Colombians dock their colorful boats in a different village each night, purchasing coconuts in large quantities from the Indians and selling such Colombian merchandise as rice, sugar, and hammocks. Despite the length and frequency of contact with these sailors, Kuna culture has been influenced by them only marginally—strict ethnic boundaries are maintained. The Kuna refer to the Colombians as *sichikana*

(blacks) and consider them to be inferior. Some villages do not allow them to spend the night. Where they do spend the night, they sleep on the decks of their boats or on the nearby docks. There are some mitigating factors in this Kuna-Colombian relationship. Kuna men often hang out on the boats while they are docked, chatting with the sailors and among themselves. And a number of long-term friendships exist between Colombian sailors and Kuna individuals or families. The presence of the black sailors is very much a part of life in San Blas.

Temporary migration to the Canal Zone, to Panama City, and to other parts of Panama is another source of income for the Kuna; most send money or goods back to their families in San Blas. A third major source of income, in addition to farming and work outside of San Blas, is the women's mola. Outside of San Blas, the Kuna are probably best known for these colorful products of an appliqué and reverse-appliqué sewing technique. Most molas are first worn as blouses and then, when used, sold as single panels. (A mola blouse is formed by two panels sewn together.) The women sell the molas either directly to outsiders or, increasingly rarely, to Kuna middlemen.

With regard to political organization, there is considerable structure at the ethnic or tribal level, especially in San Blas. Three caciques for San Blas, each from a separate region, are ranked in order of authority. These caciques represent the Kuna in dealings with the Panamanian national government. Twice a year a general congress is held in one of the villages of San Blas. This general congress is attended by representatives from all San Blas villages as well as by non-Kuna Panamanian officials. Problems are discussed and decisions are made which affect all of San Blas. There is a great deal of ritual activity as well which involves relations among different villages. A general congress for traditional chanting by 'chiefs' is held every three months, with representatives from all San Blas. In addition San Blas is divided into three regional sectors (east, central, and west) for traditional chanting *onmakket* (gatherings). Representatives of each village within each sector gather periodically in one of the villages of the sector for several days of chanting. This provides an opportunity for ritual leaders to listen to and evaluate each other's performances and to otherwise communicate with one another.

It is common practice for 'chiefs,' especially prestigious ones or those who aspire to prestige, to travel frequently to other villages, where they spend several days talking and chanting. 'Chiefs' and other ritual leaders and specialists also travel within San Blas and to the interior in order to study with well-known experts or to teach and visit with their students. All this travel means that there is

much intervillage communication, from the most formal and ritual to the most informal and everyday.

While there are structure and unity, both official and unofficial, at the level of the Kuna as an ethnic group, the most intense, active, day-to-day organization is at the level of the village. Politically, each village has its own organization consisting of 'chiefs' and other officials. In addition, each village has other ritual leaders—specialists in medicine, curing, magic, and puberty rites. Ideally each village is politically and ritually complete, each possible Kuna role being filled. But, while this ideal is met and by necessity must be met in the political organization (see chapters 2 and 3), this is not so with regard to other ritual roles. Some roles have more than one occupant in a particular village; others have none at all. Once again, village size is an important factor. The larger a village is, the more specialists one is likely to find living in it. This means that inhabitants of smaller villages might find it necessary to go outside the village for the curing of particular diseases or the performance of particular rituals—expensive and time-consuming operations. There are thus certain advantages to living in larger, more densely populated villages, in which there is a greater frequency and intensity of political, ritual, and, ultimately, speaking life.⁵

Language and Speech in Cross-Cultural Perspective

The nature and the role of speaking are not universal, not everywhere the same. So the particular Kuna organization of and use of language and speech must be seen in contrast with other possibilities: the Apache of the North American Southwest, who are spare, laconic, careful, but highly witty in their speech; the Abipones of the South American Gran Chaco, whose life was organized around hunting and warfare and for whom success in these endeavors, not speaking ability, was a source of prestige and leadership; the Wolofs of Senegal, among whom there is a disdain for verbal expression by the higher caste and a concomitant monopoly on certain forms of verbal and especially verbally artistic activities by the lower caste; North American blacks, among whom complicated verbal forms, playful and poetic, related to group leadership patterns emerge in the vernacular language; the Vakinankaratra of Madagascar, for whom indirectness is a primary and organizing principle for many forms of discourse and distinguishes men's and women's speech patterns; the Mayan Chamulas of Chiapas, Mexico, for whom the metaphor of heat is a dominant cultural theme which can be used to classify the structure of all genres of speaking; and the Balinese of Indonesia, for