

ORAL HISTORY OF THE KUNA & PANAMA
 from the late 19th century to 1925
 Carlos López, Kuna traditionalist & Chief
 recorded 1985

For a moment we will hear about how the place is coming. Since the young men wish to learn about the fathers who carried the place for us, for a moment I will say a few things to the young men.

PANAMANIAN INDEPENDENCE

Thus the place continued on, at the time when Colombia still held all the land, the elders say. Whatever year it might have gone, the elders say. . . . Then one day Inanakinya [chief of all the coastal Kuna] called again to all his followers. When he called to all his followers, Inanakinya began to sing to them, they say:

"Now, I will not divorce my old wife on you," he said. "I have a good wife," he said. "I have an hard-working wife," he said. "A wife who is up at dawn cooking me banana drink, that's what I have," Inanakinya was singing to the elders. "Not one who leaves me without clean clothes on the crossbeam, with clothes strewn around," he said. I have a wife who is up washing clothes for me at dawn... My old woman... If I married a young woman on you, I wouldn't work out for you," he said. I would be getting a woman to be lazy on you," elder sang. "Therefore I don't want a young wife. A wife who gets up at mid-morning, I don't want at all," he said. That's how elder sang, they say. . . . Grandfather was singing in metaphors. And the elders, in the old days, understood everything, so right away they understood him. Like that.

. . . The elders already knew that Panama held the land. But elder sang, "I will not forget Colombia," he was saying. That's what the old woman referred to. The young woman meant, "I'd accept Panama." Elder sang to his followers about Panama as a young person who still didn't have anything.

[When Inanakinya died, the Kuna confederacy split into two groups: those who took Cimral Colman as their leader leaned towards Panama; those who followed Inapakinya (nephew of the late Inanakinya) stayed with Colombia.] And then the elders went their separate ways, the elders went off, they say. The elders broke [the confederation] into pieces like that, they say. Suitup hung with Grandfather Colman, they say. Carti Tuppir hung with Grandfather Colman, they say... Manti Upikantup also went with Inapakinya. They were breaking the place into pieces on us.

That's how things were: in 1903, Inatoikinya [modernist chief of Tupile or Mono] first grasped the Panamanian flag. . . . Sali Robinson also grasped the flag. . . . Their history is like that. It came to be that the flag was grasped. Though schools had yet to be seen.

That year began, in 1909 [actually 1907] and Father Gasso first entered... Sali Robinson also brought him in. Things began to happen on us.

The place began to come alive, the elders say.

POACHING OF KUNA RESOURCES

Thus the place was coming, coming. . . . and the wagas [non-Indians, Latins] who fell Nispero trees [tapped for balata, a form of rubber] were the first to begin entering, into this land. In the forest the Nispero-cutters began to enter... The waga began to fell Nispero. The waga began to shoot jaguars. The waga began to shoot caimans. Schools had still yet to be seen.. "Things were touched first,... the trees were the first to be touched," the elders say. Then in the forest, our fathers and the waga began to strike each other, things began to happen that way.

In the forest they finished off one whole kind of resource, and so they began to turn towards [exploiting] the sea. The waga began to set nets too. The islands along here, the elders felt they were theirs, so they would go to wait for the turtles,... and the waga would already be there before you, waiting for the turtles. The turtles began to be taken from you. The turtles began to be taken from our fathers. Coconuts began to be cut too. They would drink coconut milk, knock down coconuts, the waga began to act that way. The fathers took stock of how things stood, and there were nets set everywhere. Our fathers already set nets too. They began to fight with each other over this, about the sea; the Kuna with the waga and with the English [prob English-speaking Blacks]. They began to have fights.

A GOVERNMENT HEADQUARTERS IS ESTABLISHED

Things were like that... Grandfather Colman began to think: "If things are happening like this, things won't turn out well for us, as I see it." Grandfather Porra [i.e. President Belisario Porras] was there. He visited San Blas [in 1915]. Grandfather Colman went off to Panama. He said to Grandfather Porras, "This Porvenir [an island at the end of San Blas closest to Panama], I want to put a gate there... "Here I'll place a cat," he said. "The cat which I'll put here is to catch rats for me," Colman said. . . .

When Grandfather Colman said this to him, Porras felt it would be easy. "We're in agreement on this." They went to San Blas. With his followers, he brought police. They began to look for a place. "Where will we find a seat for the intendencia? [government headquarters]" They began to look for a place. . . . Thus they refused him... they came to Naraskantup [Orange Island], searching for a place, to hear that issue. Then the waga was ready to disembark; so Colman could resolve this issue. . . .

"We disembarked," elder Ceferino [son of Chief Colman, source of information for the narrator] said. My father got in the hammock. The Colombian flag was flying, at Naraskantup Tummat. Thus we disembarked, and my father began to speak," he said. "'Now elders, you see. I want to put a portal here," he said. 'The coconuts being stolen from you, the turtles being caught just as if you weren't owners of the islands, the wagas do this to the Kuna, you're things are being touched---the door I will place here is so the waga won't enter like that again, so they he'll only enter the right way.'" Thus Colman spoke.

The elders were mad, he said. The elders were really mad. With their faces all red, they said, "Kuna like this are just blowhards; They [foolishly] think they'll do such things." "They said that to my father," Elder Ceferino said to me. . . .

Kaikirkortup was the island's name, they say. The Kuna living there used to call it that, Kaikirkortup. But the waga renamed it "El Porvenir [The Future]," they say. "Right here," they said. They looked the place over, and the wagas all disembarked. Every last one really looked the place over when they got there. "Right here is where we'll put it," they say. It was in 1915, when it came to be born, that's its history," they say.

WAGAS ENTER TUPPILE

Things stood that way, and in Tuppile, in 1916 for the first time a school would be built. . . . The school was built, one with a second story. When the school opened, a teacher appeared. Guillermina de Sedas was the teacher's name, she came first. In 1916... First she brought her daughter, by herself, just the one. She opened the school, and the young men all entered. I entered right away too. Méndez was the name of the guardia who also arrived. Guillermo Denis, a waga of that name also arrived, both guardias, the two of them. Then they...here in Tuppile, they [the two policemen] were the guardians of the school-opener. Those waga came at the same time [as the teacher]. For a year that woman stayed. She left again. The teacher changed.

KUNA CUSTOM IS SUPPRESSED

That's how things were going along, the number of wagas began to increase. The elders were still drinking chicha [homemade cane beer, for puberty ceremonies], here. The elders were still drinking chicha. The elders would still get drunk. The waga saw that. . . . The waga little by little began to change the Kuna. Things began to happen that way. Now then boy, you are collecting that story, so I'll tell you. At what point the evil on the land would come to us, what began to be interfered with first, at what point our flesh began to be touched, listen to that. It was underway, you understand. . . . Another waga came at that time... The waga would go back and forth, to Ukkup Senni, to Margana. There were three [outposts], all the same, they first began to set up schools.

Things were that way... and in 1918, these things would be interfered in. Beads were first interfered with, along with gold. It came to be that they were interfered with. The waga said, "We'll put an end to beads," [i.e. with Kuna women wrapping their arms and legs tightly with beads] they said; "We'll put an end to gold [nose-rings]," they said. The senior women, already they were old, and for years they had worn noserings; [so] it made the senior women feel bad; the senior women were sad; the women began to cry over their gold. I saw it, you understand. . . . The things we managed in our households began to be touched too. You couldn't chew corn mash [for chicha]; [the police] thought badly of you for that. . . .

Things were going along that way; and then they brought clothes here. A waga went to Panama, and he brought back ready-made clothes for the women. He brought back western dress. Clothes changing had come here. Truly they changed the clothes right away. But they had yet to set up a club here. The waga patrolled in the streets, they kept watch on the place, you couldn't sleep well. At night, like spying on you, like keeping watch, that's how the waga was. The elders began to [have to] keep quiet. It began to be as if the elders weren't masters of their own house. Things began to be that way, you understand.

...

DANCING

Things stood that way, and the waga's strength really increased. Then the waga was ready to establish a club. It came to be that a club was established. The waga also built a new barracks. Where the school stands [now], they put the barracks. I was present when the barracks was built, I was present when it was finished too. Near there, on the windward side, they established a club. It was in 1920, I believe, things were happening that way. Things happened that way.

Things stood like that, and our fathers began to be mistreated. You would spear a tarpon, and a piece of tarpon would be taken from you, things began to happen that way. Beads were already gone. Molas [traditional blouses] were already gone. Then dancing came. The baile came. Here... now, the young girls, and those with husbands, then their numbers began to increase in the dance club. The waga began to do things that way. . . . That's how the place was coming, you understand. And the elders were listening to the place [monitoring developments]. The elders already, they really weren't sleeping. All the senior women were already in long clothes, all looked like that, without gold, without beads, they changed their clothes---that's how things were. So the year(s) was going on, and the elders were like that [i.e. alert but not rebelling], and it had still not been heard that the elders were changing things [i.e. rebelling, fighting back]. Tuppile's [story] was like that. Like that.

RESISTANCE AND PLANNING

Right. Things stood that way, and Grandfather Colman lived down that way. He was there by himself, he was singing about Father. Grandfather Colman. . . . Jose Burgos, of Sugtup, he was his secretary. Manuel Hernandez was second. Manuel Gonzalez third. [etc. etc.] Those who knew paper, they came together on Ailigandi, those who wrote. Layans sent a letter to Washington. Another mailed a letter to Colombia. They were searching for a solution, that's what they were doing. . . . They began to get bullets at Puerto Obaldía [town on the Colombian border]. They were buying bullets, that's how the elders began to act. . . . Colman said, "We'll put watchers at every knoll [i.e. every village]." What the waga calls spies. The elders say watchers. . . .