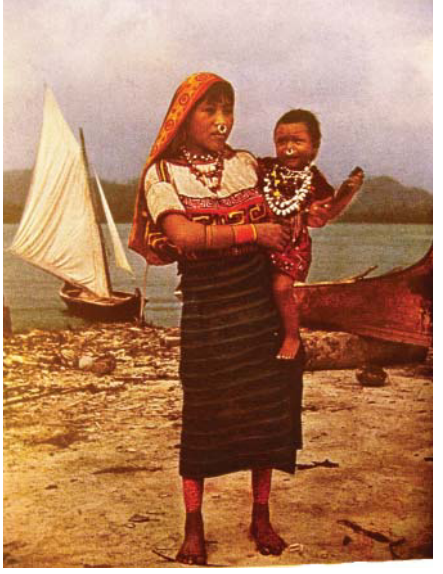

The Kuna *Mola*

Dress, Politics and Cultural Survival

Diana Marks

Diana Marks completed her doctorate on the evolution of the Kuna Indian *mola* blouse in 2012. Using an interdisciplinary approach, her research included an assessment of *molas* in museum collections, particularly in the US. Her current research includes studying the iconography on *molas* and the study of non-Western dress in museum collections.

The Kuna Indians of Panama have become identified with the mola *blouses worn by Kuna women. The impact of colonization and the subsequent transculturation gave the Kuna access to the materials needed to sew* molas *which were subsequently used as a signifier of political resistance. Beginning in 1919, the Panamanian government instituted policies that amounted to ethnocide, in an attempt to destroy Kuna culture, including progressively prohibiting components of Kuna women's dress. The Kuna Revolution in 1925 resulted from resistance by the Kuna people to the Panamanian government edicts to adopt Western style clothing and other customs and led to the granting of an autonomous Kuna territory. This paper explores the impact of the Kuna Revolution on the wearing of the* mola *blouse and on its design.*

Keywords dress and identity, non-Western fashion, Kuna *mola* blouses, cultural survival, Kuna Indians, material culture, iconography

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Introduction

THE KUNA INDIANS are an indigenous people who live in Panama. My research focuses on the Kuna Indians living in forty-five island communities in the San Blas archipelago, on the Atlantic side of Panama. The 2010 Panamanian census recorded over 80,000 Kuna Indian people, with approximately 30,000 Kuna Indians living in the San Blas in an autonomous territory known as the Kuna Yala *comarca*. The Kuna population in the San Blas in 1920 was 17,090 and in 1940 the population was 20,822, as recorded in the Panamanian census data. The Kuna communities have been steadfast in limiting access to their islands by outsiders.

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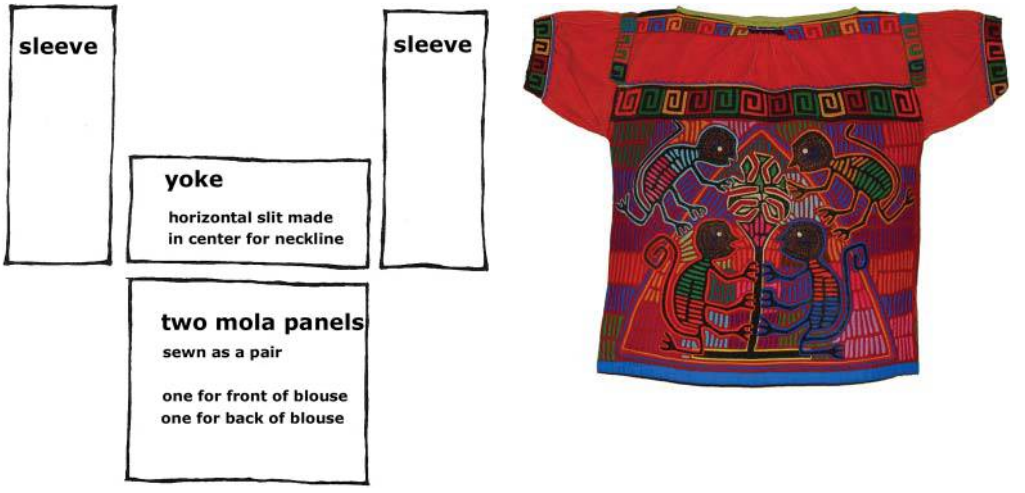
FIGURE 1 Parts of a *mola* blouse. Diagram adapted from Mari Lyn Salvador, *Yer Dailege! Kuna Women's Art* (Albuquerque, NM: Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico,1978), 31. Example on right from a private collection.



A pivotal moment in the history of the San Blas Kuna Indians was the 1925 Kuna Revolution, which resulted in the Kuna people being able to continue to live as an independent people in an autonomous territory, with leadership maintained by Kuna chiefs. The purpose of this paper is to assess whether the Kuna Revolution impacted the sewing and wearing of *mola* blouses. Did Kuna women change the styles of the blouses or the iconography in the appliqué panels? Did Kuna women continue to wear the *mola* blouse as part of their everyday dress ensemble?

I begin by describing a *mola* blouse and then briefly outline the relationship between the Kuna Indians and the Panamanian government from the beginning of the twentieth century. This is followed by a visual analysis of the *mola* blouse for the period leading up to the Kuna Revolution and for the twenty-year period following the revolution.

Description of a *Mola* Blouse

The development of the *mola* blouse began around the turn of the twentieth century.[1] The earliest *mola* blouse found in a museum was collected in 1906, three years after Panama became separated from Colombia, its independence created at the instigation of the US, which played a part in this due to its desire to construct the Panama Canal.[2]

Kuna Indian women spend many years of their lives sewing pairs of appliquéd and embroidered rectangular textile panels for many hours each day. These panels are sewn into blouses, and worn as part of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble.[3]

A *mola* blouse comprises five rectangular components: two *mola* panels, one for the front and one for the back of the blouse, which may be similar designs; a yoke which is slit in the center to create a neck opening; and two sleeves. This is illustrated in FIGURE 1. The *mola* panels are at least two layers; some *mola* panels may comprise up to seven layers, though most are made of three to four layers of fabric. The yoke and sleeves are made from a single layer of fabric.

Early Twentieth-Century Kuna Politics

For the first few years of the twentieth century the Panamanian national government ignored the San Blas Kuna Indians; some

1 Diana Marks, "The Evolution of the Kuna Mola: From Cultural Authentication to Cultural Survival" (PhD diss., Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, 2012), chs. 3 and 4. This paper comprises additional research. The dissertation extensively covers the meaning of the *mola* to Kuna women and Kuna communities.

2 The construction of the Panama Canal by the United States began in 1904 and continued until 1914.

3 Kuna women wear *molas* they make themselves; blouses for young girls are made by female relatives. While some Kuna transsexual men (known as *omeggids*) are known to sew *molas*, the focus in this paper is on the sewing and wearing of the *mola* as women's dress.

Kuna chiefs were aligned with Colombia and continued to fly the Colombian flag. There were two distinct Kuna factions—one supported Panama and the other Colombia. By 1919 President Porras decided to take strident measures to influence the loyalty of the Kuna Indians and commenced a policy of forced assimilation. The Kuna Revolution was a direct result of the government suppression of key elements that the Kuna perceived as crucial for their ethnic survival, each relating to Kuna women and the culture's creation of difference and separation from outsiders.

The strong link between dress, a form of material culture, and the ethnic identity of the Kuna people was demonstrated by the strength of their reaction to attempts by the Panamanian government to force Kuna women to wear Western style clothing and cease wearing their *mola* blouses, leg and arm bindings, and nose rings. From 1919 the Panamanian government instituted bans on the wearing of components of a Kuna woman's dress.

As well as attempting to force Kuna women to wear Western dress, the measures included forcing Kuna women to participate in Western style dancing and the prohibition of drinking alcohol, which was integral to Kuna lifecycle events such as the girls' puberty ceremonies. Kuna resistance included insubordination, violence, and migration to more remote islands. Anthropologist James Howe describes these measures as amounting to the killing of their culture, and he terms this as "ethnocide."[4]

While the campaign of ethnocide lasted for six years, Howe notes that Kuna women's dress "already functioned as an ethnic marker," hence the resistance from the beginning of the government campaign in 1919 until the Kuna Revolution.[5] This is noteworthy, because my research has found that at this time the *mola* would have been less than a generation old.

By 1925 the Kuna leaders orchestrated a revolt, albeit with advice and support from an American, Richard Marsh, who is credited with writing their declaration of independence.[6] The Chief of the island of Ustupu, Nele Kantule, and the Chief of the island of Ailigandi, Simral Colman, coordinated attacks on a number of islands which were under the control of Panamanian police and other government officials who had been carrying out the Panamanian government policies of ethnocide. The carefully planned revolt began on February 22, 1925, lasted three to four days, and resulted in fewer than thirty deaths.[7] Kuna island villages "under Panamanian domination revolted, supported by forces sent by Colman and Nele Kantule. The police who escaped the killing fled the region, abandoning even Nargana and the government headquarters on Porvenir to rebel control."[8] An appeal by the Kuna to the United States, through Marsh, resulted in mediation between representatives of the Panamanian government, the US government and the Kuna leaders. The result was a US-backed agreement for the Kuna Indians in the San Blas to be allowed to maintain their isolation and self-governance.

While a few Kuna villages voted and participated in the 1920 and 1924 Panamanian national elections,[9] the Kuna Indians did not fully participate until the 1932 elections.[10] Panamanian women, including Kuna women, did not obtain universal suffrage until 1946.

Until the late 1920s the Kuna Indians were still divided into two camps, apparently a continuation of the pro-Colombian versus pro-Panamanian history. The faction leaders, Kuna Chief Inabaginya and Chief Nele Kantule supported different candidates in the 1932 election, the first polling to be held in Kuna Yala, though only around 600 men voted.[11]

Panamanian presidential candidates courted the Kuna vote because the electorate

4 James Howe, *The Kuna Gathering: Contemporary Village Politics in Panama*, Latin American Monographs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 214; James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel : Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 177; James Howe, *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 82, 67–70.

5 James Howe, "An Ideological Triangle: The Struggle over San Blas Kuna Culture, 1915–1925," in *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, ed. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 43.

6 Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel*, 262–263.

7 Ibid., 267–279.

8 James Howe, "The Kuna and the World: Five Centuries of Struggle," in *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama*, ed. Mari Lyn Salvador (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1997), 96.

9 Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel*, 130.

10 R. Valdés Richard, "Analisis De Los Pocesoc Electorales De La Comarca Kuna Yala Desde 1932 Hasta 2001," *La Loteria* 488 (Enero/Febrero) (2010), 65. Valdés Richard is a Kuna Indian scholar who has researched the involvement of his people in local and national politics and published articles and a book, *El Voto Guna En La Historia Electoral Panameña* (Panama: Tribunal Electoral, 2011).

11 Ibid., 65.

in which the San Blas was originally grouped included the city of Colon, which was a marginal seat.[12] In the 1936 election over 1,000 Kuna voted; in the 1940 election 2,738 Kuna voted. The Kuna people were recruited at the leadership level in 1945.[13]

In the following section I describe the dress worn by Kuna women in the years leading up to the Kuna Revolution of 1925 and the subsequent twenty years.

Visual Analysis of the Dress of Kuna Women

Kuna *mola* blouses found in museum collections were compared to contemporaneous photographs showing the complete dress ensemble of the Kuna women, of which the blouse is only one of a number of components. For the period prior to 1925, photographs were sourced from Prince (1912), Pittier (1912), Verner (1920), Randolph (in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, taken in 1923), Richmond Brown (1924), Marsh expeditions from 1923 to 1925 (in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution), Verrill (in the National Museum of the American Indian, taken in 1924). For the period after 1925, photographs were sourced from Stirling taken in 1931–1932 (in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution), Edholm taken in 1938 (in the National Museum of the American Indian), Feeney (1941), Marden (1941), De Smidt (1948) and Stout (1947).

Mola blouses in ten collections from four US museums were consulted: in the Field Museum—the Fitz-William collection from 1917; in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH)—the Cash collection from 1920, the Tower collection from 1921, the Randolph collection from 1923, the Stirling collection from 1932, the Roosevelt collection from 1935, the Stout collection from 1941; from the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)—the Richmond Brown & Mitchell-Hedges collection from 1922, the Harris / de Tomasi collection from 1925; and from the Denison Museum, the De Smidt collection from 1945.[14]

In order to interpret the dress of Kuna women from a cultural perspective, it is important to be able to view the complete dress ensemble while being worn, to appreciate the detailed arrangement of components, as well as how these components relate to the body. In looking at the photographs, it is important to note that the Kuna Indians are short of stature. Harris, a geneticist who studied the incidence of albinism in the San Blas Kuna, found that the average Kuna woman measured 140.4 cm (4 ft 7 in.) and the average Kuna adult man measured 149.9 cm (4 ft 11 in.).[15] Their torsos appear bulky in relation to their height.

The geometry of the rectilinear construction of the blouse contributes to a perception of two-dimensionality, and it is difficult to envisage the garment being worn without consulting photographs, especially for the early blouses which have very small flat sleeves.

The earliest photographs found showing Kuna women wearing a dress ensemble, taken in 1911, are in a scholarly anthropological article and show that their dress covers their bodies from head to foot (FIGURE 2). The first colored photographs of Kuna dress found during my research are in the February 1941 edition of the *National Geographic* magazine (FIGURE 3).

I have analyzed the dress of Kuna women and girls in terms of the definition and classification of dress advocated by Eicher and Roach-Higgins[16] and have recorded this under the headings in FIGURE 4. The complete dress ensemble is illustrated in FIGURE 2 and FIGURE 3.

It is recognized that there will be variation in dress on different San Blas islands, due to

12 Personal communication, F. Herrera, May 31, 2012.

13 Valdés Richard, "Analisis De Los Pocesoc Electorales," 66.

14 For my doctoral research I developed a "reference collection" to provide a representative sample of *molas* from 1906–2006, with known collection dates, with a preference for complete *mola* blouses. It comprised 162 *mola* blouses, 13 pairs of *mola* panels and 72 individual panels, a total of 247 *molas*, with 422 individual *mola* panels. This reference collection was sourced from six museums: the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Field Museum, the Logan Museum of Anthropology (Beloit, WI), the Denison Museum (Granville, OH), and the Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin). The sample of *molas* referred to in this paper is drawn from this reference collection.

15 Reginald Harris, "The San Blas Indians," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* IX, no. 1 (1926), 42.

16 Joanne B. Eicher and M.E. Roach-Higgins, "Definition and Classification of Dress," in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*, ed. R. Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 8–23.

FIGURE 2 Early photograph of a group of Kuna Indians taken on the San Blas island of San Jose de Nargana at the end of 1911. From J. Dyneley Prince, "Prolegomena to the Study of the San Blas Language of Panamá," *American Anthropologist* 14, no. 1 (1912), pl. VIII. Photographer: I. N. De Long.

FIGURE 3 Illustration of the dress ensemble of a Kuna woman and child. The dress ensemble includes a headscarf [*muswe*], nose ring, necklace, *mola* blouse, wrap skirt [*sabured*], and strings of beads wound around arms and legs [*wini*]. From Corinne B. Feeney "Arch-Isolationists, the San Blas Indians," *National Geographic* 79, no. 2 (February 1941): 211. Photographer: Lieutenant Dayton Seiler, U.S.N.

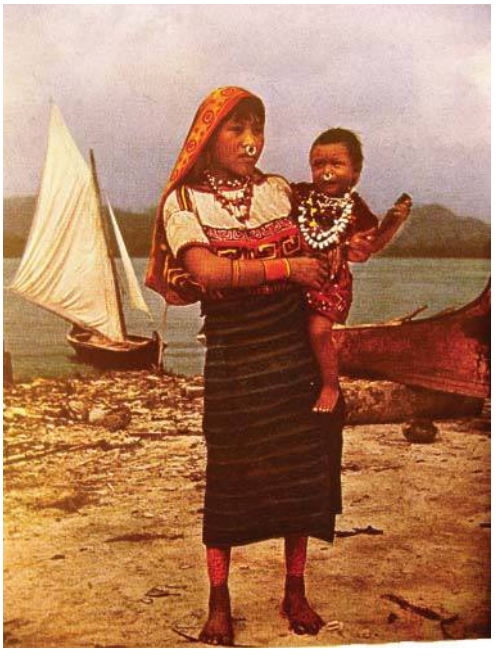


FIGURE 4 Components of the Kuna woman's dress ensemble.

1	body modification
	skin painting
	hair length
2	body supplements
	nose ring
	necklaces
	arm & leg beads [*wini*]
	footwear
3	cloth components
	headscarf [*muswe*]
	blouse [*mola*]
	wrap skirt [*sabured*]

the extent of outside influences, for example the presence of missionaries. There will also be personal preferences and economic considerations. The visual assessment below is derived from the available photographic record for the period immediately prior to the Kuna Revolution and for a period afterward.[17]

Pre-1925

Before 1925 nose rings were worn by most girls and women. Generally the size increases from small for girls to medium for young adults, and in this era the adult women wore large nose rings extending below the lower lip. Necklaces were worn made of seeds, bones, teeth, and coins. Arm and leg bindings, called *wini*, were difficult to find in photographs, but where visible are quite small in width on both wrists and lower legs.

For the three cloth components, the headscarf, the *mola* blouse, and the wrap skirt, the photographic evidence is very useful. A wide variety of patterned fabric was used for the headscarf, called a *muswe*, which was worn flowing over the head, in front and behind the shoulders. The colors are unknown. The earliest example found in a museum collection is red and yellow (from 1921).

The wrap skirt, called a *sabured*, is wound around the blouse, sufficient to hold it in place, but is not noticeably tight; a wide variety of printed cloth is seen in the photographs. The length extends mostly to the ankles, though a few were longer. A skirt in a museum collection from 1921 was dark blue with yellow and light blue motifs.

The third cloth component is the *mola* blouse. The photographs show young girls wearing smaller dress-like *molas* with simpler designs; and young girls wearing the same *mola* blouse as women. Some girls may be wearing a blouse of the same size as an adult. The women are seen wearing large *molas* that flow over their skirts and are very loose-fitting. The blouses have drawstring necklines. The appliqué panel designs are frequently large and geometric, both linear and curvilinear. The bands joining the yokes to the appliqué panels have either sawtooth designs (called *dientes*) or appliqué shapes. Some of these bands are wide.

The amount of the *mola* panel that is visible when worn varies. When the blouse is worn as a dress, the entire panel is visible. On most Kuna women, when the *mola* is tucked into the wrap skirt, about half of the appliqué panel is visible.[18]

Since the photographs from this era are all black and white, museum collections are relied upon to describe the colors. *Mola* blouses were found in bright, highly saturated colors. While there was evidence of fading due to the climate and laundering, the seam allowances of *mola* panels and yokes revealed the original bright colors. The predominant colors used in *mola* panels were red, orange, yellow, navy-blue, and black. For early *molas*, many bright patterned fabrics were also used in the panels.

Post-1925

Nose rings continued to be worn after 1925; some adult women are seen with the nose ring extending to the lower lip and some to the center of the lips. Arm and leg *wini,* where visible, increased in size, meaning the number of strings of beads wound around the wrist and the lower legs had increased. The *wini* are quite wide.

The headscarf, the *muswe*, is worn by women only. A variety of fabrics were seen, worn flowing over the head, in front of and behind the shoulders. A visible border is seen on some headscarves. A red and yellow headscarf was found in a museum collection from 1941.

The wrap skirt, the *sabured*, was wound around the blouse, sufficient to hold it in

17 I carried out a visual analysis of mola blouses from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century as part of my doctoral research.

18 This section is based on photographs taken between 1911–1924 and *molas* in museums collected between 1917–1925.

place. A wide variety of printed cloth, many with horizontal patterns, was used. The length extends to the ankles or a bit shorter. A navy-blue skirt with a reddish-brown pattern was found in a museum collection from 1941.

Young girls in photographs are seen wearing smaller dress-like *molas*; they are wearing the same type of *molas* worn by women and are also seen wearing smock-like *molas*, thus there were a wide variety of juvenile styles. Women's molas were large, flowing over their skirts, and not as loose-fitting as earlier blouses. The drawstring neckline remains. Among a wide variety of designs, panels are frequently geometric with some overall labyrinth patterns. *Mola* bands are either sawtooth or appliqué, with some wide appliqué bands.

The amount of the *mola* panel that is visible when worn varies. As a dress, all of the panel is visible; when tucked into the wrap skirt, half or slightly more of the appliqué is visible. On young girls, half or less of the panel is visible when worn.

The colored photographs show the bright colors in different components of the Kuna woman's dress, with the overall dominance of the color red. The photography also highlights the differences between the dress of Kuna women and men, who wear predominantly black and white Western-style clothing.[19]

The main differences between the dress of Kuna women in the first two decades and the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century appears to be in the width of the blouses, which narrowed, and thus became more fitted to the upper body.

Impact of the Kuna Revolution on *Mola* Blouses

Influence of Kuna Leadership

The immediate impact of the Kuna Revolution on Kuna women is described by Holloman.[20] Prior to 1920, Kuna women on four islands (Nargana, Corazon de Jesus, Rio Azucar and San Ignacio de Tupile), referred to by Holloman as "progressive" islands, did not wear traditional dress, including *mola* blouses.[21] Holloman asserts that this changed after 1925, for at least a three-year period:

For a time after the revolution the clock was rolled back in San Blas. All women were required to adopt traditional dress. Adult women on Nargana and the other progressive islands who had never been *in mola*[22] had their noses pierced by force.[23]

The Kuna leaders, especially the famous Nele Kantule, instigated a revitalization of traditional Kuna knowledge and lore, and codified the village and inter-island decision-making processes to strengthen the autonomy of the San Blas Kuna people.[24] Kuna women, wearing their *mola* blouses, highlighted the distinctiveness of the Kuna people and strengthened the Kuna identity.

After the Kuna Revolution, Nele Kantule also influenced the establishment of a number of community-operated collective enterprises, named *sociedades*, comprising small groups of villagers, sometimes kinship-based.[25] These cooperatives organized the sale of *molas*, agricultural production, and the purchasing of large items such as a boat for a village. Profits were divided in accordance with shares held in the cooperative, and sometimes this was used as a method to save for large expenditures, such as a *chicha* puberty celebration. These cooperatives, while retaining a Kuna social foundation, introduced a cash economy into trade relations and were operated also by Kuna living in Panama City.[26] *Mola* blouses began to be commercialized at this time.

Immediately after the Kuna Revolution, Howe believes that the Kuna leaders developed "a conscious, active policy of presenting their people and their culture to the world, either through their own

19 This section is based on photographs taken between 1931–1941 and *molas* in museums collected between 1932–1945.

20 Regina E. Holloman, "Developmental Change in San Blas" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1969), 435.

21 The "progressive" islands had been missionized early and had allowed outsiders to operate schools on the islands. At the time of her fieldwork in 1967, Holloman reports that on most islands all the Kuna women wore *molas*. On the four progressive islands the *mola* was not worn (ibid., 91). Holloman "estimated that in 1967 at least 75 percent of all the adult women in the region were traditionally dressed [in mola]."

22 Holloman describes being "in mola" [bolded in original] to include the complete Kuna woman's dress ensemble—*mola* blouse, *wini*, nose ring, headscarf and wrap skirt (ibid., 91). I suggest that some of the women, on the progressive islands, would have continued to sew *molas* and wear *mola* blouses some of the time.

23 Ibid.,435.

24 Ibid., 436–461.

25 Karin E. Tice, *Kuna Crafts, Gender, and the Global Economy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 43.

26 Ibid., 47.

autoethnographic studies or by facilitating the work of others,"[27] and that the success of this policy led to a Kuna cultural item, the *mola*, becoming a recognized symbol of the Panamanian nation.[28] Luce maintains that the Kuna "are one of the most politically mobilized and active indigenous peoples in Latin America."[29] My earlier research confirmed that Kuna leaders were determined to create self-contained, self-governed communities prior to the Kuna Revolution, from the mid-nineteenth century.[30]

Kuna Nationalist Symbol and Flag

Preparations for the assertion of independence included creating a nationalist flag, around the time that the Declaration of Independence was written in 1925. According to Howe:

A flag was designed, presumably by Marsh [who drafted the Kuna Declaration of Independence], featuring a large swastika. A traditional motif in Kuna basketry, the swastika was associated in some North American minds with Aryans and Aryanism, but not yet with Nazis.[31]

As well as appearing in basket designs, this shape is found in nose painting, *wini* beads and *mola* panels.[32] The Kuna also associate the swastika symbol with the pelican's beak and the octopus.[33] The Kuna flag shows a left-facing swastika. A basket with swastika designs, purchased by the Musee de L'Homme (Paris) from Nele Kantule in 1932,[34] shows right-facing swastikas.[35] The use of this symbol in *mola* blouses is considered below.

A discussion of *mola* blouses collected between 1917 and 1945, found in ten different collections follows.

Style and Iconography of *Mola* Blouses

In order to assess the impact of the Kuna Revolution on *mola* panel design, a sample of seventy-five *mola* blouses was selected and assessed in terms of possible political content. As mentioned above, *mola* blouses for the period prior to 1925 were sourced from six collections in three museums, and these comprised forty-eight *mola* blouses; for the period after 1925, four collections in three museums were selected, for a sample size of twenty-seven *mola* blouses.

I was interested in assessing whether the *molas* collected in the years leading up to the Kuna Revolution were unworn and discarded or traded, on the basis that the assimilationist policies were influencing Kuna women to abandon wearing the *mola*. There was no evidence that this was the case. Detailed examination of these blouses found that nearly all showed evidence of wear, including some with damaged fibers, splits to seams, stains, repairs, and alterations. This supports the theory that, despite negative pressure from the government, many Kuna women continued to wear their *mola* blouses.

The style of blouses remained consistent, most with a drawstring neckline and small sleeves. Though there was a wide range of *mola* panel sizes in each period, the largest *molas* were from 1917–1918, some over 70 cm wide, with many other large *molas* over 65 cm wide before 1925. After this time, the *molas* narrowed in width, with many under 60 cm wide.

Panel Iconography

For both the pre-1925 and the post-1925 *mola* panels, around one-third depicted plants or animals, which appear to be from the local environment, and around one-third depicted Kuna life, which includes Kuna daily and lifecycle events and myths. Thus two-thirds of the *molas* in the sample for each period were identified as relating to the natural environment experienced by the Kuna people or the life or cosmology of the Kuna people. While it was not possible to clearly categorize the design motif sewn on many of the *molas*,

27 James Howe, *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers*, 165.

28 Ibid., 190, 201.

29 Crystal Ann Luce, "Culture Loss and Alternatives to Statehood: Lessons from the Inuit, Kuna and Romani" (MA diss., University of Colorado, 2006), 73.

30 Marks, 2012, ch. 9.

31 James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel*, 262. Marsh, whose role is extensively covered by Howe, was an American supporter of the Kuna people.

32 Michel Perrin, *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indians* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 90.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 In a footnote, Howe explains that some Kuna sources claim that the flag was designed by Kuna leaders at a prior time (*A People Who Would Not Kneel*, 344). Regardless of origin, the Kuna swastika is left-facing and the Nazi swastika, which was adopted as the symbol of the Nazi Party in 1920, is right-facing. In *mola* panels, the direction of the swastika is not consistently right-facing or left-facing. While black, red, and gold are popular Kuna colors in *molas*, the choice of colors for the flag is identical to the colors of the German flag used during the nineteenth century and officially adopted after World War I by the Weimar Republic. A left-facing Kuna flag is shown in a documentary by Kathryn Lipkey Vigesaa, "Molas in Transition: Art of the Kuna Woman" (Laraway Mountain, CAN: Laraway Mountain Studio, 2009). I observed a right-facing swastika embossed on a San Blas island chair in 2010 (also in red, yellow, and black).

FIGURE 5 Example of mola blouse collected prior to 1925 compared to Panamanian coat of arms. The Panamanian coat of arms appears on Panamanian coins. Panel width is 57 cm. In this mola the symbols in the four quarters of the crest have been rearranged. 1921. National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (E 418 531-0). Photo by author.

there were no apparent references to Christian iconography influenced by the missionary activity in the area, which appears in some *molas* from the 1950s, and none appear to relate to Panamanian political parties, which became popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In both time periods there were examples of *mola* panels based on Western consumer goods or objects — five such *molas* were found prior to 1925 and five post-1925.[36] The iconography on these *mola* blouses is discussed below.

Pre-1925 Mola *Design*

Many early *molas*, from the turn of the century until 1925, have complex, well-planned designs on their panels, with the simpler two-color designs most likely sewn for young girls. Early *molas* give evidence of access to Western consumer goods, such as cooking utensils and packaged goods. The Kuna have had contact with Westerners for over 500 years through colonization and trade, and Kuna men are known to have worked on foreign ships for centuries. The development of the *mola* relied on access to cloth, either by trade or gifting.

The Panamanian coat of arms, possibly copied from Panamanian coins, is shown on both sides of a *mola* blouse, with the front of the blouse showing the central four objects on the shield in different positions from the coat of arms, shown in FIGURE 5. On the back of this blouse, these objects are more abstract. This *mola* suggests support for Panama at a time when different Kuna communities supported either Panama or Colombia.

A mechanical corn grinder was identified on the front of the *mola* blouse in FIGURE 6, during research with the source community leading up to a major exhibition of Kuna material culture.[37] This was the first manufactured commonplace implement found depicted on a *mola* panel. Most implements were fabricated from locally available plants or animals. The Kuna cultivate corn on small plantations on the mainland. This corn grinder would be much more efficient than manual grinding with stones. A Kuna chief informed the researchers that this type of corn mill was purchased from traders starting in the early twentieth century. The *mola* blouse in FIGURE 6 also relates to foreign goods obtained by trade. Western goods were obtained from traders from Colombia and other areas who visited a number of the Kuna islands to buy coconuts, and these traders were one of the sources for the cloth used to make *molas*.

Both sides of the *mola* blouse in FIGURE 7 include multiple letters of the alphabet and repeated shield-like designs. This is the only

36 In addition to the pre-1925 *molas* described below, there was also a boat with passengers (NMAI 252495 E, front and back of blouse); the steering wheel of a boat (NMNH E 425 635-0, back and front of blouse) and post-1925 there was another matchbox design, which shows cattle grazing (NMNH E 364 233-0, front and back of blouse), another coat of arms and possibly a badge (NMNH E 364 254-0, front and back of blouse) and the Chilean coat of arms (NMNH E 364 245-0, back of blouse).

37 The exhibition catalogue *The Art of Being Kuna: Layers of Meaning among the Kuna of Panama* (Salvador) outlines the involvement of the Kuna people in interpreting mola iconography. For information about this *mola*, see pp. 188–189.

FIGURE 6 This *mola* has been identified as depicting the chute of a mechanical corn grinder looking from above. There also appear to be many small pieces of corn. Panel width is 66.5 cm. 1922. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (166358 E). Photo by author. On the right: mechanical grinder in current use, side view. Island of Ustupu, Kuna Yala, 2010. This corn mill may be similar to the one depicted in the *mola*. Photo by author.

pre-1925 *mola* with lettering in the sample. The word "mixed" is clearly shown on the right of the back panel, and there are jumbled letters close to each other, which may spell the word "seeds." It is possible that the *mola* was copied freely from a packet of mixed seeds, perhaps used for animal feed. This is an early inclusion of letters in a *mola*, perhaps reflecting common usage of the product.

The fact that the words are in English most likely indicates that the *mola* is based on a label from a product obtained from the US Panama Canal Zone which was close to the northern end of the San Blas archipelago. Kuna men frequently worked on the mainland of Panama and in the Canal Zone for wages, though it was more common in the Canal Zone from the 1930s. US citizens living and working in the Canal Zone thus had contact with Kuna men, sometime befriending them and being invited to visit the San Blas islands, and thereby gaining an understanding of their lifestyle and culture.

FIGURE 7 This *mola* design may be from a label, possibly on a packet of mixed seeds. Panel width is 66 cm. The word "mixed" can be seen on the right. 1923. National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (E 425 629-0). Photo by author.

Post-1925 Mola *Designs*

The sample of *molas* investigated from the period after the Kuna Revolution did not demonstrate more evidence of outside influence in the iconography or the fabric used. Both before and after the Kuna Revolution a wide variety of fabric was found in both *mola* yokes and *mola* panels, indicating easy access to cloth, though perhaps some was repurposed from pre-used Western garments or feedsacks.

In this period *molas* were also found with designs reflecting those of everyday consumer goods such as matches, contemporary coins from Panama, and other countries such as Chile, and possibly coins from the previous century from throughout South America, which are found in Kuna coin necklaces.

Matchbox label designs are popular for *molas*, for example the *mola* showing the

FIGURE 8 Example of *mola* blouse collected after 1925 showing a close replication of the Parrot Safety matchbox label, on right. Panel width is 58.5 cm. 1941. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (204532 E). Photo by author. Matchbox label ≈ 9 cm wide; from collection of author.

Swedish parrot safety matches in FIGURE 8. This matchbox was sold in Panama beginning in 1911. The back panel of this blouse has a large image of the Panamanian coat of arms with the name of a brand of cigars: John Carr. The front and back *molas* of a blouse are often nearly identical; however, where this is not the case, there is generally a relationship, and in this blouse the matches and the cigar have a logical connection.

The replication of the matchbox label is fairly accurate, albeit many times larger than the actual matchbox, with the background filled with letters from the label, and the back *mola* panel is a fairly accurate copy of the coat of arms. The parrot matchbox design is another example of a useful everyday item, obtained by trade, which has an appealing design, being enlarged and sewn for a *mola* panel.

Both sides of the *mola* blouse shown in FIGURE 9 appear to show six coins, some of which quite closely resemble old Colombian coins minted in 1820, called "Santa Marta" coins. These coins have the letters "S" and "M" clearly stamped on them and have

FIGURE 9 Some of the six circular objects on this *mola* appear to be old Colombian coins, ca. 1820. Panel width is 60.5 cm. 1932. Kuna women wore necklaces made of old coins, shown in FIGURE 10. Note also on the left of the mola panel a representation of a Kuna flag at the top of a flag pole. National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (E 364 248-0). Photo by author. Below: Obverse and reverse of an 1820 Colombian silver coin (two *real*), ≈25 mm diameter.

FIGURE 10 Kuna woman wearing a coin necklace. Photograph taken in 1942 by Luis Hurtado. Courtesy of A. Magdalena Hurtado Arenas.

sawtooth-edged shapes inside the circumference, imitated on the *mola* on a number of the coin-like shapes. FIGURE 10 shows a Kuna woman wearing a necklace made of old coins.[38] This is another example of Kuna women basing a *mola* design on a small object, part of their everyday life, in this case often part of their dress ensemble, and enlarging it on the *mola*. Most likely the *mola* would be worn together with a coin necklace and thereby increase the meaning of the design to the wearer, reinforcing her identity.

The prevalence of Kuna symbols was investigated also, in particular whether the Kuna left-facing swastika was incorporated into *mola* panel designs after the Kuna Revolution when, as discussed above, it became part of the Kuna flag. Three blouses, each collected in the 1930s, were found with this symbol. On one blouse the overall panel design incorporated four large swastikas on both sides (see FIGURE 11). Small swastikas surround the large swastikas on the back of this blouse. On another blouse, one side incorporates what appears to denote a flag pole with a swastika at the top, signifying the Kuna flag and on the other side there is a swastika as a filler element (see FIGURE 9). It would seem that the inclusion of the flag confirms that this blouse was made after the Kuna Revolution. On a third blouse, the front *mola* panel includes the swastika as a large filler element and the overall design appears to relate to a Kuna myth. It was given to President Franklin Roosevelt on an official visit to the San Blas in 1935, and I suggest that this particular blouse was chosen as a gift by Kuna representatives to indicate continued appreciation of US support for Kuna autonomy, both from the time of President Theodore Roosevelt early in the century and especially during the Kuna Revolution, ten years earlier.[39]

Each of these examples links the swastika symbol, the emblem on their flag since 1925, with Kuna identity. As displayed by Kuna women when wearing these blouses, the symbol can be interpreted as reinforcing and asserting the autonomy attained by the whole community as a result of the Kuna Revolution.

Conclusions

Based on an examination of photographs and museum collections of *mola* blouses, there is little evidence of change to a Kuna woman's dress ensemble as a result of the Kuna Revolution. Historic evidence supports the societal pressure on Kuna women by their own communities to continue to make and wear the *mola*, as part of a strategy by Kuna leaders to strengthen their communities, particularly through promoting the wearing of this visually distinctive form of dress by Kuna women. The impact of the bright colors

38 Kuna women have been photographed wearing strings of old coins as necklaces. Pittier noted that these were old Columbian coins. *National Geographic* XXIII, no. 7 (July 1912): 657. DeSmidt claims that these could be Panamanian, Columbian and US currency valued up to $75-$100 (US). See *Among the San Blas Indians of Panama* (Troy, NY: s.n., 1948), 45.

39 NMNH E 377 428-0, front of blouse. The workmanship of the yoke is very high quality, suggesting that the blouse was carefully selected as a gift.

FIGURE 11 This mola shows Kuna swastika symbols incorporated into the overall design. Panel width 62.5 cm. 1932. National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (E 364 247-0). Photo by author. On the right: Kuna flag hung from the rafters of the meeting house, island of Ailigandi, Kuna Yala, 2010. Photo by author.

heightens the visibility of Kuna women, contrasting with the natural green and brown hued environment of the islands where they live.

There is evidence that some of the Kuna women who adopted Western dress in the early decades of the twentieth century were encouraged to wear the *mola* blouse and wrap skirt as everyday dress after the events of 1925. The selection of designs for *mola* panels reflects the many interests of Kuna women, their preference for bold colors and the incorporation of the quotidian into their dress. The importance of their identity is shown in the inclusion of designs of Kuna cosmology, as well as representations related to Kuna lifecycle events at which the *mola* is worn, even by Kuna women who no longer wear it as part of daily dress.

This strategy of creating and maintaining a visual distinction between the Kuna Indians and outsiders, together with restrictions on outsiders visiting and living in Kuna communities, has continued. The relevance of this strategy in contemporary times is the subject of ongoing research by both Kuna communities and outside researchers.

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