

# **General MacArthur among the Guna: The Aesthetics of Power and Alterity in an Amerindian Society**

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with issues surrounding the study of indigenous appropriations of symbols of military power. It focuses on the case of Guna people from the San Blas Archipelago of Panama who in the 1940s carved some wooden figures in the likeness of General Douglas MacArthur and used them as auxiliary spirits in collective healing rituals. By appealing to anthropological reflections on the notion of style, the article suggests a correlation between stylistic variations in forms of visual art, sociality and power. It exploits the potential of style analysis for interpreting historical phenomena from an anthropological perspective. It is argued that there is a strong link between the stylistic changes of Guna woodcarving and the socio-political transformations that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. The Guna figures of MacArthur are the outcome of a stylistic switch towards individuation, paralleled by the creation of strong political subjects called upon by the historical events of the first half of the twentieth century in San Blas. Finally the case of cross-cultural appropriation discussed in the article shows the potential of

ethnographic studies of local lived worlds in furthering the understanding of global events such as WWII.

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This article explores the relationship between visual arts, forms of sociality and notions of power in an Amerindian lived world. By focusing on an instance of cross-cultural appropriation of images of military power it studies the making of specific objects and powerful non-human subjects, as well as the political implications of such processes in specific socio-historical circumstances.

I here consider the historical case of Guna<sup>1</sup> people from the San Blas Archipelago of Panama (see Figure 1) who, in the 1940s carved wooden ritual figures in the likeness of the North American General Douglas MacArthur and used them in collective healing rituals on a number of occasions. Moving beyond this specific case I look more broadly at the representation of white people in Guna ritual artefacts and ask the following question: what can the representation of white people and their concomitant military imagery tell us about Guna sociality and notions of power?

The perspective that I adopt in this work seeks to pursue an alternative route to the one taken by studies of contemporary forms of cross-cultural appropriation, which tend to emphasize aspects of so-called global interconnectedness. A

notable example is Clifford's (1988) analysis which provides an account of the modern colonialist world in which Picasso, his fellow artists, intellectuals and, to a certain extent, gallery goers, came to challenge western aesthetic paradigms in the first three decades of the twentieth century. According to an example used by this author we could read the presence of a blue plastic Adidas bag visible on the lap of the Melanesian umpire overlooking the match shown in the 1975 film *Trobriand Cricket* 'as part of the same kind of inventive cultural process as the African-looking masks that in 1907 suddenly appeared attached to the pink bodies of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*' (1988:148). This approach sheds light on Euro-American aesthetic consumptive practices and processes of othering.

Taussig explicitly expounds the merits of an anthropology that focuses on 'the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others' (1993:236). His analysis is based on a number of selected instances where colonial administrators are reflected in artefacts produced by the colonized. He suggests for example looking at the representation of white people in Guna shamanic carvings as being a copy, a form of mimetic appropriation aimed at acquiring the powers of white people. From this perspective the *hauka* possession ritual of the Songhay-Zerma is another example of abduction of the power of white colonizers by means of mimicking their behaviours and bodily appearances. As Picasso and the Melanesian umpire partake in the 'same kind of inventive cultural process', so Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres Fous* and *Trobriand Cricket* exploit the same mimetic capacity deployed by the people portrayed in the films (240-46). This position carries within itself self-reflexive implications: 'The white man as viewer is here virtually forced to interrogate himself' (238).

Examples of the kind used by Taussig and Clifford could potentially proliferate, as indeed could the phenomena of cross-cultural appropriation that they instantiate. However, I argue, the analytic potential of such approaches is limited, since by virtue of their self-reflexivity they end by avoiding full consideration of the lived worlds that generate those appropriations. For example, they tell us precious little about what the blue plastic Adidas bag was for those Trobrianders who decided to incorporate the game of cricket in their everyday life.

I agree with the above authors that anthropologists should battle to avoid the Western proclivity to abstract their objects of analysis from the historical colonial situations in which they have been created, used, and sometimes traded. To avoid this pitfall they give one answer; I shall explore another.

### ***Familiar encounters***

From the literature and archival sources it appears that on at least two occasions during the 1940s – and it is reasonable to think that there have been more – Guna people carved large balsa wood figures in the likeness of General Douglas MacArthur and used these as auxiliary spirits in collective healing rituals to rid the village from epidemics. The two known Guna wooden figures of MacArthur are kept in museums in the United States; one is at the Denison Museum in Granville, Ohio; the other at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

The first one was collected by Leon De Smidt, a North American resident in the Canal Zone, who visited the San Blas Archipelago twice in the mid-1940s (see Figure 2). He was invited by Alcibiades Iglesias, a Guna protestant missionary who was then in charge of the church of Ailigandi, which is a Guna village on an island in the middle sector of the San Blas Archipelago (cf. Howe 2009:181-2). Iglesias had been educated in the United States in a missionary school, where he was sent in 1916 along with other young Guna men by the British born Protestant missionary Anna Coope, the founder of the first mission school on the island of Nargana (Howe 1998:93-4). After his return, Iglesias and his North American wife started the Protestant church and school in Ailigandi (Howe 1998: 297; Lane 1983:39-43). This was one of the several schools and missions opened in San Blas between the 1930s and 40s by Guna men who had been formed in the protestant school of Coope or in mission schools in the USA. The reason for these schools being opened was that in some sectors of Guna society there was a sense that school education and learning English would help future Guna generations in dealing with the Panamanian government.

The second statue of the General was collected by another North American, Louise Agnew (see Figure 3). While travelling along the San Blas Archipelago a few years later she found the balsa wood figure of MacArthur on the Guna island of Dubac (Isla Pino in Spanish) and after some negotiation with the inhabitants she managed to buy it.

**Figure 1. Map of Panama; A: Eastern Panama, Guna Yala and Panama Canal;  
B: Ailigandi, Ogobsuggun and Dubac. Cartographic Unit, Durham  
University.**

Asking why Guna people carved the figures of MacArthur in the middle of the twentieth century in this article I deal with the problem of how historical events of cultural encounter, clash and domination are often registered in indigenous lived worlds in aesthetic and ritual forms that escape traditional historical analysis based on written documentation. The following questions arise when we try to deal with this kind of problem ethnographically: what is at stake from the indigenous perspective when we focus on visual forms of cross-cultural appropriation? What lies beyond obvious references to symbols of colonial or military power and domination? The domain of visual arts needs therefore to be looked at through an ethnographic lens that is able to connect different levels of complexity and, most importantly, different points of view.

### ***Images of white people***

*The savage hits back* (Lips 1937) is still the most comprehensive study of the representation of white people in native arts across the world (see also Blackburn 1979). This comparative work relies on an impressively wide array of specimens from museum collections and ethnographic material available in the 1930s. It aims to demonstrate how native societies colonized by Europeans resisted years of violent domination and missionization by appropriating selected aspects and things around white people, thereby 'hitting back' at their colonizers, as the title rather eloquently puts it. By grouping works of art based

on the representation of different aspects of white peoples' lives, such as the use of ships, rifles, the presence of missionaries, merchants, doctors and teachers, Lips gives us a detailed account of how white people were perceived by a number of disparate societies across the globe.

Very rarely do we find it difficult to decide whether or not we are looking at a European in the artistic work of these tribes. It is not the costume only, but all the most delicate details, the anthropological characteristics, such as difference in hair, lips, and nose, in gesture, pose of the arms and hands, and of the whole body, that have been exactly noted and recorded. In many cases not only can we quite clearly recognize that we are studying the picture of a European, but the special traits of a definite nation have been so well executed that we can distinguish with certainty between Englishmen, Frenchmen, Portuguese, Dutchmen, Germans, or Russians, without assistance from historical facts or peculiarities of clothing. This fact is all the more striking, since this realism does not seem in keeping with essentials of tribal art, and requires an explanation which only a study of primitive art as a whole will supply (Lips 1937:35-6).

The last remark made by Lips is of particular interest for the present study, as I will discuss later. For the moment suffice it to say that Lips' work is one of the rare studies that pointed in the direction of the local complexities behind the production or appropriation of cross-cultural imagery.<sup>2</sup> As Van Velthem noted in reference to Amerindian societies, aesthetic notions and material culture have

rarely been adopted as the perspective through which to study the representation of contact (2000:61).

I will argue that the powerful white people represented in Guna ritual woodcarvings are 'good to think with' about the nature of power and sociality from a Guna perspective. In so doing I tackle issues of counter-appropriation of symbols of military power and aim to contribute to the study of indigenous notions of power and more generally of the nature of mimesis and cross-cultural representations from an ethnographic perspective. I am concerned with the social intentions and agency behind the making of objects in a context of cross-cultural interactions. White people represent perhaps the best example of ontologically different beings (of Others) for Guna people and yet they instantiate positive qualities of Guna social life and political philosophy. Below I describe how images of powerful outsiders are mobilized and used in Guna daily life for specific purposes and show that through focusing on these images we can understand crucial aspects of Guna notions of power and sociality.

In order to address this question I will resort to a fairly neglected concept in anthropology, the concept of *style*. My aim is to discuss the distinctive features of the Guna visual style and show that such features resonate with wider issues concerning modes of sociality. By tracing the general lines of the Guna visual system I wish to suggest a reading of the representation of white people in Guna ontology. By considering the circumstances that framed the relationship between the Guna and North Americans and Guna people's own reflections on it, in what follows I suggest that the representation of white people in Guna



artefacts is an example of the historical transformations of Guna style in visual arts and social life.

### ***Style***

Style is about dynamism and change, as writers concerned with the topic have often stressed (see Kroeber 1957). Another aspect of style, particularly relevant to anthropology, is that it lends itself to historical analysis. Previously dominant art historical tendencies to consider styles as necessarily evolving towards naturalistic representations were put under scrutiny by Shapiro, who argued that both geometric and naturalistic styles 'occur in history; there is little reason to regard either one as more typical or more primitive' (1953:300).

Kroeber and Richardson (1940) had already begun exploring the relation between art, history and anthropology focusing precisely on style. In a quantitative analysis of three centuries of women's dress fashion in Europe they had demonstrated the relations between stylistic changes in fashion and socio-political occurrences in history. After a detailed analysis of variations in women's dress styles in relation to periods of either political unrest or relative stability the authors had suggested that stylistic variations need to be considered against a 'basic pattern of women's dress style, toward which European culture of recent centuries has been tending as an ideal' (Kroeber and Richardson 1940: 149). Following their methodological reasoning, it would seem therefore worthwhile to consider style, from an anthropological perspective, as a tool to explore the impact of historical circumstances on socio-cultural patterns<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, it is

through studying stylistic changes that one is able to work out a 'basic pattern', not vice versa<sup>4</sup>.

Despite its potential this approach has not received much attention. However, ethnographic studies of art have increased considerably in number in the past forty years, and so has the attention to native lived worlds and ontologies. This has led Layton to consider style an aspect of visual communication and to note

how fundamental a characteristic it is of cultures to select and organize experience into characteristic patterns of meaning and there is every reason to suppose that this will take place with form in the construction of artistic styles (1991:171).

Notable is also the contribution to the study of style that Forge has made based on his research on Abelam paintings. While he stated that it is misleading to focus on either abstract or figurative elements he called attention to the field of relations between visual motifs. 'The total design may or may not have a name or "represent something" in our terms, what is important is the expression of relationship between the parts and the meanings of those parts' (1973:187).

In a work still unique in his genre, *The Way of the Masks* (1982), Lévi-Strauss demonstrated the analytical importance of stylistic analysis in considering the plastic features of some particular masks made by the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Salish people of the Northwest Coast of America. In his

analysis Lévi-Strauss compared the formal features of such masks with the mythology and cultural practices of the peoples who made them. By applying to visual artefacts the structural analysis that he had previously used in his study of Amerindian mythology he formulated historical hypotheses that would otherwise be impossible to formulate given the lack of documentation regarding the phenomena concerned.

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss suggested that the stylistic choices of a particular society need to be looked at in relation to either the choices of neighbouring societies or to the previous style forms of the same society. Gow (unpublished manuscript, 1997)<sup>5</sup> has subsequently argued for the strength of Lévi-Strauss' take on the problem of style in his analysis of the beadwork artefacts made by Piro (Yine) women from the Bajo Urubamba region of Western Amazonia. Building on Lévi-Strauss' approach that considered style as an historical tool of enquiry, Gow argued for extending stylistic analysis to social forms, demonstrating how changes in social forms are made sense of by the people who participate in such changes. After stating that 'Piro beadwork style exists because it *can* exist, and only subsequently does it do anything', Gow proceeded to demonstrate ethnographically the stylistic shift from design to alphabetic writing enacted by Piro people in the course of the twentieth century. This shift implied a convergence of meanings between Piro people and white missionaries. Stylistic analysis, Gow argued, provides an historical explanation, independent of documentary archive, of why and how such process took place.

Expanding the discussion on a more general level Gell wrote about style in visual arts focusing on the regularities in the transformations of graphic motives within a specific culture. In a manner reminiscent of Forge, he characteristically defined style as 'relations between relations of form' (1998:215). In dialogue with the art history literature and using the example of the ethnographic collections from the Marquesas islands, Gell argued that 'Marquesan style is both unitary and dynamic; it is a field of possible or legitimate motivic transformations, rather than the totality of existing instantiations of such transformations' (215).

With a focus on 'relations between relations' Gell offers a compelling perspective through which to compare relations between visual motifs in artefacts and relations between persons in a given society. The main thrust of his argument is about the possibility of looking at specific properties of social life through identifying the 'axes of coherence' within the style of visual system. It is of course not fixed social or cultural forms that Gell refers to, but rather 'transformational modes'. Relations between elements in the visual system point therefore to relations between persons in the social system. Relations are the key object of Gell's analysis, not so much artefacts or persons as poles of those relations. It is by studying how relations between visual motifs change following the 'least difference principle' that Gell suggests a link between style in visual artefacts and social relations in the Marquesas. He therefore argues that the 'least difference principle' applied to the transformations of visual motifs corresponded to the downplaying of social differences in this once highly competitive society.

What Gell calls the ‘fundamental scheme transfer between image-making and the making of persons’ (220) is of particular interest for the case that I deal with below. Moreover, as Küchler has recently argued in her reappraisal of Gell’s concept of style, it is ‘the multiplicity and manifold relations between artefacts that count for anthropology’ (2013:27). In line with Lévi-Strauss’ work on the logic of the concrete Küchler further points out that Gell has shown us how objects are ‘good to think with’ and has prompted us to consider ‘... the role of art in presenting us with the visible experience of relations held internally, a qualitative experience made possible by an intuition...’ (31).

I concur with Gell on the methodological importance of focusing on ‘relations between relations’, and in exploring the links between style in objects and style in sociality. I also draw on Lévi-Strauss’ argument that exploring transformations in objects’ relations provides useful clues to explore transformations in social forms. Namely, through exploring transformations in Guna visual art I wish to look at both the relations between the Guna and North Americans and the transformations in Guna social life. This will also allow me to formulate some hypotheses regarding the changes that Guna notions of the social and of power have undergone in the past century.

Nevertheless, in what follows my analysis differs from the authors discussed above in one important aspect. Namely, I do not focus my attention on *formal* visual features and innovations in Guna ritual figures. Although there could indeed be scope for a formal analysis, what I focus on here instead is what particular images ‘stand for’ in terms of social agency; their indexicality, as Gell

perhaps would have it; or the impact that historical circumstances have on style as variations on the norm, as Kroeber would maybe concur. Differently from Gell, who in his chapter on style explicitly departed from the approach that he adopted in the previous part of the book, I maintain that a stylistic analysis could be achieved by focusing on local categories, in my case those of Guna people, and therefore be intrinsically *ethnographic*, and *not* based on *formal* visual qualities individuated *a priori*. In this sense, although my argument owes much to art history and anthropological takes on style, it departs clearly from these on this last issue. In brief, I mainly rely on Guna exegesis of their art and not on the comparison of the formal features of their artefacts as seen from an external perspective.

Whereas Gell explicitly focused on what he called ‘ethnographic isolates’, that is, the collections of artefacts of one specific culture from a specific historical time, in what follows, my choice to start from the ‘ethnographic isolate’ represented by the wooden figures of General MacArthur is but a strategy to carry out an historical analysis of the Guna stylistic system. The case that I study here is one of cultural contact. It is in fact, by focusing on the encounter between Guna people and North American soldiers in the middle of the last century that I aim to explore particular features of Guna style<sup>6</sup>.

### ***The politics of contact***

A considerable amount of studies of contemporary Amerindian societies have dealt with the complicated issues concerning indigenous people’s relation with, and perception of white people. In particular, recent studies have provided

important critiques to earlier approaches – up to the early 1980s - that adopted the perspective of acculturation, by which the contact of indigenous societies with colonial societies was read primarily in terms of culture loss. Focusing closely on indigenous categories authors working with contemporary Amerindian societies show the resilience of indigenous lived worlds and the way external colonial powers have been resisted, scrutinized and in many cases digested within local ontologies.

Most of these authors have stressed the value of considering indigenous agency in the context of colonial power struggles. This has had the consequence of unravelling a number of themes that Amerindian scholars have developed according to their ethnography. I suggest that these emerging themes could be synthesized as follow: ‘becoming white’, ‘historical transformations’, ‘mimetic appropriation’ and ‘perspectival transformation’.

The notion of ‘becoming white’ has emerged from studies focusing on the threats perceived by indigenous peoples facing the encroaching powers of national societies. Some indigenous peoples seem therefore to distinguish between competing moral values, which sometimes might be perceived as reconcilable through the domestication of foreign knowledge (Kelly 2005; Overing 1996), sometimes not, because of the unequal power relations between indigenous and national societies (Course 2013).

The impact of colonialism on indigenous societies has also been studied through the lens of ‘historical transformations’. On the one hand this approach reflected

on how processes of social change and cultural contact have been made sense of in indigenous cosmologies and mythologies (Carneiro da Cunha 1973; Hugh-Jones 1988), on the other hand it highlighted indigenous notions of history (Gow 1993; Ireland 1988; Silverblatt 1988; Taylor 2007). Other studies have explored the potentialities of the notion of 'mimetic appropriation', as formulated by Taussig (1993) in his famous reappraisal of Benjamin's work, in the context of relations between indigenous peoples, missionaries and the wider national society (Santos Granero 2002, 2009). Furthermore, some authors in recent years have elaborated and explored notions of Amerindian ontologies in terms of 'perspectival transformations'. A number of works have consequently focused on such issues as the adoption of white people's clothes by indigenous peoples (Ewart 2007; Gow 2007; Santos Granero 2009), bodily transformation as a paradigm of becoming white (Vilaça 2007), and the radical implications of the conception of alterity at the core of indigenous notions of sociality (Viveiros de Castro 1992).

One problem arising from the studies considered so far, I suggest, is that it is easy to presuppose that we already know what white people are for indigenous societies (see Harris 1995). One, if not perhaps the principal reason for this presumption, is that most ethnographies are written by members of the former group. By uncritically considering white people as a generally uniform category we risk overlooking important features of indigenous critical engagement with alterity, of what Wagner (1981) and more recently Viveiros de Castro (2009) have defined 'indigenous' or 'reverse anthropology'. I suggest it is crucial to focus on the specific *qualities* of white people that indigenous people comment on, find



appealing or appalling, and in some cases strive to appropriate. I here therefore engage with the aesthetic categories of Guna people in order to shed some light on their relationship with white people and more broadly on Guna notions of sociality and power.

### ***The Guna and the U.S. soldiers***

Central to most Guna healing rituals are some wooden anthropomorphic carvings called *nudsugana* in Guna language. These figures are the auxiliary spirits of ritual specialists and are found in almost all Guna households where they are kept as spirit protectors. These carvings can be either male figures, often represented wearing a shirt, trousers, a tie and a brimmed hat, or female figures, with the clothes normally worn by Guna women: a headscarf, a blouse and a cloth wrapped around the waist. What is striking and of particular interest for my analysis here is that these wooden figures have the appearance of white foreigners (see Figure 5 in the online supplement).

Nordenskiöld noted after his 1927 expedition among the Guna 'It is a matter of conjecture whether the Indians have not gotten the idea for these figures from the pictures of saints. It is typical of all wooden figures that they do not represent Indians but Europeans instead' (1938:423). In a similar vein, Chapin, who conducted research among the Guna half a century later, wrote that the wooden figures 'almost invariably are carved to look like non-Indians; if they are made to represent Indians, they are somewhat more exotic, wearing suits and hats with serrated tops, and are occasionally riding horses' (1983:93-5). It is indeed interesting to note that the representation of white people in Guna ritual figures

is a phenomenon dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. However, only stating that Guna wooden figures 'look like' white people without exploring the implications that such a resemblance has for Guna people is of little help if we intend to carry out an anthropological analysis of this intrinsically interesting fact.<sup>7</sup> What meanings have white people come to acquire for Guna people during the past century - and beyond?

Severi (1993) indicated a fascinating link between madness and the image of white people in Guna shamanic tradition. The historical conflicts between Guna and white people provided the framework for the image of the latter to be incorporated as demons, responsible for turning their Guna victims mad, non-human and eventually killers of their own kinspeople. By the same token white people are incorporated as auxiliary spirits in the form of wooden figures. For Severi (2000) the ambiguity between demons and auxiliary spirits, bad and good, is key to understanding the transformational and ambiguous nature granted to the spirits of white people by Guna people.

It is therefore interesting to consider how Guna people give material shape to their representations of spirits. As I have described at length elsewhere (Fortis 2012a) Guna anthropomorphic carvings have the appearance of generic figures of a person. They do not represent any specific living individual and their external generic appearance stands in opposition to the internal one, their 'real image', which can only be seen in dreams by seers who consult with the souls of *nudsugana* during the cure of a sick person or during collective healing rituals. Interestingly, on a number of occasions I heard Guna people describing the

dreamed image of *nudsugana* as that of a white person, more rarely of a black person, and in some cases as that of a soldier.

**Fig. 5 (online only) Nudsugana from Leopoldo Smith's house. Ogobsuggun, 2004. Photo by Paolo Fortis.**

To address the question above I shall consider the example that provides the main case of this paper, that of the wooden figures of MacArthur. Before doing so two things need to be noted. First, North Americans had been instrumental in Guna people seeing their rights recognized by the Panamanian State. In 1925 Guna people revolted against Panamanian authorities encroaching on their territory and benefited from the support of the former secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Panama, Richard Marsh. Marsh, who is described in the literature as an eccentric adventurer, helped the Guna to organize their rebellion, which ended with the killing of some Panamanian guards. Afterwards, he convened a meeting between Guna and Panamanian authorities, who, in the presence of the Governor of the Canal Zone and the U.S. Minister J. G. South, signed a peace treaty (Howe 1998:279-91). This was the first step in a negotiating process that led to the recognition of the Guna territory as a reserve in 1938 (*comarca* in Spanish) and to the establishment of the Guna General Congress as a representative body that was recognized by the Panamanian Government (296).

Second, in 1930 the Guna leader Nele Kantule and the head of the North American Army in the Canal Zone, General Preston Brown, signed a treaty establishing that Guna people would be hired as civil workers in the military

bases of the Canal (Howe 1998:295; Margiotti 1999:39-43). Until the devolution of the Canal to Panama in 1999, Guna men worked in the U.S. forts along the Canal, mostly as cooks and cleaners.

Through this long-term relationship generations of Guna people became acquainted with the U.S. forces in the Canal. Guna men and their visiting families were able to move in and out of the Canal Zone, formally North American territory, without need to show their I.D. card, I was often told. Guna workers were lodged in barracks in the military area and during their free time joined the soldiers in leisurely activities such as playing basketball or baseball, or drinking beer in the canteens. They were also able to shop in the Canal Zone markets that sold North American merchandise. Items of clothing were on high demand among Guna men, who shipped them to their families in the villages.

The families of Guna workers were also able to visit them and on such occasions as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration were invited to lunch with the soldiers and their families. In some cases Guna women were hired as house helpers by the soldiers' families. Moreover, given the constant movement of Guna families between the villages in Guna Yala and Panama city, and to a lesser extent Colón, the military world of the Canal Zone soon became widely known to Guna people. Their descriptions and impressions of the U.S. military power and organization circulated widely among kinspeople and fellow villagers leaving a vivid memory still present nowadays.

During their period of work many Guna men became friends with North American soldiers and their families, from whom they used to receive clothes and other goods for their children. On occasions the latter visited their Guna friends in their villages. Many Guna men learned English and acquired specialist skills, such as cooking, driving and mechanics. One example is that of Nicanor Pérez, a man in his mid-seventies from Ogobsuggun, who while narrating his experience of working as a chef in the Canal Zone in the 1980s, told me about his boss, a sergeant from Boston. Nicanor used to go to his house to maintain the garden and once he built a thatched roof marquee for him. Sometimes he also helped the sergeant when he invited his friends for a barbecue. In return the sergeant gave him several gifts over the time, including a used car, which he refused asking for a bicycle instead, and some oven trays, for his bakery in Ogobsuggun. Nicanor emphasized that the sergeant was a very good person and they kept in touch when the latter moved back to the USA. I should add that these kind of positive memories are shared by all Guna men I spoke with in relation to their work experience in the Canal Zone.

After the outbreak of WWII the Panama Canal Zone became a sensitive target and the U.S. Army began to build patrol bases and landing strips along the San Blas coast in the Guna territory. One of these bases was built on the coast in front of the island of Ailigandi, which was visited by De Smidt. As the people in Ailigandi still remember, there were bulldozers and trucks working on the coast to clear the land for the military base on the mainland. Once it was finished, Guna men worked as cooks, while women washed the soldiers' uniforms. Moreover, as an old man in his nineties told me in 2014, youngsters used to visit the military

base at night to watch films. Another base was built near Ogobsuggun and as a man told me people there still remember the aircrafts flying above the village daily; when the soldiers left they went to get the provisions left on the site.

### ***MacArthur among the Guna***

Differently from their direct knowledge of U.S. soldiers over a long period of time, it is unlikely that any Guna ever met General MacArthur in person. As pointed out below by De Smidt, their knowledge of him was likely based on what the soldiers told them. MacArthur was a well-known figure in the U.S. military world and publicly before WWII having been appointed Field Marshal in the Philippines in 1936. During the war he famously retook the Philippines from the Japanese and at its end led the occupation of Japan where he became Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers participating in drafting the country's new constitution. Alongside the fame acquired through his military achievements he was also a well-known public personality, often described as a controversial and eccentric character with a 'naturally histrionic personality' (Manchester 1978:443). A tall and handsome man, he had a flair for dressing. A photogenic character often appeared in pictures with a pipe in his mouth. This combination of fame and personal traits gained him renown beyond the military world among North Americans and around the world. After WWII and during its aftermaths he acquired international status and was an outspoken advocate of U.S. intervention and political action in Asian countries under what was then considered the threat of Communism. But what specifically led Guna people take an interest in MacArthur during the 1940s?

According to De Smidt:

The San Blas Indian not only became acquainted with the United States soldier who protected the coast of Panama, but he was also made familiar with the world activities of our armed forces through the picture magazines which our soldiers often gave the boys who did their "K.P." ['kitchen police'] work. In this way and through conversation, General Douglas MacArthur became the hero of some of the San Blas people in the spring of 1942 just as he became the hero of most people in the United States. It is not likely that we would have known anything about this admiration if sickness had not broken out in the village of Ailigandi which was serious enough to call for the observance of an appeasement feast (1948:37).

De Smidt explains that people in Ailigandi decided that the outbreak of fever had been caused by the felling of trees and the moving of rocks by the military who were constructing the airfield. This work had upset the spirits that inhabited the place, prompting them to attack the people in the village.

The town council met and decided to have an appeasement feast. They selected General Douglas MacArthur to be their patron saint for the occasion as he was then making his valiant stand at Bataan. The image which they made of General MacArthur was nearly seven feet tall. Because the Indians were not familiar with military regulations governing dress they made some grave errors. Instead of wearing

khaki, the image is painted so as to be wearing a green cap with a pink band and one white star. His coat was painted a powder blue with two pink breast pockets. Below the left pocket was what appears to be a German Iron Cross. He also wore a black bow tie and black pants. Although the Indians have small flat noses, they admire large pointed ones. They therefore made the image with a nose which projected three inches from the face (37).

Agnew, in a letter which accompanied the shipment of the balsa wood figure of the General to the American Museum of Natural History wrote the following:

I hope that you like this 'General McArthur'. He is very much authentic (Caribe Cuna style). This subject is very frequently chosen by San Blas men because during the war the Cunas learned from army men stationed in the area that 'General McArthur was a great and strong man.' They were told that 'he could protect them.' The word 'protect' assumed broad concepts. (North American seamen watched for German submarines in the San Blas Islands – the airforce even established grass landing fields near the coast on the Panamanian Mainland).<sup>8</sup>

The people in Ogobsuggun I spoke with in April 2014 remember the military base built on the coast opposite the island of Dubac during the period of WWII. It is therefore perfectly plausible that people there came to know about MacArthur in the same way that people in Ailigandi did, through talking to the soldiers and



reading their magazines, as De Smidt suggested in the case of Ailigandi.

Moreover, extravagant as it may be, De Smidt's description is quite accurate in its explanation of the reasons that moved the people of Ailigandi to celebrate the ritual to rid the village of the epidemic. Guna people say one of the causes that can provoke the outbreak of an epidemic is the cutting of forest trees. During previous fieldwork in Ogobsuggun in 2003 and 2004, I was told that in the past when Guna men cut trees to clear land for new gardens in the forest this often upset the spirits dwelling in such old trees, who then decided to raid the village causing widespread cases of diarrhoea and fever, especially affecting young children. To chase the spirits back to their invisible villages a collective ritual was celebrated.

**Figure 1. General Douglas MacArthur, c. 1942. DU 1971.1. Denison Museum, Denison University, Granville, Ohio**

**Figure 2. Bust of General Douglas MacArthur. Catalog No: 65/5604. American Museum of Natural History, New York.**

This ritual, called *absoged* ('to converse'), is still carried out nowadays when a village is struck by misfortune. A ritual singer and a seer lead the ritual that lasts for eight days and all the adult men and women of the village help by smoking tobacco and bringing along the *nudsugana* from their homes (Fortis 2015). On this occasion larger balsa wood figures are carved. These are called *uggurwalagana* and can be either generic anthropomorphic figures; zoomorphic figures, like harpy eagles, snakes and crocodiles; they may represent weapons,

like shotguns; or sometime, as it happens, figures of powerful war foreigners, like MacArthur. The carvings are then lined up against the walls inside the village gathering house where the ritual is performed.

Through his chanting the ritual singer gathers all the souls of the *nudsugana* under his orders and summons them to wage war against the malicious spirits attacking the humans in the village. The smaller figures that adult villagers bring from their homes join the larger balsa wood figures carved especially for the occasion. It is said that balsa wood figures act as leaders because of the quality of their wood. The balsa tree (Guna, *uggurwala*; Latin, *Ochroma pyramidale*) is associated with the first living being who was sent to the earth during its creation by Great Father. He was the leader of a group of eight mythic characters who, after witnessing the secrets of the creation of the earth from the body of Great Mother and the birth of evil beings, retired to live in their supernatural village from where they now preside over the reproduction of plant species, alongside a group of female supernatural beings who participate in human reproduction (Fortis 2012a: Ch.2). Auxiliary figures made from balsa wood are skilled expert speakers, they dominate several languages, they are able to trick the enemy with their diplomacy and most importantly they are white, like the pale wood from which they are carved. Although I am not aware of any Guna myth of origin of white people it is worth noting the association between white people and balsa wood. Moreover, I was told that after death Guna people become tall like white people, with lots of money and they live in beautiful houses. The association with balsa wood and the dead thus points toward a

characterization of white people as distant others whose power, if properly domesticated, could be beneficial for the living.

During the *absoged* ritual, *nudsugana* form an army led by the master singer. Those who described it to me made explicit use of military metaphors: the souls of *nudsugana* wear khaki uniforms so as not to be discovered by their supernatural enemies; the singer orders the troops to line up and prepare for attack, he tells them to tie a net between the branches of the trees to entrap the enemies when they pass by; some *nudsugana* produce a toxic gas when they lift their hat making the enemies faint. While descriptions of this metaphysical war scenario were shared by most Guna adult men I spoke with, it was acknowledged that the only person able to actually witness it was the seer, who while asleep during the singer's performance, could observe the developments of the supernatural battle. Once the eight-day long ritual comes to an end the smaller figurines are returned to their homes, while the larger balsa wood figures are usually discarded. Their souls are sung away by the singer and head off to the village of the Owner of Trees. The wooden figures thus become 'inactive' and are either kept by some people in their houses, brought to the forest, thrown into the sea, or sold to curious travellers.

### ***MacArthur as a problem with style***

In what follows I wish to suggest that the Guna figures of MacArthur pose an important problem with respect to style. Namely, differently from the smaller woodcarvings, they refer to a specific person. To my knowledge a general feature of Guna woodcarvings is that they are generic figures and do not refer, or even

less represent, any individual living being (Fortis 2012a: 180-7). This, as I will explain later, is the precondition of their ritual efficacy and of their status as plastic figures in the Guna visual system. In what follows I wish to suggest a way to read through the apparent irreconcilable features of the MacArthurs, as individual figures, and *nudsugana*, as generic figures.

The large MacArthur figures collected by De Smidt and Agnew had been previously used in *absoged* rituals after which they were ‘emptied’ of their soul, thus becoming potential collectible items for the occasional visitor. Differently, the smaller carvings that are brought to collective rituals and otherwise kept in Guna households have a longer life span. They are carved using hard woods and they last longer, often surviving the person who had them carved. Once their wood rots or cracks they can nonetheless be discarded after it has been ascertained that their soul no longer inhabits the carving.<sup>9</sup> Differences in material correspond thus to differences in life span. Importantly the type of wood from which each figure is carved reflects the qualities of the auxiliary spirit inhabiting the figure. As noted before, balsa wood carries diplomatic and linguistic skills and a penchant for leadership. Other woods carry physical strength or the capacity to produce toxic gasses.<sup>10</sup>

Another difference is that of size. While home figurines are around 20/30 cm. tall, the balsa wood figures carved for the *absoged* can be as tall as 2 m. or more, as in the case of the MacArthurs collected by De Smidt and Agnew (respectively 2.1 and 1.8 m. tall). Their size seems to be inversely proportional to their longevity, but is positively correlated to their power. As noted above, tall balsa

wood figures act as chiefs during the metaphysical battle against evil spirits, leading the army of *nudsugana*. This seems thus to recreate a sort of hierarchy, where taller figures act as intermediary chiefs and the ritual singer holds the ultimate command.

Most importantly, it is interesting to note that whereas home figurines are conceived as multiple, larger ritual balsa wood figures are treated as individuals. Guna people often made a point in telling me that the smaller *nudsugana* that they keep in their homes like living together, they like to keep each other company while co-residing with human beings. Therefore small *nudsugana* are always kept in groups in wooden or plastic boxes inside the dormitory house. They never stand alone as single figures.

This feature presents a striking analogy with the way Guna people live in their villages. As Margiotti (2010) has noted, Guna people value their life in densely populated villages where they decided to move around one hundred years ago. Since their move to the islands the population has grown dramatically.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, as Margiotti suggests, Guna people have adapted to their new demography by developing an ethos of multiplication. This applies to a number of aspects of daily life, such as the preparation and distribution of food between kinspeople and between affinally related households; the distribution of roles between a married couple; and the conception of the person observable through birth practices stressing the separation of the newborn from its pre-birth companion, the placenta. As Margiotti argues, all these strategies based on principles of multiplication and fragmentation should be considered as already

inherent possibilities within the Guna lived world and were put into to place when the situation called for it. This ethos of Guna social life is also found in the visual and material practices of women's dress, *mola*, which are characterized by a striking 'visual density' (Margiotti 2013). Style in social life and visual art are thus mutually dependent and the study above prompts a further look into the ways both transform according to historical circumstances.

A key feature of small Guna home figurines is their appearance as generic figures of a person. As I have argued elsewhere the external generic figure of *nudsugana* reflects in the sphere of visual art, the principle of the continuity of souls against the discontinuity of bodies common to many Amerindian ontologies (Fortis 2012b; 2014). In brief, their external carved 'figure' (*sobaled*) devoid of any individualizing feature stands in opposition to their anthropomorphic 'soul image' (*burba*); the latter being a feature shared by all living beings, be they animals, plants, humans or spirits (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998). Moreover, *nudsugana* present similarities to the image Guna people have of deceased persons, which are beings stripped of the individual features that they possessed as living beings. The erasing of personal differences epitomizes the end of fertility: the souls of the dead are unable to reproduce (cf. Carneiro da Cunha 1978; Overing 1984), which is another feature that they share with *nudsugana*.

The dead and *nudsugana* are therefore images of powerful non-human beings. The generic appearance of *nudsugana* is a function of their otherness and of their power and efficacy in the Guna lived world (Fortis 2012a:202-4). By making imperfect replicas of soul images Guna carvers do not represent any living being

because what characterizes a *nudsu* is its being different from a human being. This difference mainly comes down to not having a human body, which according to Guna notions of the person is constituted through the interplay of identity and alterity; respectively, human kinspeople and animal entities. This interplay is beautifully epitomized by the Guna notion of ‘amniotic designs’, *gurgin narmaggaled*, which instantiate at birth the potential praxes that the newborn will be able to develop during its life (Fortis 2010). While human beings are the outcome of a proper combination of identity and alterity, *nudsugana*, because of their lack of a body, are purely alters. Hence, they are destined to be ever different from their soul images - different from themselves.

This has led me to describe the nature of Guna carved figures as the outcome of an act of *proliferation*, rather than one of representation. *Nudsugana* are disembodied figures, ever different from their immaterial prototype, but they are virtually infinite in their numbers. Their incomplete instantiation as it were is counterbalanced by their multiplicity. They are replicas trapped in the ever-frustrating tension of getting close to their prototype. This tension is deflected by their proliferation as generic images. The sheer number of carved figurines in Guna villages and in every single house is a sign of their numeric proliferation, which stands in contrast, or perhaps prevents, their individual empowerment. I suggest that the avoidance of lifelikeness in Guna plastic art, and the consequent proliferation of ritual figures, needs to be read as a strategy to prevent them from becoming too powerful and dangerous.

The MacArthur figures seem therefore to challenge the avoidance of representation by aiming to ‘look like’ a specific person, thus pushing the limits of Guna aesthetics. I argue that instead of contradicting it this specific case sheds further light on Guna aesthetics and its link to sociality. Individualizing practices in figurative art, such as in the case of the MacArthurs, are highly dangerous and are rendered safe by the very short life of such figures, ritually controlled by singers and seers during the collective ceremony in which they play a key role. In what follows I suggest that both the avoidance of representation and the ephemeral life of Guna woodcarvings are positively related to the ongoing avoidance of the centralization of power in Guna social life.

### ***Rotalio and the power of the many***

When I visited Ogobsuggun in April 2014 I brought with me the picture of the MacArthur figure kept at the AMNH and showed it to a number of people in the village explaining who he was, when it was carved, and asking what they thought about it. This prompted some very interesting conversations. Here I want to elaborate on a particular conversation, which I had with Rotalio Pérez, a man in his mid-fifties and now a grandfather with a growing number of grandchildren (see Figure 4).

During the discussion, Rotalio stressed that the figure of MacArthur was clearly a soldier because it was made wearing a uniform. ‘That’s how policemen make themselves known, so that you fear them’, he pointed out. The discussion turned swiftly to the topic of clothing. I asked Rotalio the reason why all Guna elder men dress in a similar fashion, something that had struck me for a long time. Their



attire is in most cases formed by a pair of dark trousers, a white long-sleeved shirt, often a tie, and a brimmed hat (see Figure 6 in the online supplement). All of these items are foreign products which have to be bought in Panama City or Colón. Rotalio went on to explain this in the following way:

Now, you see, parents and children eat each food with a different taste. This is because they don't eat together. Everyone decides how much salt and chili to put on their plate depending on their taste. Elder people in the past used to wear headdresses woven with plant fibres and decorated with birds' feathers. They made shirts using fabrics of different colours, like the Guna in Bayano [inland region South of San Blas] still wear today. They did not have tables and chairs. They sat on wooden stools around one big plate from which they all ate together. The taste was the same for everybody. While they were eating they 'exchanged ideas' (*binsae ugge*).<sup>12</sup> Back then people worked together. To build a house the owner took the larger poles and built the structure. Then a date was decided for the villagers to collect wild canes, smaller poles and leaves to finish the house. They worked all together and built the house in one day.

Then Rotalio explained that in the 1970s Guna men started wearing long-sleeved shirts and ties imported from the city. They thought 'let's do the strangers (*wagmar*)!' Guna village elders adopted their standardized foreign attire so they could be recognized and acquire 'respect' (*binsae*).<sup>13</sup> In the same way as in Panama one can recognize a member of the parliament or a policeman by their

clothes. 'Without a uniform the policeman is not respected', Rotalio emphasized, and he noted further that young men now wear all sorts of T-shirts with different designs and symbols of the different political parties, shorts and baseball caps. 'Now everyone thinks on their own, they do not exchange ideas any more', he concluded.

According to Rotalio's explanation, eating from the same plate, sharing the same culinary taste and exchanging ideas are different aspects of the same process. 'Before they worked together – he told me – they shared the same idea. If you do not exchange ideas you have no force.' Rotalio, in keeping with other Guna men, agrees that his ancestors were hard workers and lived longer because their diet was based on forest products and plant medicines. Their bodies were stronger because they worked together. Eating the same food, from the same plate, with the same taste, were preconditions for people sharing the same idea, working together as one single body.

Furthermore, Rotalio's explanation of the importance of sharing one idea as the precondition of collective work and communal strength was originally prompted by discussing the military uniform of the MacArthur figure. It seems that the military uniforms of U.S. soldiers that Guna people observed from the 1930s onward stood as a powerful instantiation of the power of white soldiers. Wearing the same uniform, which is ultimately what uniforms are made for, is the expression of sharing the same idea, which thus implies being able to work together effectively towards a common goal, and thus to be powerful.

Interestingly enough, Rotalio used the same Guna term, *binsae*, to express both

the 'idea' that old Guna people came to share upon exchanging opinions, and the 'respect' that chiefs acquire by wearing their 'uniform'.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 3. Rotalio Pérez holding a pair of *nudsugana*, Ogobsuggun, 2004.**

**Photo by Paolo Fortis.**

Uniforms are thus the manifestation of being part of, literally, a larger body expressing a communal intent. The power of the one is backed by the power of the many. Uniformity, acting together and conviviality have as their precondition multiplicity and proliferation. What then, in light of Rotalio's explanation, was the kind of power that Guna people in the mid twentieth century envisaged in General MacArthur? I argue that that power was the phenomenal efficacy of the U.S. army that unfolded before the eyes of Guna people. That power was constituted by the exceptional military organization; the ability to transport large machinery from the Canal Zone to San Blas to build barracks and landing strips in the forest; the capacity to quickly and effectively transmit key information across very large distances; the ability to co-ordinate troops deployed at global level, and eventually, as it turned out, to win the war. That, for Guna people, was clearly not a power that any human being – intended as Guna person - could, or should indeed, possess.

General MacArthur was a perfect instantiation of the power of the multitude. His own power was the expression of the multiplicity of beings that he himself incorporated. The wooden figure of MacArthur, similarly to other *nudsugana* was a being in a state of proliferation; it was not unique, since it was replicable<sup>15</sup>.

However, differently from other *nudsugana* it was in danger of becoming one, that is, too similar to an individual subject; it was defying the very preconditions of Guna figurative art, which is to be different from its prototype. Its power had to therefore be fleeting. This was achieved by its short-lived leadership of the supernatural army that was ultimately controlled by a higher power, that of the ritual singer. Its destiny uncannily resembled that of the 'real' MacArthur who, once he had become too difficult to control was removed from his office by President Truman (Manchester 1978).

**Fig. 6 (online only) Ogobsuggun sailagana, 'chiefs'. 2004. Photo reproduced from the library of Ogobsuggun.**

### ***Conclusions: The Avoidance of the One***

It is now time to consider the implications that the analysis conducted so far has for the understanding of Guna notions of power and sociality as they unfolded in the middle of the twentieth century.

Pierre Clastres famously reported the words of a Guarani 'shaman', *karai*, who, after speaking the voice of the divinity, commented: 'Things in their totality are one; and for us who did not desire it to be so, they are evil' (1977:143). Clastres further elaborated on the meaning of the 'one'. For the Guarani the One is the Evil. Insofar as everything on this earth is imperfect, corruptible and destined to perish, that is, it is associated with the One. In their search for the Land without Evil the Guarani aimed at escaping the imperfection of the One by surpassing death and mortality and reaching a land where misfortune did not exist. 'Evil is

the One. Good is not the many, it is the *dual*, both the one and its other, the *dual* that truthfully designates complete beings' (146).

I suggest that the Guna provide an interesting variation on the South American theme of duality. Whereas in great part of Amazonia duality and its nested multiplicity seem to provide the key model to understand humanity and alterity (Stolze Lima 1999), the Guna provide an instance of further multiplication. Instead of the original mythic twins, from whom many Amazonian peoples consider humanity to derive, Guna people talk about octuplet heroes whose actions are linked to the origin of the human condition (Fortis 2012a:133-51). Furthermore, the first beings to appear on earth and to witness its creation were a group of eight young men, who then became the masters of trees and whose power is nowadays drawn at in the making of ritual wooden figures. In Guna cosmology the world is composed by of eight celestial and eight subterranean tiers. Eight and four, its half, are also key numbers in ritual praxes. For instance, the *absoged* ritual lasts for eight-days; plant and animal spirit masters invoked by ritual specialists have four names each; plant medicines used for curing a single patient are gathered fresh every four days; the bark of medicinal trees is collected by cutting four pieces from the trunk according to the cardinal directions.

In the mid twentieth century Guna people must have begun to realize that they were facing the new problem of acting together as one people before the Panamanian state. After the 1925 revolt they became progressively involved, through the mediation of North Americans, in negotiating their future as a

people within Panama. That must have required an unprecedented level of cohesion and a new form of political representation. How to act unitarily before the emissaries of the state without losing their internal egalitarianism cannot have been an easy feat.

As Martínez Mauri (2011) describes, Guna people underwent a period of intense political change between 1941 and 1948. At the beginning of the 1940s the Guna were divided into three main political factions, each headed by its own chief, *saila*, with different and often opposed positions regarding the relation with the national government, school education and missionary presence. In 1945 the Guna organized the first general congress, which was attended by representatives of all factions. Efforts of political unifications culminated in 1948 when the chiefs of the three factions were officially nominated as chiefs of the Guna General Congress. Since then they negotiated unitarily with the mayor of San Blas and the national government regarding issues of land, resources, education and health.

The solutions that Guna people progressively found are to be seen as part of the ongoing battles that they, and most Amerindian peoples, have been fighting for centuries against colonial national states and of their ontological refusal of the state and its institutions. I argue that there is a strong link between the stylistic change of Guna woodcarving described above and the socio-political transformations that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. The MacArthur ritual figures are the outcome of a stylistic switch towards

individuation, paralleled by the creation of strong political subjects called upon by the historical events of the first half of the twentieth century in San Blas.

Guna people harnessed their power as a multiplicity through their ethos of multiplication and acted at different levels of complexity. They projected this transforming power towards the socio-cosmological level. Where Panamanian authorities pressed Guna chiefs and representatives for uniting in one single political entity modelled on the state, Guna people, similarly to other Amerindians, responded by keeping their ethos of fragmentation and 'pulverization' of power (Sztutman 2013), as opposed to the one of concentration.

Along with recent studies showing the contemporaneity of Clastres' thought on politics and its implications for a theory of Amerindian arts (Lagrou 2012), I wish to conclude by pointing out the scope for a combined analysis of style and sociality as a means to reveal transformations of power from an indigenous perspective. I hope to have shown that tensions triggered by historical events might become visible through stylistic variations in visual art. I also showed that in order to overcome the limits of applying a western perspective to style analysis in a non-western society we need to avoid formal analysis of visual systems and rely instead on the virtues of ethnography as a deep engagement with indigenous ontologies.

Style in art and power in political and social organization are subject to changes and transformations. By reacting to external elements they change. But style in

art and social organization are profoundly entrenched in societies that stand against the state. Their freedom consists in their capacity to transform, realizing the multiple possibilities triggered by their avoidance of the One.

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<sup>1</sup> I use here the new system for transcribing the Guna language (previously spelled 'Kuna') formulated by Guna linguists and officially adopted by the Guna General Congress (Orán and Wagua 2011). This mainly differs from previous forms of transcription, including the one I adopted in my publications to date, in the use of the voiced stop consonants g,b,d instead of the previously used k,p,t.

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<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions are Toren's study of the fate of Leonardo's *Last Supper* on the island of Gau in Fiji, where she demonstrates that 'the process by which Fijian hierarchy is ratified by a divine and transcendent power underlies the appropriation of Leonardo's *Last Supper* as an ideal image of the chiefs who are the guardians of Fijian "tradition"' (1991:265). And Henley's re-interpretation of the *hauka* possession ritual, where he argues that 'local colonial Europeans with their obvious political power and equally obvious technological power, hybridized in a composite fashion with imaginary Islamic elites originating from Makkah, offer a variety of models of what powerful other-worldly beings might be like and how they might behave' (2006:752).

<sup>3</sup> In a later work Kroeber expanded on the causality of stylistic changes in relation to basic patterns. 'What the wars and revolutions do is to trigger disturbances in the stability of fashion. Wars and revolutions do not in themselves operate toward lengthening or shortening, widening or narrowing, raising or lowering any dimension of dress' (1957:22).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to compare this point to the one made by Ginzburg when, revisiting Vasari's distinction between 'simply' (*semplicemente*) and 'according to' (*secondo che*), he compared different approaches to works of art as either absolute and isolate entities, or historical and relational ones. As Ginzburg noted both approaches are necessary albeit incompatible. Nonetheless, 'we can articulate the "simple," direct, absolute approach through the language of history – not the other way around' (1998:47).

<sup>5</sup> This paper, entitled 'A lesson in Piro beadwork: understanding style in a lived world' was delivered by Peter Gow as a RAI Curl Lecture in 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Although as stated above my analysis owes a great deal to Lévi-Strauss' use of style as a tool of historical enquiry, it is fair to note the remark that Hugh-Jones made regarding the scant attention that the author paid to the impact that contact with white people had on Amerindian societies (1988:139).

<sup>7</sup> Taussig (1993) has started addressing this problem using as a point of departure the anthropological category of sympathetic magic. My point of departure here are Guna aesthetic categories.

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<sup>8</sup> Louise Agnew (1958). Letter to Dr. H.L. Shapiro, Curator of Physical Anthropology. Division of Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York.

<sup>9</sup> In some case the *nudsugana* of a deceased person might be sold to foreigners or brought to a place in the mainland forest where all 'dead' *nudsugana* are collected (Alexandre de Beaulieu, pers. comm.)

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the relation between tree species and the quality of *nudsugana* see Fortis (2012a: Ch.3) and Nordenskiöld (1938:345).

<sup>11</sup> In the case of Ogobsuggun: from around thirty people at the beginning of the twentieth century to almost two thousand now.

<sup>12</sup> *Ugged* is often used to mean 'to buy', that is to exchange something for something else, currently money. *Binsae*, as a noun, means 'thoughtfulness', 'idea', 'memory'; as a verb, it means 'to think', 'to remember', but also 'to give as a present'.

<sup>13</sup> The adoption of Western clothes by Guna authorities and male elders is a phenomenon that dates back to before the 1970s as it is possible to see for example in the pictures of Guna men after the 1925 revolt (Howe 1998:286-288). What I think Rotalio is talking about here is his perspective as a growing young man who was developing his awareness of the differential role of clothing in his lived world.

<sup>14</sup> Also Rotalio's reference to exchange ideas during meals might point to the father-in-law/son-in-law relation, which is based on respect and is the key affinal relation in the consanguineal household. See Jamieson (1998) for a discussion of linguistic and kinship implications of the relations between Miskitu people and white traders in Nicaragua.

<sup>15</sup> An interesting comparison could be made here with what Descola (2010) defines as analogic and animistic forms of figuration. The former type is constituted by images composed of anatomical parts belonging to different animal species, like the Chimera or Pegasus, bringing together a multiplicity of powers and capacities. The latter entails images that by showing anthropomorphic traits point to a common human interiority entailing the capacity for sociality and culture. The Guna MacArthur figures clearly exploit the power of the multiplicity without nonetheless drawing on a hierarchically organized array of powers and qualities. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to this point.