

# Images of persons in Central and South America

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'Il nous est difficile de comprendre comment ces conjurations de démons ont inspiré aux Indiens une oeuvre artistique. Il faut nous contenter de constater le fait et cela d'autant plus que nous avons ici à faire à des phenomenes extrêmement anciens, dont nous ne connaissons pas l'histoire et qui sont sûrement fort compliqués.'

(Nordenskiöld 1929)

This paper aims to explore some ideas regarding the relationship between art and alterity which emerged through reflecting on the ethnography of Kuna people from Panamá. By focusing on the sculptural representation of the human figure among the Kuna, I aim to unfold the complex relationship between visual art and ideas and practices surrounding death, suggesting that the link between sculpture and death appears to be widespread among Central and South American indigenous people. Here I deal with an ethnographic problem, the nature and implications of which point to a wider comparative ground, showing the key role of visual art in mediating between humans and non-humans, identity and alterity, life and death, present and past, in Amerindian lived worlds<sup>2</sup>.

I will focus on the carving of wooden anthropomorphic figures used in healing rituals by the Kuna, called *nuchukana* (sing. *nuchu*) in current Kuna language, and compare this with other cases where ceremonial wooden sculpture is documented in Amerindian ethnography. My aim is to illuminate what Kuna people think about when they visually represent the figure of a person in woodcarving. I also wish to make sense of the wider implications of this issue in Amerindian ethnography. Namely, what do we learn from making sculptural forms the object of our analysis?

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<sup>2</sup> For other studies dealing with the role of visual art in relation to alterity in Amerindian societies see Gow (1989; 2001), Lagrou (1998; 2007), Barcelos Neto (2002).

While there is a great deal of study on graphic designs among Amerindians, ethnography so far has not addressed the issue of sculptural forms<sup>3</sup>. I suggest the reason for this is principally that what a Western trained eye is used to perceiving as sculpture, i.e. the figure of the human body, is an extremely rare occurrence among contemporary Amerindians. Instead of carving the figure of a person, Amerindians seem generally keener to make dugout canoes and to carve stools, which have a great importance in their everyday life. As an ethnographer among the Kuna, I was myself first attracted by those forms of art that appealed most to my taste, namely the colourful *mola* blouses decorated with elaborate designs by Kuna women. However, the Kuna themselves suggested I concentrate instead on their carved wooden figures. This suggestion was fortunate, for not only had earlier research paid little attention to these carvings, I soon discovered that they play a central – and interestingly complicated – role in the healing rituals of Kuna shamans.

Sculpture – mainly in stone - was found to be present among those that have been classified as pre-Columbian high cultures, in the Andes and Central America and has been studied by archaeologists, historians and early cultural anthropologists (Kroeber 1949; Lothrop 1961). However, it appears that the aesthetic values of such cultures were measured against Western criteria of aesthetics and social evolution. The tendency to project Western aesthetic values onto Amerindian cultures is well exemplified by Kroeber, who nonetheless noted a very interesting aspect of South American art.

“Within the range of the merely decorative, and sometimes of the symbolic as well, the arts of South America frequently evince originality and fantasy. They are feeble in adding interest and skill in representation, which would have led to products like those of the *Maya* – or Egyptian and Chinese – in which lifelikeness, an approach to the realities of nature, is attained along with the successful retention of both decorative and religious expression” (Kroeber in Steward 1949: 411).

Following Kroeber’s lead, Kuna woodcarving, which is generally quite rough and certainly does not aim at ‘lifelikeness’, seems to be the product of unskilled people, who are not interested in developing a representative art, i.e. figurative art. Kroeber’s merit was however,

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<sup>3</sup> Kuna women’s cloth designs have been studied by Sherzer and Sherzer (1976); Hirshfeld (1977); Salvador (1978; 1997); Helms (1981); Tice (1995); Margiotti (2009). For some examples of studies of designs in Amazonia see Reichel-Dolmatoff (1978); Gebhart-Sayer (1986); Guss (1989); Gow (1999); Déléage (2007); Lagrou (2007).

despite his negative tone, to expand to the comparative study of South American art an insight that Boas had identified a few years before. Boas addressed the problem of the relation between plastic figures and graphic designs in the art of the Northwest coast of America, arguing that plastic art was not independent from the restraints of decorative art in the carving of totem poles (1927: 183-5). This insight was consequently taken onboard by Lévi-Strauss in his seminal study on body painting among the Brazilian Caduveo (1955; 1972[1958]), where he demonstrates that the opposition between graphic designs and plastic forms, instead of constituting a problem, is in fact a powerful analytical tool through which to look at Amerindian art.

My position in this paper is to acknowledge that Kuna people, as well as other Amerindians, followed their own path in developing their visual art, and that this path is not the same as the one followed in the West. My aim is to analyse contemporary wooden sculpture among the Kuna and other Amerindians as the transformation of something else, either of other art forms, or of other phenomena. I suggest looking at an object in the broader context of the lived world in which it has been conceived. Inspired by the method applied by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Way of the Masks*, I propose to look at an art form among a particular group of people, in a particular historical time, by looking at what it is not, and at its transformations among other groups. As Lévi-Strauss put it '[...] a mask is not primarily what it represents but what it transforms, that is to say, what it chooses *not* to represent. Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms. It is not made solely of what it says or thinks it is saying, but of what it excludes' (1983[1975]: 144).

### **The bodies of chiefs in ancient Panamá**

The presence of carved wooden statues among Kuna people is not recorded in early colonial sources. The earliest mention of these that I can find is in an article written by the missionary Severino de Santa Teresa in 1924. It is quite safe then to assume that carved anthropomorphic figures are a quite recent phenomenon among the Kuna, and started to be produced around little more than one hundred years ago. However, I wish to start with something different and intriguing, regarding the past of Kuna people mentioned in the *Handbook of South American Indians*, and which, I suggest, provides a key to interpreting present-day woodcarving in the Kuna lived world. In the 4<sup>th</sup> volume entitled *The Circum-Caribbean Tribes*, in the chapter 'The Archaeology of Panama', Samuel Lothrop writes:

“In Darién it was customary among certain ruling families to bury the wives and servants in the ground but to desiccate and preserve the body of the chief. To this end the body was dried out by means of surrounding fires. It then was disposed of in one of two ways. Some families maintained a special house or room where their ancestors were seated in order along the walls. In other instances the bodies were wrapped in mantles and placed in hammocks” (in Steward 1948: 146).

This information is based both on archaeological data collected in the early XXth century (Linné 1929) and on historical sources from the XVIth century (Oviedo y Valdés 1959[1535])<sup>4</sup>. The latter describe the ancestors of present day Kuna people living in the Darién forest in the Isthmus of Panamá, often identified as the Cueva, as a hierarchical society waging war against neighbouring groups at the time of the conquest. However, it is not with the hierarchical and warlike nature of ancient Kuna people that I concern myself with here, but rather with the dried bodies of the chiefs. My aim is to explore possible connections between this information and the practice that I observed among the Kuna of carving wooden statues and keeping them, often in large numbers, in almost all Kuna houses. I was told that *nuchukana* protect the members of the household where they are kept against the incursion of evil spirits, and at the same time they are the auxiliary spirits of seers (*nelekana*) and singers (*api suakana*), who respectively diagnose and cure illnesses.

### **Children of the forest**

In the interior of the dormitory house of almost every Kuna household that I visited, at the foot of one of the two main poles, there would be a wooden or plastic box containing several *nuchukana* of different sizes, ranging from two to a few dozen, and from 10 to 30 cm. high. **[FIG.1]** These wooden figures also vary in their making. Generally, they are rough representations of the human figure, with little attention to detail and with schematic gender features. In some cases the gender is represented through a more detailed representation of clothing, or the carving of the female breast. The common traits that feature characteristically

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<sup>4</sup> See also Helms (1979: 16-17) for a similar description made by early conquistadors of the treatment and conservation of dead chiefs' bodies in Darién (Panamá). It is worth comparing this ancient Panamanian practice with the Andean cult of the ancestors' mummies, *mallqui*, which had also a lithic double, *huacas* (cf. Molinié 2004; Sarmiento de Gamboa 2007[1572]: 117-19).

in each figure are a long pointed nose and the head covered by either a hat (*kurkin*), in the case of male figures, or a headscarf (*muswe*), in the case of female figures<sup>5</sup>.

Here I focus on the process of carving a *nuchu*, carried out by elder Kuna men. As I have noted elsewhere (Fortis 2008), carving a *nuchu* is a process that is best understood as the outcome of Kuna elder men's fertile capacities; namely, the transformation of the fertility that they had as young men, and as fathers. Elder specialists, through their controlled capacity of carving (*sopet*) and speaking (*sunmakket*), extract new subjectivities from the undifferentiated totality of primordial souls living in trees, and bring them to life as protector and auxiliary spirits of Kuna laypersons and ritual specialists. Below I deal with the subjective nature of *nuchukana*. Before this, I will address a specific feature of the way Kuna men described their wooden figures to me, namely their use of an idiom of birth and death in describing the process of woodcarving.

I was told that before cutting a branch or a root, the carver must first sing a short formula to summon (*unaet*) the soul of the tree; then, with his machete he makes a sign on the lower part of the branch which faced eastward when it was still attached to the trunk. This point, which I was told is sometimes visible in the form of a little knot, is where the nose (*asu*) of the *nuchu* will be shaped. Otherwise, it is sometimes possible to identify the back (*yarkan*) of the *nuchu* from a little crack on the wood. Leopoldo Smith, an elder and expert Kuna carver, once explained to me that the nose is cut from the lower part of the branch because a *nuchu* is carved in the same way as a baby is born, with the head down. Consequently, he first carves the nose of a *nuchu*, then the rest of the head, the torso with the arms attached, and finally the legs.

When I asked another carver why the nose of a *nuchu* has to be carved from the eastward facing part of the branch, he replied that when a tree is chopped it should fall so that it lands in the same position as when a dead person is buried. Corpses are buried facing upwards, with the body positioned along the West-East axis, and the head to the West side, thus looking eastward and upward, where Pap Neka (the 'House of Father', i.e. heaven) is<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Kuna *nuchukana* have been described by various ethnographers to whom I refer for comparative regional and historical data (Nordenskiöld 1929; 1938; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961; Howe 1976; Chapin 1983). For further photographic documentation see Salvador (1997).

<sup>6</sup> It has to be noted that felling trees, for opening a garden, or for making a dug out canoe, produces the death of the tree, thus sending its soul away. Whereas the cutting of a part of it, for making a *nuchu*, not only does this not kill the tree, but it is aimed at bringing a living part (baby) of it to the village. Lévi-Strauss provides an insightful analysis of the mythological

In order to better explore the analogy drawn between the cutting of trees, or branches, and the dead I will give here some details about burial customs and the treatment of corpses among the Kuna. According to Nordenskiöld's Kuna informant, Ruben Pérez Kantule, when a man dies his body is placed in a shroud. 'They bathe him with the boiled water [in which sweet basil has been put]. They put on him a white shirt, they put on him trousers, they put a tie on him. They paint his face, they draw on his face. They comb his hair and put a hat on him' (1938: 448)<sup>7</sup>. Then his wife goes to call the ritual singer, who knows the *nalup nakkrus ikar*, the song which aim is to lead the soul of the deceased through a safe journey in the afterlife<sup>8</sup>. The singer cuts small sticks of wild cane, *masarwar*, (*Gynerium sagitatum*) and chonta palm wood, *ilawala*, (*Aiphanes aculeata*) and decorates them with feathers and achiote dye (*Bixa orellana*). Eight of these decorated sticks are put underneath the hammock where the dead person lies. Then the singer starts singing, and, by means of his song, brings the decorated sticks to life. They are called *masartule* (wild cane people); they are the guardians who accompany the soul of the dead person throughout the journey towards the realm of the dead.

'The singer *neletulupalikula* begins to sing, speaking to the *masartule*: "The souls of the dead man are ready to rise up. You shall not leave any soul. If you leave any soul behind it will cause a lot of noise. If (the dead man) has quarrelled with his wife you shall not leave this soul (this quarrel) behind. All the souls of the dead man's possession you shall collect together for the dead man. You shall make all the souls rise", says the singer to the *masartule*' (*ibid*: 450).

The journey of the dead man's soul is described as follows in the song: the deceased is placed in the middle of a canoe and his guide spirits follow him across the sea channel separating the island from the mainland; then they enter the river. During the journey different types of animals, such as crocodiles, sharks, and stingrays threaten the soul of the deceased, but the *masartule* protect him by means of their lucent sticks and their feathered hats, which

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theme that associates the felling of trees for agricultural purposes and the origin of human mortality in the first volume of his *Mythologiques* (1983[1964]: 147-163).

<sup>7</sup> This text was translated from Kuna language by Pérez Kantule and refers to the case in which a man dies. For reasons of space, in this paper I discuss only what happens when a man dies. However, I suspect that considering the case of the death of a woman would require further analysis, given the nature of marriage among the Kuna. To this topic I intend to dedicate further study.

<sup>8</sup> As suggested by Pérez Kantule, the name of this chant derives from the peach palm (*Bactis gasipaes*), *nalup* in Kuna language. "Nalub is a palm and the rest of the name of the song comes from the fact that there are laid on the dead person four small crosses made of palm wood" (Nordenskiöld 1938: 446).

they lift to emit a shining light that keeps the enemies away. The soul of the dead is then conducted through the river of Papa (Father), on the banks of which golden fruit trees grow and beautiful women stand (*ibid*: 451-2).

The journey, vividly described in the song, is the exact parallel of the journey that the dead body will undertake the day after death when it is transported from the house of his kinspeople to the cemetery on the riverbank in the mainland forest<sup>9</sup>. Bringing a corpse to be buried on the mainland is the inverse movement of bringing a branch or trunk to be carved on the island. Both episodes share elements that refer to birth and death. As for the *nuchu*, birth and death are evoked in the practice of cutting a branch and carving it. While when a person dies, the body is wrapped in a hammock, the maternal womb, and a cord, called *olokwilotupa*, the umbilical cord, is placed on the chest.

The body of the dead travels, both physically and metaphysically, in a canoe towards the cemetery and across the river towards the house of Pap Tummat. For this reason Kuna people carve small models of canoes from balsawood, containing a small bow and arrows, a spear and a paddle. One such model is buried with the dead, and at the end of the funeral, another is tied across the mouth of the river. It is said that the first person to enter the river the next morning will cut the cord and re-open the river mouth. **[FIG.2]** I suggest that the position of a *nuchu* within a tree is similar to that of a corpse within a canoe<sup>10</sup>. The tree trunk is a potential canoe, insofar as the same species of trees are used to carve *nuchukana* and canoes. Therefore the image of a dead corpse transported in a canoe is equivalent to that of a *nuchu* contained within a tree trunk (or a branch, or a root). To make a dugout canoe, the trunk of a hardwood tree is emptied of its core, its heart (*kwa*), whereas to carve a *nuchu* it is precisely the *kwa* which is used<sup>11</sup>.

Canoes stand for both physical and metaphysical means of transportation and are symbolically associated to the maternal womb, which is in fact referred to, in medicinal language and ritual chants, as *ulu*, ‘canoe’ (see Margiotti 2009). As pointed out before, a

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<sup>9</sup> It is said that in the past, when Kuna people still lived in the mainland forest, the dead were buried near the house, and sometime even inside it. This practice was still in use in the 1960s among the Kuna living near the Urabà gulf in Colombia (Calvo Buezas 1990: 130).

<sup>10</sup> See Nordenskiöld for a picture of a ‘Kuna wood carving representing a dead person who is being carried away in his canoe’ (1938: 447).

<sup>11</sup> We can thus say that the *nuchu*, once carved, from being contained inside of a tree becomes the outside container of a new subjectivity. The same inversion of inside/outside can be observed by the *mariwini* masks worn by the Matis, which are ‘thought to possess a true set of teeth deep inside their head (*ukëmuruk*), located on what could be called their underface’ (Erikson 2007: ??).

*nuchu* is in a tree in the same position in which a corpse is buried, looking eastward. The corpse is kept wrapped in the hammock when it is buried. According to Pérez Kantule the hammock was slung in the pit, which was then closed with a wooden ceiling and covered with earth<sup>12</sup>. [FIG.3]

The final destination of the souls of the dead is located in the East, where the sun rises, and I was told that this is alternatively called Pap Neka (‘House of Father’) or Sappi-ipe Neka (‘House of the Owner of Trees’). What is interesting is that Sappi-ipe Neka is also where the souls of fetuses come from, and where the soul of the placenta (*achu*) goes when it is buried after the birth of a child. In Sappi-ipe Neka live *muukana* (‘grandmothers’) who send the souls of fetuses to earth when a woman gets pregnant, and who endow babies with the raw potential to be developed into social praxis during their life<sup>13</sup>.

None of my informants ever mentioned to me the idea of a cycle of births and deaths, or that new babies incorporate the souls of previously dead people. What Kuna people stress is that when a baby is born and when a person dies the transition of their souls into new bodies and away from old bodies is considered highly dangerous for living human beings. During this transition the predatory souls of animals might attract the disembodied souls of fetuses or of the dead, and turn them into dangerous beings preying upon their kin-to-be, or their former kinspeople. It is therefore the task of ritual specialists to ensure that these transitions occur safely and that the predatory intentions of non-human beings are preventively dealt with.

For all these reasons, I think it is worthwhile exploring the double parallelism between *nuchukana* and babies, and between *nuchukana* and the souls of the dead. *Nuchukana* are literally ‘powerful babies’ from the forest; they are non-human vitalities of primordial beings turned into new subjects, who, when met in dreams by humans, appear as individual persons and have proper names, as I discuss below<sup>14</sup>. They are called *nuchu*, which means ‘little and

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly Calvo Buezas notes that in the Colombian Kuna community of Caimán Nuevo the wooden ceiling, closing the pit, was covered with the deceased’s clothes, before being covered with earth (1990: 133). This would further suggest an analogy between birth and death, since the Kuna refer to the amniotic sac as the first clothes (*mola*) of a baby. Among the Noanamá (Wounana), living in the Colombian Pacific coast, the dead used to be buried in, or near the house, putting the corpse in an old canoe, or in a section of it, which was collocated in a vault closed with stakes (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1960:118). The practice of burying the dead by putting the corpse in a canoe is found as far away as among the Mapuche (Course 2007).

<sup>13</sup> To know more about the process of transforming potential praxis into human praxis see Fortis (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Often *nuchukana* appear to people in dreams as same-sex foreigners, usually white people. This issue was noted early on by Kuna ethnographers (Nordenskiöld 1938; Chapin 1983) and interpreted by Taussig (1993) as an instance of mimesis. Although Taussig was right in noting that this is an interesting problem, he did not approach it ethnographically. Severi (1993; 2000) in his study of Kuna shamanic chants provides important insights on the representation of white people in Kuna



pretty one'. They are cared for by members of the household and referred to with fondness. At the same time people fear them, as they know that if mistreated they could even cause death. Let us now turn to examine how Kuna people imagine life after death.

### **Death as alterity**

Once the soul (*purpa*) of a dead person has travelled through the river Oloupikuntiwari, it reaches Pap Neka. There I was told that the dead live only with their partners, without any other kinspersons. Each couple live in their house in the company of the animals that the man hunted during his terrestrial life. Furthermore, the man and the woman's bodies look almost identical. They are the same height and the same overall shape; they do retain their gendered attributes, which enables them to enjoy the pleasures of sex still, although they are sterile<sup>15</sup>. Men and women in the afterlife turn into generic images of persons, stripped of any individual feature - both physically and in terms of personality - that they possessed during their life (cf. Taylor 1993).

What is interesting about the Kuna way of imagining post-mortem life is that it is dominated by a strong sense of affinity. The fact that a couple lives alone without children, and indeed that they are not able to generate offspring, points towards the elimination of consanguineal ties, and the impossibility of creating consanguinity after death. At the same time, as Juan Mendoza once told me, "*Cadauno hará su zoológico en paraíso*", "Everyone will have their own zoo in heaven". The animals that a man hunted during his life, which live with the couple in what seems like a Kuna version of the Garden of Eden, stand also in the position of affines to the couple. In Kuna mythology, shamanism and hunting practices, animals are potential or real affines (Viveiros de Castro 2001). The relationship between humans and animals is always imagined and acted upon as one of predation and/or seduction. The initiation of young seers (*nelekana*) culminates in a ritual through which the initiate is led in his dreams by a singer to seduce the daughter of a chief of animals (*poni siskkwa*). Once the seer has found his animal partner, he will then be able to learn from his animal father-in-law

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cosmology and shamanic tradition. In my view there is room for more ethnographic analysis of the place of white people in Kuna ontology, as suggested, for example, by the use of different types of white men's clothes by Kuna elder chiefs, younger men and *nuchukana*.

<sup>15</sup> See Carneiro da Cunha (1981:166-7) for a similar notation about the Kraho post-mortem ideas; whereas Viveiros de Castro notes that for the Yawalapítí the souls of the dead, who live up in the sky live a festive life, but do not have sexual relationships (1977: 105).

through dreaming<sup>16</sup>. Hunters may undergo particular medicinal treatment to increase the chances of finding prey in the forest. They bathe with fresh water infused with perfumed plants, such as sweet basil, *pisep* (*Ocimum micranthum*), and learn the shamanic song called *pisep ikar*, which has the effect of attracting the female of the species of animals which the hunter desires to hunt. The hunter thus seduces his prey, appearing as a potential mate, but he eventually strikes the mortal blow. It is also said that both seers and hunters, who undergo initiation and ritual treatment, have to restrain themselves from courting women in the village, since their seductive powers are higher than those of other men, and would therefore end up causing jealousy and subsequent social problems.

It would seem therefore, that all animals hunted by a man during his life are potential partners that instead of becoming real partners, as in the case of seers, are turned into prey and eaten. Rather, after death they too assume the position of brothers-in-law, the wife's unmarried brothers who live in the same house as the married couple and have a close but competitive relationship with their sister's husband<sup>17</sup>. Life after death is therefore like a return to a pre-cosmological state of affairs, where differences between human beings and animals fade away, and where procreation, as the precondition of human social life and the fundament of kinship, is impossible<sup>18</sup>. In general all differences are levelled down, human/animal distinctions change in intensity, and male/female gender difference is reduced to basic sex difference. The powerful image of a couple of quasi-identical beings calls vividly to mind a couple of male and female *nuchukana*. **[FIG.4]** It is a common practice for Kuna carvers to carve couples of *nuchukana*, using wood of roughly the same size and type. I was told that a *nuchu* always needs a partner so as not to feel alone. For this reason people always make sure to keep a good number of *nuchukana* in their houses, and have both male and female figures. They make sure to keep their powerful companions happy and in good company among themselves. **[FIG.5]**

What is striking is that both the souls of the dead and *nuchukana* do not procreate and, in a way, do not have a body. If we consider the human body as the product of kinship *par excellence* (see Margiotti 2009 on Kuna ideas on procreation and kinship, and Gow 1991;

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed analysis of the relationship between humans and animals through the study of Kuna shamanic discourses and practices see Fortis (2008).

<sup>17</sup> In her insightful analysis of the theme of animals as affines within matrimonial relationships among the Jivaro, Taylor argues that '[...] a man is connected to two "brothers-in-law", his wife's human and game brothers" (2001: 50).

<sup>18</sup> This is in line with what Viveiros de Castro defines as "[...] pre-cosmos, very far from displaying any 'indifferentiation' or originary identification between humans and non-humans, as is usually formulated, it pervaded by an *infinite* difference, albeit (or because) *internal* to each persona or agent, in contrast to the *finite* and *external* differences constituting the species and qualities of our contemporary world" (2007: 51).

McCallum 2001; Vilaça 2002 on other Amerindian societies) we can see how kinship is completely absent in the way relationships between the deceased and between *nuchukana* are thought of by Kuna people. As Viveiros de Castro suggests, in his *GUT feelings about Amazonia*, we should consider the Amazonian person as dividual, and thereby composed by the opposition of an alter and a self (affinity and consanguinity, alterity and identity at the level of the person), respectively instantiated in the soul and the body. In accordance to his formulation, I argue that Kuna people conceive life after death as pure alterity, stripped of identity and selfhood<sup>19</sup>. *Nuchukana* are therefore containers of pure alterity, brought inside each household, at the core of Kuna human social life, where daily processes of nurture and reproduction take place.

The absence of the body is therefore the absence of that part of the self that is created through kinship. The Mother-children relationship is considered by Kuna people as a nurturing relation, where the body of the child is made a proper human body first through breastfeeding and then through the feeding of real food (Margiotti 2009). By the same token, bodies are the means through which persons acquire social praxis and the capacity to communicate with other living human beings, hence their identity vis-à-vis other people. As I argued elsewhere, the presence of geometric designs on the residues of the amniotic sac at childbirth is considered by Kuna people an important clue to transform babies into kinspeople, and to improve their future praxis. Kuna women do not create designs in their original form, but perceive them as a given attribute of the human body, which will be developed into social praxis within the network of kinship relationships (Fortis 2010).

Not only are the dead and *nuchukana*, others to human beings, they are others to themselves too, as relations among themselves are imagined as purely affinal. Interestingly this state of pure alterity, where there is no space for identity, is pictured by Kuna people as identity at the level of images. What makes the dead completely alter to each other, as well as to themselves, and incapable of replicating, makes them visually equal to each other, and also to animals. The same principle is at work for *nuchukana*, where the external visual appearance of their wooden figures is kept generic, voluntarily avoiding any resemblance to individual beings, both living and dead. Identity at the level of image, which is another word for ‘soul’ (cf. Taylor 1996), stands for absence of personal identity, insofar as personal

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<sup>19</sup> People who are not completely dead but remain in the closeness of the living, roaming around the village or the mainland gardens as ghosts (*kirkmar*), are always on the look for a sexual companion. If they succeed in seducing a living person, the latter will die and the former will retreat forever in the house of the dead.

identity is developed through the projection towards the others of one's self manifested in a discrete visual appearance.

### **From ontology to art**

The carving of a *nuchu* carries references both to the creation of a new person, and to the depersonalisation of a dead person. As Héctor Smith, Leopoldo's brother and one of the *saylakana* (chiefs) of Okopsukkun, made it clear to me, it is only by carving a piece of wood in the figure of a person (sometimes only its face) that the primordial entity of a tree will become alive (*tula*). After some thought, I came to the conclusion that what Héctor meant was that a *nuchu*, once its wooden figure has been carved, and only then, can become an individualized subject with whom human beings are able to communicate. When the *nuchu* has been carved and sung by a singer (*api sua*) it will acquire his or her own personality and will appear in dreams as a specific person to the dreamer<sup>20</sup>. Carving a *nuchu* is thus a voluntary process aimed at making an invisible and de-individualized soul available to living human beings. The souls of trees are in fact unavailable to human perception; no one ever told me that seers or, even less, laypersons can dream of a tree entity. Kuna people explained to me that large emergent trees are the manifestation of primordial beings, created at the beginnings of time, which now live in distant ultra terrestrial abodes, separated from humans, and are only conceived as a collectivity<sup>21</sup>.

The carver carries the recently cut branch, with its nose-sign already made, into his house on the island village, where he later sets about carving it. This process may not begin for several days, as the carver might be busy with other activities. The wood is considered lifeless at this stage, and can be stored with bark, vines and other dry medicinal plants in a basket in a corner of the house. [FIG.6; FIG.7; FIG.8] When the carving begins, the man often sketches

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<sup>20</sup> Although anyone can dream of a *nuchu*, it is only a seer (*nele*) who is able to intentionally meet *nuchukana* in dreams and learn from them.

<sup>21</sup> Nordenskiöld noted a similar idea regarding primordial tree entities among the Emberá, neighbours of the Kuna. 'Les Chocó croient aussi à un autre monde. C'est n'est pas un enfer pour les méchants, mais c'est là que vivent d'autres êtres immortels que Dieu a formés avec du bois avant qu'il creat les Chocó. Ils ne jouent aucun rôle dans la vie de ces Indiens et ne presentent pour ainsi dire qu'un intérêt historique puisque c'est d'eux que les Chocó ont reçu le maïs' (1929: 142). Another myth collected among the Emberá-Noanamá relates a similar story, 'Al principio Dios hizo los hombres de palo, pero éstos se fueron al otro mundo donde no mueren. En el otro mundo el sol luce solamente de noche. Los hombres allí no pueden obrar, porque tienen un agujero muy pequeño. Se alimentan con sólo oler los patos. Dios se cortó la mano con un cuchillo, y no quiso seguir haciendo hombres de madera, los formó de barro, y por eso es que los hobres mueren. Se vuelven barro. Si no hubiéramos sido hechos de barro, cambiaríamos de piel como las serpientes y como las langostas' (Wassén 1933: 110). Primordial tree people are present also in the cosmologies of the people living in the Upper Xingu of Central Brazil, such as the Yawalapíti (Viveiros de Castro 1978), the Kalapalo (Basso 1987), the Kamaiura and the Kuikuru (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1970).

the face before proceeding with the rest of the figure. Once the overall figure has been carved it is up to the carver to add any details or to refine the shape [FIG.9]. Nonetheless, these subsequent operations are apparently totally irrelevant to the aim for which the *nuchu* is destined. What is important, and left until the end, is to put two glass beads in previously drilled holes to make the eyes. Only then, is the *nuchu* ready to be brought to a ritual chanter, who sings a song to summon (*unaet*) the soul to take its place inside the newly carved figure. This operation is said to ‘give life’ (*otuloket*) to a *nuchu*.

The new subject that emerges through the carving and singing of a *nuchu*, acquires some qualities from the carver and retains others from the tree species from which it has been cut. For example, the quality of speaking well (speaking one’s thoughts) can be transmitted by the carver, while physical strength is the characteristic of *mummutwala* (unidentified tree, literally ‘drunken pole’); the capacity of producing a toxic smoke that makes the enemy faint is a quality of *kapurwala* (Caoba in Spanish, fam. *Meliaceae*); while *ukkurwala*, balsa tree (*Ochroma pyramidale*), is considered the leader of trees, guiding expeditions against pathogenic entities. Besides these general qualities *nuchukana* may acquire a more personal character. One, among the group of *nuchukana* hosted in a household, is often said to be more loquacious than the others, and appears often in dreams to members of the household, normally to those endowed with some shamanic capacities, or to older people. Young seers are given personal *nuchukana*, who become their spirits’ guide during their apprenticeship. Often the personal relationship with one *nuchu* accompanies the seer during his life, and develops into a proper companionship, where trust is essential. The *nuchukana* that stand out from the group for their propensity to communicate, are often the ones who are brought to seers, when a member of the family is ill, in order to reveal the nature of the illness. During these encounters the *nuchu* may also reveal other information, such as for example whether the host family takes good care of it. On one occasion I was told of a *nuchu*, who complained about the lack of hospitality of its host family, and asked the seer to stay with him. It is not uncommon that eventually a *nuchu* reveals its name in dreams to someone, giving the necessary clues to the dreamer to recognize the correspondent wooden figure, such as a small detail, like the lack of an eye, or the colour of the skin, corresponding to the colour of the wood. *Nuchukana* who reveal their names are paid special attention and often smoked with tobacco in order to nurture and strengthen them.

As we have seen so far, there is much more to a *nuchu* than its external form. The roughness and lack of lifelikeness of Kuna wooden figures is not the outcome of the lack of technical skill or of interest in representation for Kuna people. It would suffice to consider the planning and technical skills involved in making a dugout canoe from a single tree trunk, to realize that Kuna carvers do not lack manual skill and the capacity to foresee their finished work right from the beginning. As for the interest in representation, I would argue that Kuna people do not lack interest in figurative art, but they effectively avoid representation, especially when it comes to woodcarving. Given the equivalence between the wooden figure of a person and the soul of a dead person, I suggest that the wooden figure of a person is in a metonymic relationship with the image of a person, that is, with its soul. If we hold this assumption to be true, we begin to see how, for the Kuna, figurative art is not the representation of visual exterior forms, but rather is the instantiation of invisible interior forms. Thus by instantiation of interior forms I mean the manifestation of the awareness that interiority is what makes all beings visually similar (Viveiros de Castro 1998). We can thus begin to understand why Kuna people do not aim at producing what in Western aesthetic tradition are defined as realistic images of a person, and why they do not aim at lifelikeness in their woodcarving. I suggest that they aim at instantiating the principle of a continuity of souls behind a discontinuity of bodies, to put it in perspectival terminology<sup>22</sup>.

### **On figure and image**

Carving a *nuchu* is a process aimed at hosting temporarily, although it might last longer than a human life, the soul of a powerful Other. If carving is like a birth, the death of a *nuchu* occurs when the wood rots, or when it is consumed by insects. However, it must be pointed out that a *nuchu* is a wooden figure of a person, not a body. Kuna men used to describe the wooden figure as the clothes (*mola*) of the *nuchu*. This indeed recalls the temporariness of one's clothes, which after a while wear out, and of the possibility of changing one's clothes, thus changing one's point of view (*ibid*: 482). Whereas, the Kuna word for body is *sana*, and it is translated in Spanish as 'salud', 'health' in English. More than just physical substance, the human body is fabricated both through eating 'real food' (*masi sunnati*), and through developing 'thought', 'love' and 'memory' (*pinsaet*) towards one's kinspeople. Kuna people say that the body is a human body, only as long as it is a healthy and straight thinking body.

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<sup>22</sup> A similar conclusion has been drawn by Descola, who contends that '[...] l'animisme paraît relativement indifférent à la ressemblance, reflet d'une attitude qui voit dans les images non pas des copies du réel, mais des sortes de répliques incorporées du prototype (généralement un esprit, ou un animal-esprit), dotées à ce titre d'une agence aussi puissante que la sienne' (2009).

When it stops being healthy, and is not able to communicate properly with other human beings, it is in serious danger of ceasing to be a human body.

A *nuchu* is a figure of a person. In Kuna language ‘figure’ is said *sopalet* and can refer to a *nuchu*, it can also refer to the picture of a person drawn on a piece of paper, or to any type of figurative design. On the contrary, what we call ‘geometric’ design the Kuna call *narmakkalet*, a term which refers to women’s blouse design, as well as to writing. While designs are often and happily copied from one to another, *sopalet* has the distinct meaning for Kuna people of not being the copy of an original. Realism is just something that does not cross the mind of Kuna men, when they carve their *nuchukana*. Rather, carving the figure of a person is defined as a transformation (*opiñet*), which probably means to bring someone into existence in a form that is perceivable and conceivable by human beings<sup>23</sup>. This, I think, has rather profound implications, insofar as the completely truthful image, unattainable before the advent of photography, is identified with the ‘soul’, *purpa*<sup>24</sup>. As a Cashinahua woman made it clear to the ethnographer Els Lagrou, a drawn ‘figure’ (*dami*) is different from a real ‘image’ (*yuxin*), which is intended as the immaterial double that each living being possesses (Lagrou 2007: 116).

Given what I have described so far, it is now possible to realize that among the Kuna carving wooden figures of a person entails bringing powerful alterity to the core of human social life. This practice constitutes the reverse of the daily creation of kinship, which, as noted above, is the creation of human bodies, and could potentially threaten human social life at its very foundations. It is therefore a very delicate process, which only a few specialized elders are able to control, and which is the basic necessity for creating a social life that is safe from cosmological alterity justifies the risks that it entails. Kuna people consider *nuchukana* as their guests and look after them in daily life through a series of actions aimed at maintaining a controlled and amicable relationship with them. After being carved and ‘given life’ each *nuchu* is kept with other *nuchukana* in the household of its ‘hosts’ (*akkwemala*)<sup>25</sup>. Young girls wash *nuchukana* once in a while with water infused with sweet basil, in order to

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<sup>23</sup> The noun *sopalet* derives from the verb *sopet* (‘to give shape’), whereas the noun *purpa* does not become verb. The implication of this could be that figures are intended as the product of a human agency, while souls are there and cannot be the product of any agency.

<sup>24</sup> Chapin points out that “soul” is not an exact representation, for it is subject to strange distortions. It often turns to gold, is dressed in elegant clothes, etc.’ (1983: 75-6, note 17).

<sup>25</sup> In healing songs the ill person is called *inna ipekkwa*, the ‘owner of the chicha’, meaning that he/she is the host of the *nuchu*. Given that *inna* in Kuna language means both unfermented and fermented maize drink, *inna ipekkwa* is both the person who provides ‘unfermented’ chicha to *nuchukana*, as a form of nourishment, and the one who provides the ‘fermented’ chicha that will be offered by *nuchukana* to evil spirits, in order to get them drunk and steal the abducted soul of the ill person back.

‘change their clothes’ (*mola onukket*). An elder woman, usually the grandmother (*muu*), blows tobacco smoke on *nuchukana*, or smokes them by burning cacao seeds. The smoke thus produced is the *inna*, unfermented maize drink, of *nuchukana*, which ‘gives them strength’ (*okannoket*). Adult men, who know at least one of the healing chants (*ikarkana*), normally sing them at night time. In this way, I was told, besides rehearsing the long chants, they ‘converse’ (*apsoket*) with the souls of their *nuchukana*, who consequently feel happy and animated. Moreover, it is good practice that members of a household call their *nuchukana* when having their daily meal, ‘*Anmarba maskuntamalo! Anmarba koptamalo!*’ ‘Come eat with us! Come drink with us!’ I was told that *nuchukana* share the meal with people as they eat by smelling the food.

Although none of these practices is compulsory or points to any form of worship, it seems rather that they are part of an etiquette, a way of behaving aimed at maintaining good relationships between people and *nuchukana*, and more importantly, at making the latter feel happy and well looked after. In this way Kuna people make sure that their *nuchukana* remember them (*epinsaet*) in case of need that they help in curing and protecting their hosts against illnesses and misfortune caused by evil spirits (*ponikana*). Ultimately immortal beings, *nuchukana* co-reside with mortal human beings for a fraction of time, in which they assume the form of an individual existence. By establishing this particular form of commensality, Kuna people and *nuchukana*, despite their cosmological distance, come to coexist for a specific amount of time in each individual life. It is perhaps with this in mind that Kuna people think about woodcarving as a process in which birth and death overlap. It is an inversion of time, in which the physical action of cutting a branch is seen as a separation, the creation of a discontinuity. As any human birth is a potential conflation between cosmic and human life, the carving of a *nuchu* introduces temporality in the continuous flow of cosmic existence. Trees are the manifestation of immortality, insofar as they slough skin (see Lévi-Strauss 1983[1964]: 147-163). Carving a *nuchu* is therefore coming to terms with human mortality and, at the same time, fights its premature occurrence. Kuna elders who carve their *nuchukana* think of their children and grandchildren, whom they strive to protect against illness and premature death.

Above I explore the relationship between woodcarving and death among the Kuna. Let us now see where this relationship is found in different forms.



## Comparative examples

I now turn to ethnographic examples which show that Kuna woodcarving is not an isolated case in Central and South America. My aim so far has been to suggest that carving a wooden figure of a person among the Kuna is but one manifestation of a more general problem concerning figuration in the Kuna visual system. The method applied is based on the assumption that it is not by focusing on objects that we understand what they mean for the people who create them, rather it is by looking at the networks of meaningful actions in which objects are conceived that we are able to make sense of the daily experience of people. In other words, I suggest that sculptural forms are the tip of an iceberg; they are the visible manifestation of a much broader and complex structure that manifests in transforming ways among different Amerindian peoples.

Among the Emberá and Noanamá (Wounana), traditional neighbours and former enemies of the Kuna, living in the Pacific side of the Darién forest between Panamá and Colombia, the carving of wooden anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures was a common practice documented from the beginning of the 1900s onwards (Severino de Santa Teresa 1924; Nordenskiöld 1929; Rochereau 1929). Reading Reichel-Dolmatoff's ethnography (1960), we know that wooden figures are either carved on the top of the shaman's staff or they stand alone. The former embodies the personal auxiliary spirits of the shaman (*haibaná*), while the latter may be either carved on occasions of curing sessions and then disposed of. Shamans' staffs, called *polimía* in Noanamá language, are topped by anthropomorphic figures, which represent a particular male ancestor who is the tutelary spirit of the shaman (1960: 126). Wooden anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, called *dúma* by the Emberá and *hai-dumá* by the Noanamá, are carved from balsa wood either as three-dimensional or flat figures for curing sessions, and put around the sick person, who lays down inside a small hut, built with wooden planks painted with black and red geometric and floral designs (*ibid*: 128; Nordenskiöld 1929: 143-144; Wassén 1963: 55-60). The shaman rubs the figurines on the body of the sick person while he sings and moves around, until the cure is considered to be successfully completed. The figures are then disposed of and might be used by children to play with (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961: 231-234)<sup>26</sup>. The nature of these auxiliary spirits embodied in wooden figures give us an interesting clue, which seems to confirm what is

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<sup>26</sup> Reichel-Dolmatoff adds that "[n]o sex is indicated but, upon questioning, the shaman will generally attribute different sexes to his figurines" (*ibid*: 234).

postulated above concerning the individualization of primordial beings in Kuna wooden statues.

‘Las personificaciones sobrenaturales que, en cambio, representan las fuerzas que activa e inmediatamente controlan el bienestar humano son los espíritus de los antepasados (N: *bíne*), principalmente los de línea paterna. [...] Al hablar castellano los indios designan a estos espíritus con el término de 'familiar', empleando esta palabra siempre en el singular, pero dando a entender al mismo tiempo que designa a una colectividad. Los indios algo aculturados explican que el 'familiar' es el 'diablo', pero con ello no quieren sugerir que se trata de una personificación del mal, sino indican sólo la calidad de 'espíritu' o 'demonio' que, aunque temido como concepto colectivo, se vuelve un protector en una relación individual’ (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1960:119)

Among the Emberá-Noanamá, babies of around one year receive little wooden figures of balsa wood from the shaman, which represent their tutelary spirits and which they use as toys (*ibid*: 115). Those adults who wish to contact the spirits prepare themselves by “[...] building a small room with palm leaves walls in their house. Following the indications of the shaman they carve a small anthropomorphic figure and put it in the room” (*ibid*: 120). Then the spirit would appear in dreams to the person in guise of a human or an animal<sup>27</sup>. To acquire a tutelary spirit adult people have to fast and drink hallucinogens under the guide of a shaman; in this state they wander around isolated spots of the forest until they have the vision.

Wooden figures among the Emberá and Noanamá are therefore the representation of ancestral forces. Although it is not clear what Reichel-Dolmatoff means by ‘ancestors of paternal line’, and he does not analyze further the Noanamá term *bíne* that he translates as ancestors (antepasados), it is interesting to note that sculptural forms are associated with ancestrality, shamanic visions and cure. One difference with Kuna people is that the latter do not refer to their *nuchukana* as their ancestors; instead they stress the distant alterity of their tutelary friends, who are associated with primordial mythic beings.

Another example I wish to look at is that of the wooden statues carved by the Witoto of the Colombian Amazon. Apparently their production is discontinued today, but according to

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<sup>27</sup> Guillermo Vasco notes that 'El aprendiz debe, en primer lugar, aprender a soñar' (1985: 36).

Yepez (1982) it is possible to make sense of what it meant for the Murui-Muinane (an ethnic group part of the larger Witoto people) to produce such wooden statues in the past, through the analysis of present day rituals and discourses. The Murui-Muinane used to make two types of statues in the past called *janare* and *janane*. Both types were carved on occasions of community rituals, whereby the head of the longhouse and master of the ritual, the *buinaima*, through dreams and hallucinations was instructed to make the wooden figures (*ibid*: 61).

The statues were always carved in couples, one male and one female figure. The male *janare* statue was put at the entrance of the longhouse, while the female was put at its end. They were the night guardians representing the chief and his wife. While people were asleep the *janare* protected them against the attacks of malevolent shamans, *aima*, who transformed into jaguars and tapirs, causing illness and misfortune for the people of the house. “Against these aggressions the answer of the Buinaima was, [...] in the past, to assume the corporeality of the *janare*” (*ibid*: 61). In this condition the *buinaima* devoured the animal causing misfortune.

As Yepez notes further, the transubstantiation of the *buinaima* into a statue and that of the *aima* into an animal, switched the register of cannibalism into that of metaphysical aggression; that who ‘devoured’ was not a ‘human’ but a personification of Jana Buinaima, the “original being” father of the community, and Janare, the materialization in this case of the “original manioc pole: Jucitofe” (*ibid*: 61-62). Cannibalism was practiced in the past by the Witoto against their enemies, and it was then eradicated by missionaries, who worked hard to instil a deep sense of shame towards this practice. The *janare* statues are said to have originally been associated with cannibalistic rituals, which were celebrated when the Witoto took captives among their traditional enemies, the Carijona (*ibid*: 21). For this reason they are not carved nowadays, as they became part, as the Murui-Muinane say, of the ‘histories of punishment’.

Interestingly, in the section dedicated to the Witoto in the Handbook of South American Indians, we find the following reference to wooden statues:

"The house is abandoned only when a chief dies. [...] The *Bora* hold a feast of the dead some months after a death. The soul leaves the body to go into the bush (*Muenane*) or to heaven (*Bora*) or the air (*Witoto*), where it subsequently lives an

ethereal and innocuous existence. An image, purely memorial in purpose, is made of any deceased member of the chief's family. It is always accompanied by a second image of the opposite sex" (Steward 1948: 758)

We are left to ponder whether these figures are 'purely memorial in purpose', and what would mean 'memorial' for the Witoto. If the soul of the chief was already able to transubstantiate into the statue during dreams, it seems possible that it did the same when it left the body permanently after death. But the problem remains, what do the Witoto think when they carve the figure of a person? And, going back to our original question, what is a figure of a person for Amerindians?

Indeed, I have no answer so far to this challenge. However, one possible path towards a solution was pointed to by Tunki, an Achuar man, who explained to the ethnographer Philippe Descola the nature of the vision of *arutam*, during which a person, under the effects of *maikua* (*Datura arborea*), meets a deceased relative, who tells him a little message of hope, which makes him a powerful warrior.

'The person [*aents*] that you see is not the real person. The real person has disappeared forever. What you see is his *arutam*. [...] The person that you see is an image [*wakan*] of *arutam*: the person no longer exists, but *arutam* exists forever. *Arutam* sees with the eyes of that person, *arutam* speaks with the mouth of that person, because *arutam* is invisible. To make itself known, *arutam* makes itself like the person, but the person is dead' (Descola 1997: 307).

## Conclusions

As Taylor and Viveiros de Castro noted in a recent article '[...] les sociétés du Bassin amazonien produisent peu d'images tangibles du corps sous forme de gravures, de sculptures ou de peintures. Elles ne fabriquent pas des *représentations* du corps, elles fabriquent plutôt des corps. [...] L' "œuvre d'art" qui importe en Amazonie, c'est le corps humain' (2006: 150). Thus, it is perhaps out of place to focus on sculptural forms among people such as the Kuna, who place emphasis on the creation of bodies and on their decoration, rather than on their visual representation. However, as I hope this paper has demonstrated, Kuna people do not conceive their anthropomorphic figures as representational, and, even less, as

representations of bodies. What they do is more like giving form to ‘images of interiority’, which pertain to the realm of the invisible and the transformational. The external form of *nuchukana* is in stark contrast to their internal image, the soul seen in dreams and endowed with a specific personality. They are, in a way, the reverse of human beings. While for the latter, the external visual appearance of the body gives clues about the internal state of the person, about its humanness, while the external figure of the former does not reveal much about the internal soul.

It is perhaps for this reason that Kuna people carve their wooden figures in such a way that they all look similar, and, as far as I know this also holds true for the Emberá-Noanamá, and the Witoto. It would therefore seem that their main preoccupation is about the representation of virtuality. *Nuchukana* are about giving form to invisible and unperceivable primordial entities, in order to establish positive personal relationships. This appears to be the same for the Emberá and Noanamá shamanic figures, and for the Witoto memorial statues, with the slight difference that in the latter cases they are said to embody ancestors. Both primordial beings and ancestors, whatever the difference between the two may be, are other to human beings, and others of a particular type: they do not have a body and do not procreate. They cannot live as human beings. For this reason they are, and will always remain, separate from living people<sup>28</sup>.

The ethnographic and comparative material presented in this paper seems to point therefore towards the widespread preoccupation about death and alterity shared by many Amerindians. I hope to have shown that there is a vast field still to be explored, which opens up before our eyes when we start to seriously consider what Kuna people, as well as other Amerindians, tell us about their art. Focusing on the sculptural representation of the human figure, I hope to

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<sup>28</sup> The theme of death as manifestation of virtuality is vividly present in the mythology and ritual praxis of Xinguano people. A Kalapalo myth tells how the creator Kwatingĩ made himself two daughters of wood, in order to spare his real daughters from marrying Jaguar. One of the two ‘made ones’ gave birth to the twin heroes, Sun and Moon, and was killed by Jaguar’s mother. The other gave birth to Xinguano people, their enemies and to white people (Basso 1987). Nowadays Xinguano people hold a collective inter-tribal festival during which they celebrate their dead. The name of the ritual (*kwarip* for the Kamayura) derives from wooden branches, decorated with feather ornaments and geometric paintings equal to those used by people, which during the celebration are said to embody the souls of the deceased persons for which the ritual is held (Agostinho 1974; Viveiros de Castro 1977). Following a Kamayurá myth, the *kwarip* mortuary ceremony was celebrated for the first time by the Creator himself, who wanted to bring the dead back to life. Therefore he cut three wooden logs from the forest; he decorated them with ‘feathers, necklaces, cotton threads, and armlets of macaw feathers’ and then put them at the centre of the village (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1970: 55). While some people started singing to turn the wood into people, the Creator told the others not to look at the wood. The days passing, the wooden logs started to slowly transforming into real people. When the transformation was nearly completed, he called all the people to come and celebrate the dead people coming back to life. But one man, who had sex with his wife during the ceremony, ran among the crowd in the middle of the village. This caused the three figures to turn back into wood again. After scolding the man the Creator thus concluded: ‘All right. From now on, it will always be this way. The dead will never come back to life again when kuarups are made. From now on, it will only be a festival’ (*ibid*: 55).

have shown that, in the cases considered above, woodcarving is intrinsically related to the instantiation of virtual alterity; a domain that escapes normal human experience, but it nonetheless constitutes an arena for human reflection and speculation about life.

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