

The Evolution of the Kuna Mola: From Cultural Authentication to Cultural Survival

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

The San Blas Kuna Indians, an American Indian indigenous people, live in an autonomous territory in Panama and are considered to be a micro island nation. The distinctive mola blouse worn by Kuna women is recognised as an identifier of the Kuna people and also of Panama, and the history of this dual symbolism is investigated through an interdisciplinary approach.

A “reference collection” comprising molas from six museums provided the basis for understanding the evolution of molas over the last one hundred years. A visual analysis comparing molas in these museums with contemporaneous archival photographs prompted an investigation of the role of the mola in Kuna culture, since the iconography of the mola panels is obscured when worn as part of the dress ensemble of Kuna women.

The conceptual framework developed for this dissertation comprised four elements: cultural authentication; flow theory; cultural survival; and identity. The origin of the mola is explained in terms of the concept of *cultural authentication* developed by Eicher and Erekosima (1980) and this is linked to the concept of the *invention of tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Each of the components of cultural authentication outlined by Eicher and Erekosima was found to occur.

The motivation for the continuation of the high quality mola production can be explained by a combination of factors, which relate to *Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory* and the central role of ritual, which are linked to positive well-being. Previous research has established a link between textile making activities and the well-being of women in Western cultures and this research confirms that the theory is applicable to non-Western culture. The concept of ‘serious leisure’ is also found to be relevant to non-Western culture.

The continuation of mola production is also considered in the context of the *cultural survival* of ethnic nation-states and the concept of ‘islamiento’, developed by Chernela (2011), is extended to encompass the overarching strategy developed by Kuna leaders since the move of the Kuna people to the San Blas islands, during the second half of the 19th century.

This dissertation explores the reasons why the mola developed during the first part of the 20th century as part of the everyday dress ensemble of Kuna women, and why after the Kuna Revolution in 1925, the role of the mola in creating Kuna *identity* was reinforced. The association of the mola with Panama has in recent years also created a market for the mola as a tourist souvenir.

Finally, the dissertation examines the role of museums in preserving Kuna material culture, which is not possible under local conditions. This dissertation concludes that museum collections are an integral part of a strategy to ensure cultural continuity and survival. Museum collections provide an important resource, vital for researchers from Kuna Indian communities, to trace the evolution of mola design and the significance of the mola for cultural identity.

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for Dennis

In memory of Ted and Betty

SPELLING

Australian spelling has been used in this dissertation.

The original spelling has been retained in quotations.

MEASUREMENTS

Metric units of measurement are used
unless specifically noted.

100 centimetres (cm) = 1 metre

1 metre \approx 39.4 inches

1 yard = 36 inches \approx 91 cm

2" \approx 5 cm

1 cm \approx 3/8 inch

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Part 1 Background

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of research

In this dissertation I outline how molas have been fashioned to create a distinctive identity for Kuna Indian women and girls. Fabricated with material goods obtained entirely from Western sources, including the cloth, thread, needles and scissors, molas have evolved since the turn of the 20th century. Over the same period, Kuna Indian men and boys have worn a variety of Western-styled clothing, frequently mirroring Western fashion worn in Panama and the surrounding countries. My research relates to the Kuna Indians living in the San Blas archipelago of Panama. I describe a Kuna mola blouse below.

Research for this dissertation was initially directed at determining the origin of the mola and its trajectory from a component of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble to a globally recognised symbol of the Kuna people. I confronted these questions: How did the mola blouse develop? Are there multiple meanings attributed to the mola by Kuna women and by Kuna communities? Why spend hours sewing intricate mola panels which are partly or completely obscured when worn? What changes have been made to the mola blouse since its origin around 100 years ago and how can these changes be explained?

I have constantly reminded myself that the molas were made to be worn. In order to study their evolution, I established a "reference collection" of molas from six museum collections: the Denison Museum, the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Field Museum of Natural History, the Logan Museum of Anthropology, all in the US; and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Display in museum collections was found to disconnect the mola from its origin as clothing; this is exacerbated since museum collections frequently contain the mola panels and not complete blouses. Museum exhibitions of Kuna culture and the associated catalogues focus primarily on the aesthetic display of molas as a form of two-dimensional textile art, rather than as dress.

A second focus of this dissertation was directed at the continued role of the mola in the cultural survival of the Kuna people. Why is the mola still part of everyday dress for many Kuna women? Whilst some Kuna women wear the mola blouse as part of a complete dress ensemble every day, other Kuna women wear part of the ensemble, or wear Western style dress most of the time and wear the mola for ritual celebrations.

1.2 Research framework

I hypothesised that the mola is integral to the sense of community and well-being of the Kuna people; that the process of sewing is important; that the creation of a distinctive dress was intentional; and that the perpetuation of the mola was part of a strategy for cultural survival.

My research questions can be summarised:

Is it possible to explain the evolution of the Kuna Indian mola blouse in terms of the process of cultural authentication?

Once the Kuna mola had been developed, is it possible to understand its continuation as a response to the objective of the preservation of Kuna culture?

Is the persistence of the mola, worn as part of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble, part of a strategy for cultural survival?

An extension of the association of the mola with Kuna Indians, to the identification of the mola with the Panamanian nation is not addressed in detail, nor is there an in-depth examination of the economic impact of the commercialisation of molas. The focus has not specifically been related to the iconography on the mola panels, though reference is made to categories of motifs and the origin of some designs. The focus is on highlighting the process of the evolution of the mola and speculating on its continued role in supporting cultural survival.

The process of sewing the mola panels is very time intensive and requires access to materials, design skills, and high quality workmanship. To develop an understanding of the origins and the perpetuation of the sewing and wearing of molas, multi-disciplinary research has been carried out. My research is based on the literature from a number of subject areas including anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, history, cultural studies, dress history, fashion studies, psychology, object-based material culture methodology and tourism studies.

The research framework underpinning my thesis is built on four conceptual areas: the invention of tradition; cultural authentication; cultural survival; and the psychology of motivation. Each of these areas is expanded upon in this dissertation. Each conceptual area is linked to the others to create a case for the argument that the mola originated as a result of cultural authentication; that the mola was invented to play a role in cultural survival and that the motivation to continue sewing molas comes from individual women, supported by the entire Kuna communities, with strong incentives from the Kuna chiefs.

The phrase "the invention of tradition" was coined by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) to describe created authenticity which I will show is conceptually linked to cultural authentication. An example of the invention of tradition is the Scottish kilt, which was created in the 1790s, however it is generally considered to have a much longer history. A characteristic of invented tradition is the tendency to extend the perceived length of time since an object developed, to enhance its strength and create a history, albeit one not based on longevity. Such traditions are frequently developed at times of social change (Hobsbawm, 1983: 9-13). The process of cultural authentication of dress may occur over a short or long period. The end product will be a type of fabric or perhaps an item of dress. This product may then be "invented" as a traditional component of dress.

A number of benefits can be gained from the study of the creation of invented traditions, the most important according to Hobsbawm being that these inventions are evidence of changes in the society: "the study of invented traditions cannot be separated from the wider study of the history of society, nor can it expect to advance much beyond the mere discovery of such practices unless it is integrated into a wider study" (1983: 12).

The process of cultural authentication has been used to explain the development of the dress of ethnic groups in non-Western contexts. The dress components are sourced from a Western culture and then changed in a unique manner by the adopting culture. The term, originally coined in 1979 by Erekosima has been defined as “a process of assimilation through which a garment or an accessory external to a culture is adopted and changed. With this change, over time, the artifact [sic] becomes a vital, valued part of the adopting culture’s dress” (Vollmer, 2010: 69). The original four steps in the process, proposed by Eicher and Erekosima (1980: 83-84) are selection, characterisation by naming, incorporation and transformation. Application of these steps by later scholars has confirmed the operation of the cultural authentication process in a range of cultures, though the steps in the process do not necessarily occur in the same order.

Psychological theories discuss motivation in terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation relates to personal interest and enjoyment gained whilst carrying out a task; and extrinsic motivation relates to factors from outside the individual, from another individual or from society. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors can be understood to reinforce an individual’s behaviour. The intensity of concentration and time expended by Kuna women in sewing molas suggests strong motivation. Whilst personal motivation may be strong, the gendered and generational division of labour in Kuna society which provides ample time for women and girls to sew molas, suggests strong community support for both the time involved in mola production and the complex adornment of Kuna women with the associated financial investment. I link this external motivation to strategies adopted by Kuna leaders over successive generations to ensure cultural survival.

Cultures create traditions, according to Hobsbawm, in the main to establish a socially cohesive community which will survive. The mola may be seen as an invented tradition resulting from a process of cultural authentication. The long-term survival of the Kuna people as an autonomous ethnic group in the San Blas may be related to strategies of Kuna leaders to isolate the community in many ways, and to thoughtfully manage the contact with outside influences. The internal strategies adopted by many ethnic groups to safeguard survival include: control of territory; maintenance of their own language and dress; social control of the community through rituals; and endogamy. The external strategies include: resistance to outside control; strategic alliances with outside powers; selective trade arrangements with outsiders; and establishing cooperative enterprises for mutual commercial benefit. These strategies, both internal and external, must continually change and adapt to ensure cultural survival. I discuss the central role of the mola in the strategies developed by Kuna chiefs in terms of these internal and external strategies.

The ethnographic research I am referring to in this dissertation is based on the period of each scholar’s fieldwork, known as the *ethnographic present*, defined as “an arbitrary time period when the process of culture change is ignored in order to describe a given culture as if it were a stable system” (Bodley, 2011: 569). The fieldwork represents a slice of time in a particular location. I am assuming that the San Blas Kuna Indians live relatively similar lives in the forty or so communities in the archipelago. It is recognised that some islands are more acculturated and have adopted more Western ideas of Christianity, education and dress.

1.3 Description of a Kuna Indian mola blouse

Kuna Indian women, living on the islands of the San Blas archipelago of Panama, spend many years of their lives sewing pairs of appliquéd and embroidered rectangular textile panels for many hours each day. These panels are sewn into blouses, and worn as part of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble.

Both the panels and the blouse are called *mol*as by the Kuna Indians. In fact, *mola* is a polysemic word in the Kuna language. The meanings, ascertained by ethno-linguistic specialists, which have been attributed to the word *mola* are: cloth, in the sense of fabric; clothing; a shirt for men or a blouse for women; a single rectangular cloth panel; a complete blouse for women (Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976a: 23)¹. Holmer also lists these meanings and provides two additional meanings – curtain and cloud (Holmer, 1952: 78-79).²

In this dissertation, to avoid confusion, I will limit the use of the word *mola* to the *mola blouse* and to the two panels sewn onto a *mola blouse*. I will generally use the pair of words 'mola blouse' when referring to the complete blouse and generally the single word *mola* to denote the rectangular panel sewn as part of a *mola blouse*. Where required for clarity I will refer to 'mola panels' specifically. Whilst the use of 'mola blouse' may be considered redundant, I am also reinforcing the fact that the *mola* is an item of dress. There are many *mola* panels in museum collections and in this context their connection to Kuna Indian dress is removed.

A *mola* panel generally measures between 37 – 45 cm wide and between 25 – 34 cm deep in a *mola blouse* from the last decade. The trend is for the *mola blouse* to fit quite tightly to a woman's torso. Older *mol*as from the beginning of the 20th century are larger, often over 60 cm wide.^{3 4}

Figure 1 illustrates an exceptional, high quality *mola blouse* from the 1960s.

¹ This origin of the word *mola* in the Kuna language is discussed in Chapter 5.

² The official Kuna – Spanish dictionary, issued by the Congresos Generales Gunas for school children, in mid-2011, the *Gayamar Sabga - Diccionario Escolar: Gunagaya-Español* (Orán & Wagua, 2011) is the first authorised publication based on a Kuna orthography, resulting from research and consultation during the preceding years. In this dictionary the words *mola* and *mor* are given these meanings: cloth; clothing; dress; attire; woman's blouse; shirt. The dictionary entry is listed thus: "mor / mola", implying that the words are interchangeable. This confirms that the usage and meaning of *mola* remains polysemous.

It is noted that this 2011 Kuna – Spanish dictionary, reflecting the newly adopted orthography, uses the spelling *Guna* instead of *Kuna*. I have opted to continue to use the spelling "Kuna" in this dissertation for two reasons: firstly, to avoid confusion since the usage is prevalent in recent scholarly literature (in earlier work the spelling was "Cuna"); and secondly because the pronunciation in English is reflected by this spelling. (Also there is a city and municipality in India named *Guna*.)

³ See Chapter 6 for an explanation of how measurements were taken. Metric units are used in this dissertation unless specifically noted. 1 metre = 39.4 inches. 1 yard = 36 inches.

⁴ Representative images of early 20th century *mol*as can be found at http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/the_art_of_being_kuna/eng/toc/index.htm, accessed 10 July 2012.

Figure 1. Front and back of a mola blouse from the 1960s.

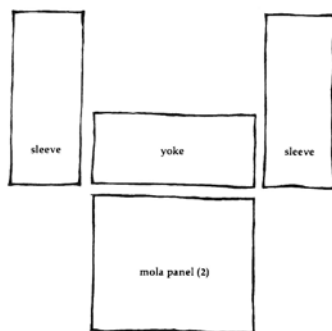


The panels are similar but not identical. The central necklace is different on each side.

Panel width 47 cm. N35.⁵

A mola blouse comprises five rectangular components: a pair of mola panels, one for the front and one for the back of the blouse, which are sewn at the same time and may be similar; a yoke which is slit in the centre to create a neck opening; and two sleeves. This is illustrated in Figure 2. The mola panels are at least two layers; some mola panels may be up to seven layers, though most are made of 3-4 layers of fabric. The yoke and sleeves are made from a single layer of fabric.⁶

Figure 2. Rectangular components of a mola blouse.



Source: Salvador (1978: 31)



F11.

Contemporary mola blouses are illustrated in Figure 3.

⁵ N35 relates to the “reference collection” notation system used in this dissertation which comprises a letter representing the museum, followed by an identification number within a museum, which is in chronological order. Appendix D provides details.

⁶ A more detailed description of the mola blouse, the techniques used to sew mola panels, and the components of the complete dress ensemble of a Kuna woman are described in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7.

Figure 3. Mola blouses purchased in Panama in 2010.



Mola panel width 37 cm



Mola panel width 41.5 cm



Mola panel width 44.5 cm

Different styles were being worn by Kuna women, though shaped necklines predominated in 2010. These mola panel sizes reflect the girth of the women who wore them, since these blouses were worn close to the body.

1.4 Contribution to knowledge

- Museum research

Previous research has not been grounded by an object-based material culture analysis of provenanced museum collections of mola blouses and mola panels. Whilst this will not be reported on in detail in this dissertation (and will be the subject of future reporting), the continuities and discontinuities found during my examination, documentation and analysis of over 400 mola panels will be highlighted. Whilst writing this dissertation I was able to continually refer back to my “reference collection” of molas from the six museums, to search for evidence of factors impacting on Kuna culture, including contact with other Panamanians, especially in the political arena, and with foreign countries, especially the globalised culture of the US. The museum object-based research was also valuable in interpreting photographs of the dress worn by Kuna women over the last 100 years.

- Motivation of Kuna women to invest time in fashioning molas

The allocation of gendered roles in Kuna society has been the subject of scholarship, however previous research has not attempted to explain the motivation for individual Kuna women to sew molas and their non-commercial benefits. The direction of Kuna leaders in the creation of an image of difference through dress, for their own political imperatives, has not been previously addressed in the context of a strategy for ethnic survival, based on an understanding of the evolution of non-Western dress and fashion in different cultures.

In order to understand in more detail the pre-visualisation, time, and skill involved in mola blouse construction I learnt to sew mola panels and made some replica mola blouses.

- The cultural authentication process for Kuna molas

By comparing the development of Kuna mola blouses with other culturally authenticated dress and textile arts from non-Western cultures, a context is given to the structural manipulation and elaboration of Western originated cloth, from a number of different cultures. Four case studies are outlined: the dress of the Kalabari people of Nigeria; the Hawaiian holoku; the match coats of the American Indians in the north east of the US; and the ribbonwork of the American Indians of the Great Lakes region of the US.

It is shown that there is a similarity of techniques between some non-Western cultures, including the Kuna Indians. By structurally altering cloth, it may become authenticated and become part of the culture of a society.

- The role of the mola blouse in Kuna rituals

The central role of ritual in maintaining Kuna culture has been the subject of substantial research, for example Chapin (1983) and Howe (1986), however I believe that the importance of the role of the mola in ritual has not been recognised. I propose that the process of sewing and wearing molas during everyday rituals and celebratory rituals is an integral part of these rituals: the rituals depend in a large part on the mola. The Kuna spokesperson’s call to the whole Kuna community to attend ritual gathering house meetings is *Mormaynamaloe*, which means in the Kuna language ‘go and sew your molas’ and this is well documented in scholarly literature. The call is both metonymic and

directive, since the women bring their molas with them to sew at these meetings, during which time they are wearing molas. The importance of the women attending wearing molas is explained in terms of gender, identity and aesthetics and the role of Kuna rituals is found to be important for cultural survival.

1.5 The importance of studying dress and fashion

1.5.1 Defining fashion and dress

The dress worn by the Kuna women of Panama has evolved in response to the materials available, outside influences, and changes in their culture. Whilst the attention of scholars to non-Western dress has a long history, the understanding that there are developments in the fashion of non-Western dress, such as Kuna mola blouses, is of relatively recent origin.

The term fashion has been defined as “changing styles of dress and appearance that are adopted by a group of people at any given time and place” by Welters and Lillethun (2011: xxv), who stress that each of the three elements of this definition need to be considered independently, namely:

- The concept of change over time;
- Its adoption by groups of people; and the
- Place-specific nature of fashion.

The study of fashion related to non-Western dress has accelerated in the last 20 years. Earlier scholars considered fashion to be a Western concept and there is a need for “fashion/dress scholars [to] become more aware of the fact that fashion was not and is not simply a Western idea” (Kawamura, 2005: 126). Recent work by Paulicelli and Clark (2009) and Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz (2008) further develops the justification for studying dress from many different cultures. In the introduction to a volume of papers, *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity and Globalization*, Paulicelli and Clark propose that “fashion is a privileged lens through which to gain a new understanding of cultures, and individual lives, as well as of the mechanisms regulating cultural and economic production in the past and in the present” (2009: 1). Whilst similar to the long-held rationalisation for studying history in order to learn from the past, these authors stress the benefits of understanding the dress of different cultures, in a world where globalisation of product is prevalent in the Western world; where fashion is transnational, non-Western dress continues to define identity and ethnicity.

Whilst discussing the fashion developments in Europe, America and Japan since the 1970s, Paulicelli and Clark refer to “the power fashion has to portray and invent national and global identities” (2009: 2), equally applicable to non-Western dress. It will be shown here that the dress of Kuna women has developed specifically as a way of creating Kuna identity.

Dress is considered by Welters and Lillethun (2011) to be the overarching construct in which fashion is situated. This approach to dress adopted by them will be used in this dissertation. Their approach to defining dress follows the work of Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) and Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1997) who have constructed a very broad definition of dress to ensure that it will be “unambiguous, free of personal or social valuing or bias, usable in descriptions across national and cultural boundaries, and inclusive of all phenomena that can accurately be designated as dress”

(Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992: 1). In addition, Eicher and Roach-Higgins support the development of their broad definition and its importance for future research into this field by stating that “our view is that the intertwined problems of terminology and conceptualization [sic] inhibit not only the clear evaluation of the contribution of past and current research, but the formulation of sound theoretical perspectives on which to base research” (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1997: 12).

Consequently, Eicher and Roach-Higgins have developed a dual definition and classification system for dress. Firstly, their definition of dress, which will be used in this dissertation, is as follows:

“an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings. . . . parts of the body that can be modified include hair, skin, nails, muscular-skeletal system, teeth, and breath. Body parts can be described in regard to specific properties of color [sic], volume and proportion, shape and structure, surface design, texture, odor [sic], sound, and taste. Supplements to the body – such as body enclosures, attachments to the body, attachments to body enclosures, and hand-held accessories – can be cross-classified with the same properties used to describe body modifications” (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1997: 15-16).

This definition includes all clothing and all other ornaments to all parts of the body, and also cosmetics applied to the human body. Eicher broadens this definition to encompass a system of visual and non-visual indicators, which have communicative properties:

“Dress is a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time. The codes of dress include visual as well as other sensory modifications (taste, smell, sound, and feel) and supplements (garments, jewelry [sic] and accessories) to the body which set off either or both cognitive and affective processes that result in recognition or lack of recognition by the viewer. As a system, dressing the body by modifications and supplements often does facilitate or hinder consequent verbal or other communication” (Eicher, 1995a: 1).

In Chapter 7, I apply this definition and classification of dress developed by Eicher and Roach-Higgins to the Kuna woman’s dress ensemble and dissect each component of dress when reflecting on the importance of the mola blouse.

1.5.2 Studying non-Western dress

The study of non-Western dress, according to Taylor has been neglected by ethnographers, despite the collection of clothing objects for museum collections (1998: 345-6). Taylor posits that the reasons for this are similar to the reason contemporary Western dress was not collected for museums: clothing was not considered a serious matter to study and those who did study it were generally women who were curators within museums.

Taylor devotes a chapter in both her 2002 and 2004 books to the study of ethnographic dress. In Chapter 7 of *The Study of Dress History*, entitled “Ethnographic approaches” she describes therein

“the emergence of textiles and dress studies within the fields of anthropology and ethnology” (2002: 195), and asserts that:

“Ethnographic research has therefore sought to show that textiles and clothing are powerful indicators of the most subtle, complex and important facets of the life of small-scale and peasant communities, acting as stabilisers reflecting the unity and strength of cultural practices and the social cohesion of a community. Research approaches are both historical and contemporary. The processes of the cultural absorption of outside and urban influences now attract much research interest which indicates that these vary enormously over vast time-spans and that each case is a reflection of the community’s own very specific circumstances. These may focus on very specific local circumstances but may also set a small community properly within the broad framework of sources of outsider influences” (Taylor, 2002: 199).

Taylor comments on the ability of detailed studies of dress to differentiate between supposed “traditions” of dress and the everchanging reality of dress components in ethnic groups, whether considered authentic or traditional dress (2002: 201-5). She also refers to research about dress and ethnic identity and the differences between ethnic dress and national dress and the hybridisation of foreign clothing, from the West, when it is received by ethnic communities.

The influence of Taylor on the study of ethnic dress history was in evidence at the “Developments in Dress History” conference in Brighton in December 2011 when one of the streams of the conference was devoted to ethnic, national and religious dress and identity. Papers included the dress of religious groups: Quakers, Mennonites and Muslims; national dress from Korea, Algeria, and Spain; and my paper about the visual analysis of mola blouses using Taylor’s approach, which forms part of Chapter 7 of this dissertation.

Taylor looks at the way private and museum collections of ethnographic artefacts were developed (2004: 66-104). From the 19th century, Taylor’s list of museum collector backgrounds includes: missionaries, traders, businessmen, explorers, tourists, the military, colonial administrators, artists and anthropologists (2004: 73). My museum research also found collector backgrounds in each of these categories.

The role of museum collections in providing evidence of change to ethnic dress is noted by Taylor when she observes that “ethnographers today are especially interested in obtaining contemporary clothing to compare with earlier examples in their collections, as a way of charting change in artefact development and belief systems” (Taylor, 2004: 97). For this purpose, I collected examples of molas directly from Kuna women (and one Kuna man) during a field trip to the San Blas islands in February – March 2010.

In their book aimed at studying the way fashion changes, Lynch and Strauss (2007) suggest five possible approaches to the study of dress and particularly the fashion change process: material culture studies; an ethnohistoric approach; function to fashion transformation; shifting identities related to role or status ambivalence; and cultural authentication analysis (Lynch & Strauss, 2007: 151-164). I have adopted a cultural authentication approach in this dissertation. I have also used

components of a material culture approach in my museum-based examination of molas, since a thorough understanding of the mola as an artefact or “object” was critical in developing my assessment of the process of the cultural authentication of Kuna mola blouses.

1.5.3 Studying non-Western fashion

Fashion, once considered only in the context of Western countries, has in the last two decades become the subject of research related to non-Western societies. The coupling of studies of dress with other issues, for example gender (Barnes & Eicher, 1997), identity (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992), aesthetics (DeLong, 1998), cultural survival (Brodman, 2005), ethnicity (Eicher, 1995b, 2005) or with cultural studies (Craik, 1993), has produced many scholarly works of fashion which discuss non-Western cultures.

In early work aimed at broadening the scope of fashion studies, Craik (1993) comments that “the term fashion is rarely used in reference to non-western [sic] cultures” and comments that “although the amount and pace of changing fashions is less pronounced in cultures with less emphasis on economic exchange, changes do occur” (1993: 18). Welters and Lillethun challenge scholars thus: “Change occurs in all cultures, so why not consider non-Western dress in terms of fashion as well?” (2011: xxviii). Many non-Western countries, including the lands inhabited by the Kuna Indians, were colonised by the West with significant resultant influences on dress. Indeed, in many areas clothing the body prior to colonisation may not have occurred, even though various body adornments may have been part of the culture.

In her review article on the “new wealth of academic scholarship” related to the study of dress, Hansen (2004) refers to many studies of non-Western dress. A key element of fashion, contained in the definition of Welters and Lillethun, the concept of change, is now integral to studying non-Western dress: “ ‘Ethnic’ dress is dynamic and changing; it even has fads. People everywhere want ‘the latest’ by whatever changing definitions of local preference” (Hansen, 2004: 387). Hansen and Welters and also Lillethun envisage future scholarly work to investigate fashion in non-Western cultures to develop a greater understanding of this phenomenon. My research aims to expand this knowledge in relation to Kuna Indian dress. I include four case studies on the cultural authentication of non-Western dress in Chapter 3.

1.5.4 Dress as an expression of identity

One of the earliest definitions of culture is by Edward Tylor who is considered to be the founder of anthropology. In *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (1871: 1) he defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”⁷. Culture is now generally understood as “the human-made material items and patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior [sic] shared by members of a group who regularly interact with one another. Culture thus includes a broad range of phenomena, both material and nonmaterial in nature” (Eicher, et al., 2008: 36). The group may be a nation, a city, a profession or an ethnic group.

⁷ Re-issued by Cambridge University Press in 2010.

An ethnic group frequently has a shared geographic location or originating location, language and sometimes a religion. The identity of an ethnic group may be reinforced by dress. Lillethun states that “dress can serve to support ethnic identity or to create it” (2011: 266). Ethnic dress may comprise a complete ensemble or an individual item of dress. Ethnic dress “is worn by members of one group to distinguish themselves from members of another by focusing on differentiation . . . dress is often a significant visible mark of ethnicity, used to communicate identity of a group or individual among interacting groups of people” (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995: 300-301)⁸.

Eicher and Sumberg (1995) assign a number of defining characteristics to ethnic dress, which can be summarised as follows:

- Ethnic dress in many societies appears to be daily wear for women;
- Men in ethnic groups may work for an outside community and wear Western clothing;
- Ethnic dress is not static, though the changes may occur slowly;
- There may be individuality expressions within ethnic dress;
- Ethnic dress may not be worn exclusively;
- Ethnic dress may be worn for the purpose of communicating independence. (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995: 300-305).

These factors highlight some of the differences between the dress of men and women in ethnic cultures. Barnes and Eicher in their introduction to *Dress and Gender* (1997: 7) note that “dress is both an indicator and a producer of gender”. In many contemporary cultures there is very little differentiation between the dress of male and female children and youth, and sometimes also for adults. In Kuna society, particularly on the islands with little Christian influence, the dress of Kuna women is very distinctive, and the Kuna male dress mirrors aspects of Western male dress.

1.5.5 Culture scale and dress

Kuna life has been characterised as a small-scale society defined as “a society where the necessities of life are satisfied locally and by simple technologies. Also, there is little job specification and by comparison to worldwide living patterns, the population density is low” (Jennings-Rentenaar, 2005: 20). From the 2000 (3rd) edition of his book *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System*, Bodley revised his categories of world cultures from small-scale, large-scale and global-scale and suggests three scales of culture which more accurately reflect the evolution of world culture would be domestic-scale, political-scale and commercial-scale (Bodley, 2011).⁹

Eicher et al. (2008)¹⁰ found that Bodley’s categories of culture scale were useful in interpreting developments in the forms and uses of dress in different cultures. Based on this interpretation, it

⁸ In some cases ethnic dress is the same as national dress. The majority of the Kuna people live in an autonomous self-governed independent province of Panama, and it could be argued that they constitute a nation. For the purposes of this dissertation however Kuna dress will be evaluated as a form of ethnic dress.

⁹ See Definitions in Appendix A.

¹⁰ Note that Eicher, et al. (2008) refer to the Bodley (2005) edition.

appears that Kuna life since 1900 would fall within the definition of political-scale culture, and the relevant characteristics of political-scale culture for the Kuna are:

- For society – high-density villages
- For economy – local markets, coins, specialists / artisans
- For technology – intensive agriculture, metal, writing, tools, early machines
- For ideology – polytheism, sacred texts, educated priests
- For dress – incorporates items from trade; natural and metal fibres; wrapped, suspended, and preshaped with little waste; origins of fashion. [Derived from Table 2.1, Eicher, et al. (2008: 40-41)].

For comparison, the dress for domestic-scale culture has been characterised (in the same source) as made of natural fibres, of limited quantity and consisting of body supplements, wrapped and suspended. The dress for commercial-scale cultures has been characterised (in the same source) as having standard sizing, tailored and custom fit, fashion, variation by occasion including uniforms and with individual taste. Eicher et al. give examples from domestic-scale culture as the Australian aborigines in 10,000 BCE; commercial-scale as the US and Japan in current times; and Imperial Rome for the political-scale. The Amish people, living in current times in the US are placed half-way between the commercial-scale and the political-scale culture (Eicher, et al., 2008: 45, Figure 2.2).

The Kuna dress is dissimilar to that of present day Amish dress, which adopts the construction techniques and materials of contemporary times, as well as a closer reflection of contemporary non-Amish clothing styles. It will be argued here that the dress of many Kuna women falls mostly within the political-scale of world culture, with some evidence of occasional use of items which fall in the commercial-scale and that for many of the Kuna men and children, their dress has characteristics of commercial-scale cultures. Some Kuna communities however retain many characteristics of domestic-scale cultures, particularly kinship-based living arrangements and small sized communities.

As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the Kuna have had contact with Western colonisers and traders for over 500 years and have had opportunities to gain trade items; and for over 100 years Kuna men have been employed by Westerners for short and long periods of time.

1.6 Dissertation outline

This dissertation is divided into four parts:

- Part 1 Background – Chapters 1 and 2;
- Part 2 Cultural Authentication – Chapters 3, 4 and 5;
- Part 3 Cultural Preservation – Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9; and
- Part 4 Reflections – Chapters 10 and 11.

Part 1 comprises Chapter 1, which introduces my area of study, research outline and hypotheses; and Chapter 2 which provides a brief background to the Kuna Indians of Panama.

In Part 2, I investigate the concept of cultural authentication as applied to non-Western fashion by a number of dress history and anthropology scholars, and explore its applicability to Kuna molas. I commence by reviewing the components in the cultural authentication process using case studies from other non-Western cultural groups in Chapter 3. In Chapters 4 and 5 I investigate in detail the process of cultural authentication of Kuna mola blouses, to confirm that their development may be explained by this process.

Part 3 addresses the preservation and persistence of mola blouses as dress, as part of a strategy of cultural survival. In Chapter 6, I outline the rationale for establishing a “reference collection” of mola blouses and mola panels from six museum collections. This provided the basis to gain a detailed understanding of the changes in dimensions, iconography, materials and workmanship of provenanced mola collections since the beginning of the 20th century. Museums provided evidence not only of the evolution of mola blouses but also the continuity of style, technique, iconography and colour preferences.

In Chapter 7, I build on this work by carrying out a visual assessment comparing molas in the “reference collection” with contemporaneous archival photographs to understand how the mola is worn as part of a dress ensemble.

In Chapter 8, I explain psychological theories related to motivational factors and the new area of leisure studies and explore their applicability to the process of sewing mola panels and the role of molas in the daily life and celebrations of the Kuna. The support of the Kuna community for the continuation of the mola blouse is explored in Chapter 9 by addressing both internal and external strategies of survival used by ethnic groups in Latin America. In both Chapters 8 and 9 I look at the role of ritual in Kuna society.

In Part 4, I reflect of the role and importance of the mola blouse in Kuna society. In Chapter 10, I look at the role of museums in collecting and preserving Kuna material culture, particularly items of Kuna dress. I also examine curatorial collecting practices, especially in terms of the role of museums in preserving cultural heritage of indigenous groups whose host nation has no known museum collection with Kuna dress artefacts.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 11, I summarise my research and contemplate the significance of the mola in identifying the Kuna people and as part of Kuna society and culture. Despite the global economy, where Western fashion has become homogenised and is available to the Kuna at an affordable cost, the mola blouse continues to be sewn and worn by Kuna women. This dissertation focuses on explaining the origin of the mola blouse, its evolution and understanding the reasons for its continuation as a form of dress.

The Appendices are contained in a separate volume due to their length, necessitated by the visual nature of the content.

In Chapter 2, the next chapter, which concludes Part 1, I give a brief overview of the situation of the San Blas Kuna Indians, including where they live, their living conditions, population data and a brief history of their relationship to Panama and to the US. I also include an explanation of why I believe the San Blas Kuna Indians have been so extensively studied.

CHAPTER 2 SITUATING THE SAN BLAS KUNA

In this chapter I situate the San Blas Kuna geographically and historically. I explain why the San Blas Kuna Indians have been so extensively studied and the evolution of the close relationship between them and the United States of America. I provide information on the population of indigenous peoples in Panama, including census data and show the distribution of the Kuna population within Panama. The San Blas Kuna Indians live in an independent territory which is called a comarca.

2.1 San Blas Kuna Indians

In the late 1970s the San Blas comarca, at the request of the Kuna people, became known as Kuna Yala. This dissertation focuses on the mola blouses sewn by Kuna women living in this comarca. Since much of the research I will be referring to in this dissertation refers to the Kuna territory as the San Blas and the people living there as the San Blas Kuna, I will continue to refer to the territory as the San Blas comarca to avoid confusion. Many maps still designate the area as San Blas. The Kuna people living in this comarca are distinct from Kuna people living in other inland communities, and from a few hundred Kuna people living in Colombia. There is significant migration between the San Blas islands and other areas of Panama, especially Panama City and Colon. Some of the migration is temporary, related to short term employment and schooling, though in recent years permanent migration has escalated.

2.2 Location of San Blas [Kuna Yala] comarca

Panama is bordered by Costa Rica to the west and Colombia on the east. It is known as the “Bridge of the Americas” since it is an isthmus linking North America and South America. It is bounded on the south by the Pacific Ocean and to the north by the Caribbean Sea. The Panama Canal, measuring only 80 kilometres, is located across the narrowest section of the country, between Colon on the north and Panama City on the south. Panama is considered to be part of both Central America and Latin America.¹¹

¹¹ The seven Central American countries are Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Latin America includes Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Mexico. Source: World Book Encyclopedia & Britannica. Molas frequently contain maps with some of these countries and flags from some Central American and other Latin American countries, reflecting the shipping routes and also proximity to the Panama Canal.

Figure 4. Map of Panama.



Source: <http://www.stri.si.edu/images/Mapas/Panama.jpg>, accessed 21 January 2012. The Panama Canal crosses between Colón and Panamá City. The San Blas Kuna territory, the Comarca de Kuna, shown in brown, includes a narrow strip of coastal land on the Caribbean coast of Panamá and an archipelago of over 300 islands located off this coast between El Porvenir in the West, down to the border with Colombia. Figure 5 below shows more detail.

This dissertation focuses on the Kuna people living in the Kuna Yala comarca, which is located along the coast of Panamá on the Atlantic coast and in the nearby islands in the San Blas archipelago. The archipelago begins near El Porvenir and ends near the border with Colombia. The archipelago comprises of over 300 islands, many of which are small and uninhabited. The Kuna live in 45 communities. Some of the island communities have very few inhabitants.

The climate is tropical, with an extended wet season. It is hot throughout the year, though it can be very windy on the islands where the Kuna live. The seas can be rough, especially when travelling in a canoe. The inhabited islands in the San Blas archipelago are frequently barren; uninhabited islands may have been planted with coconuts which are farmed as a cash crop. Many of the islands are very close to the mainland and prior to the availability of piped water, frequent canoe trips were made to the mainland to obtain fresh water from the rivers. On the mainland many Kuna farm plantations with starchy vegetables such as maize and plantain and other foods. The natural environment on the mainland is a source of ingredients for traditional medicine for the Kuna. Fishing is also a major source of food.

Figure 5. Map of Kuna Yala.



Source: <http://www.stri.si.edu/images/Mapas/Panama.jpg>, accessed 21 January 2012. See caption for Figure 4 above for description.

2.3 Background – territory and population

The San Blas Kuna Indians, also known as the people of the Kuna Yala, are not the only Kuna group or the only indigenous people to live in an independent territory [comarca]. There are five comarcas in Panama and nine provinces. The comarcas have been established for three indigenous peoples: the Kuna Indians live in the Kuna Yala comarca, the Kuna de Madingandi comarca and the Kuna de Wargandi comarca. There is a comarca for the Ngobe-Bugle people and for the Embera people also.¹²

The 2010 Panamanian census reports a total of 3.4 million inhabitants, with a total indigenous population of 417,559. Over 280,000 of these were Ngobe-Bugle people; over 31,000 were Embera people; and the Kuna people counted in the census numbered 80,526.

The San Blas comarca was officially formed in 1938, but the Kuna operated as an independent territory following the 1925 Kuna Revolution.¹³ The area of the comarca Kuna Yala is 2358.2 km².¹⁴

The Kuna communities with the greatest number of inhabitants, based on 2000 census data are Ailigandi, Mamitupu, Achutupu, Ogobsucum, Playon Chico, San Ignacio de Tupile, Ustupo, and

¹² The San Blas comarca was the first independent territory to be established and its history is discussed in Chapter 9.

¹³ Discussed in Chapter 9.

¹⁴ Source: 2010 Census “Cuadro 11” www.censos2010.gop.pa/acercad.html, accessed 3 January 2012.

Mulatupo, each with over one thousand people. Some islands host two communities and some communities live on more than one island.

The “Los pueblos indígenas de Panamá: Diagnóstico sociodemográfico a partir del censo del 2000”¹⁵ reported the total Kuna population from the 1990 census was 61,707 and from the 2000 census was 47,298, showing an increase in the total Kuna population each decade. The total Kuna population in the 2010 census was 80,526, distributed as follows¹⁶:

Table 1. Kuna population of Panama.

| | |
|--|--------|
| Comarca Kuna Yala [San Blas] | 30,308 |
| Panama City area | 40,620 |
| Darien [inland] | 2,553 |
| Colon | 4,393 |
| * remainder in other provinces of Panama | * |

Source: <http://estadisticas.contraloria.gob.pa/Resultados2010/tabulados/Pdf/Cuadro20.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2012.

The population in the Kuna Yala [San Blas], compiled from 1998 and 2010 data, is shown below. The indigenous population, comprising mostly Kuna people, has begun to decline since the 1990 census, due to migration to other parts of Panama.

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xml/7/22277/LCW20-panama.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2012, “Cuadro III.5 - Población Indígena Según Grupo Al Que Pertenece. Censos 1990 – 2000”.

¹⁶ It is difficult to determine the total number of Kuna people in each province and comarca in Panama, since some data shows total population, some shows total indigenous population, not necessarily all Kuna people. For example, Puerto Obaldia may be included in the population of Kuna Yala in some statistics but Kuna people do not live there. This explains the differences between Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 2. Indigenous population of Kuna Yala [San Blas] comarca.

| | population in Kuna Yala comarca | | indigenous population (includes Kuna people) | |
|------|--|---|--|-----|
| 1920 | 17,561 | # | 17,090 | # |
| 1930 | 15,055 | # | 14,316 | # |
| 1940 | 21,335 | # | 20,822 | # |
| 1950 | 18,075 | # | 17,350 | # |
| 1960 | 20,084 | # | 19,370 | # |
| 1970 | 24,681 | * | 21,437 | # |
| 1980 | 28,621 | * | 27,588 | # |
| 1990 | 34,044 | * | 31,802 | # |
| 2000 | 32,446 | * | 31,294 | ** |
| 2010 | 33,109 | * | 30,458 | *** |

Source for indigenous population Comarca de San Blas (Kuna Yala) – Compendio Estadístico Anos 1992 – 1996, Dirección de Estadística y Censo, Cuadro 211-01, 1998. *** 2010 Census “Cuadro 20” accessed 27 January 2012.

* Source for population of Kuna Yala: 2010 Census “Cuadro 10” accessed 27 January 2012.

** 2000 indigenous population source: <http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xml/7/22277/LCW20-panama.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2012.

The latest census data on living conditions on the San Blas islands inhabited by Kuna Indians is from the 2000 census, which reports on housing conditions and services. The conditions for four of the large communities were as follows:

Table 3. Living conditions in a sample of four large Kuna communities.

| Island | | Indicators | |
|-----------|-------------|---|---|
| Ailigandi | 1526 people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 219 huts ▪ 178 with dirt floors ▪ All but one hut had potable water ▪ Only 2 huts with internal bathrooms ▪ 170 huts did not have electricity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Av. 6.7 people per dwelling |
| Mamitupu | 1174 people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 136 huts ▪ 128 with dirt floors ▪ All with potable water ▪ Only one with an internal bathroom ▪ Only one with electricity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Av. 8.6 people per dwelling |
| Ustupu | 2322 people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 284 huts ▪ 234 with dirt floors ▪ All but two with potable water ▪ 4 with internal bathrooms ▪ 2 with electricity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Av. 8.2 people per dwelling |
| Achutupu | 1619 people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 236 huts ▪ 219 with dirt floors ▪ All with potable water ▪ Only 1 hut with an internal bathroom ▪ Only one hut with electricity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Av. 6.9 people per dwelling |

Source: 2000 Panamanian census, "Cuadro 3", Comarca Kuna Yala, Característica Importantes; third column calculated from census data.

In Kuna Yala, in 2010, there were 33,109 people living in 5641 dwellings, average of 5.9 persons/dwelling. Source:

<http://estadisticas.contraloria.gob.pa/Resultados2010/tabulados/Pdf/Cuadro2.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2012. Chapin (1983: 457) reported that he was told that in the 1920s and 1930s matrilineal households on Ustuppu housed 20-25 people and that some were larger.

Most Kuna live in matrilineal kinship groups, with upwards of three generations in one dwelling. Most huts have dirt floors and are made of natural materials. Clothing is strung on beams across the huts and also stored in plastic buckets. Hammocks are used for sleeping. Kitchens are usually in separate huts from sleeping huts. Piped water was first possible in the 1970s though is not available on all islands¹⁷. The living conditions on many islands could be described as primitive, in terms of lack of running water, no bathrooms or toilets, no power and few facilities. Some islands have more Western services than others – for example, many islands have a public telephone; on some islands there is widespread cell phone usage, since there is excellent reception on the islands which are situated not far from the mainland. Further discussion about the lifestyle of the San Blas Kuna forms part of the other chapters.

Figure 6. Aerial photographs of San Blas islands.



Aerial view of a San Blas island of Playon Chico taken in the 1960s. The close proximity of huts is seen from the air. Mola panels, like the photograph on the right, are often found depicting a San Blas island.



Aerial view of a San Blas island of Ailigandi taken in the 1960s.

Source of photographs on this page: Private collection.

¹⁷ Some islands voted against piped water (Apgar, 2010: 66). Tice (1995: 145) indicates that an aqueduct provided water on the island of Tupile in the 1970s, and some islands still had no water supply in the mid 1980s. See Chapter 8.

Figure 7. Photographs on Kuna islands.



Left: Narrow pathways between huts. Source: Margiotti (2010: 92)

Right: Huts are predominantly grey highlighting the colours of the molas. Source: Private collection



A typical view from a San Blas island



Left: Inside a Kuna kitchen.



Right: Raising a pig.

2.4 Scholarship about the Kuna Indians

The Kuna people have been the subject of extensive study by anthropologists, ethnographers, linguists, geneticists, environmentalists and other social scientists. Many of these scholars have lived with Kuna communities on San Blas islands for extended periods to carry out research and there is extensive scholarly literature as a result¹⁸. Why have the San Blas Kuna Indians been so extensively studied?

I suggest that one of the prime reasons relates to the fact that the Kuna Indians are an ethnic group, living in small communities, with distinct physical characteristics and a language and culture considered to be exotic, yet only a short flight from large American universities, from whence many of the researchers came.

A number of young American Peace Corps volunteers were located in Panama, beginning in 1963, and upon their return popularised the study of the indigenous tribes living there. Some of these volunteers came back to the San Blas to undertake graduate school fieldwork in a variety of fields, including Chapin (1983) and Salvador (1976a) who both served in the Peace Corps in the 1960s, and Agpar (2010), who served as a volunteer in 2004 and earlier.

Scientific interest in the Kuna Indians developed in the early 20th century due to the high incidence of albinism. The albinos were thought to be “White Indians” and were the subject of curiosity, perhaps reflecting the ‘scientific racism’ prevalent at the time, and this led to a number of scientists visiting to investigate. By the middle of the century geneticists such as Keeler (1953) determined, by establishing detailed kinship genealogies and migration patterns, that the albinism was due to generations of endogamy.

A plethora of fieldwork in the San Blas in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in substantial scholarly research, for example Chapin (1983), Swain (1989), Holloman (1970), Salvador (1976a), Howe (1986), Sherzer (1976a), and Hirschfeld (1976). This research of San Blas Kuna encompassed political organisation; acculturation; material culture; cosmology; music; shamans and curing; language; agriculture; kinship; gender; and missionisation. Many of these scholars continued to research and publish about Kuna culture, society and history. Highlights of this research include Sherzer, J. ([1983] 2001) who extensively studied Kuna verbal art and language; Chapin (1983) who studied Kuna ritual and traditional medicine; Salvador who wrote the first detailed work on the aesthetics of molas from a Kuna point of view (1976a, 1976b, 1978); Hirschfeld (1976, 1977a) who studied Kuna aesthetics, art and society and Swain (1978) who assessed the changing roles of Kuna women on the island of Ailigandi. I discuss the extensive work of Howe below.

Earlier Kuna research includes a dissertation by Holloman (1969) which looked at developmental change in San Blas; Agnew (1956) who looked at Kuna art and crafts and their meaning; and Stout (1947) who argued that the Kuna people had become acculturated, which subsequent scholars such as Howe have discounted.

¹⁸ See Appendix E – Fieldwork carried out in the San Blas islands.

More recently Swain (1989) looked at the role of Kuna women and also the influence of ethnic tourism; Tice (1989, 1995, 2002) has written about the commercialisation of Kuna molas and the role of women in Kuna society; Lane (1983) has investigated the influence of missionaries on the Kuna people and Jennings-Rentenaar (2005) has researched Kuna mola blouses in the context of material culture studies, museum collection studies, and the art and craft form practised in a small-scale society.

In addition to this early work, substantial research about Kuna culture and art was carried out by others in the next decades (Keeler, 1969; Kapp, 1972; Parker & Neal, 1977; Lane, 1983; Tice, 1989; Perrin, 1999) and is referred to later in this dissertation.

In 1997 significant research about Kuna life and mola textile design was summarised in the catalogue for “The Art of Being Kuna” exhibition¹⁹ on the completion of a ten-year multi-disciplinary team project researching the culture of the Kuna Indians. The extensive catalogue contains lengthy essays about Kuna molas by the key scholars in the field: Howe, Salvador, Chapin, Sherzer and others.

Recent work has focused on the preservation of Kuna territory and identity, whilst managing contact with outsiders (Luce, 2006; Chernela, 2011); managing changes to community organisation in the San Blas (Apgar, 2010; Rawluk & Godber, 2011) and two recent anthropological studies: exploring Kuna identity (Fortis, 2008) and Kuna kinship and spatial relationships (Margiotti, 2010).

2.5 History of Panama and US relations since 1900

Due to their close proximity and the US need for a viable transport link between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, the US and Panama have developed close trade and diplomatic relations since the early 20th century (Lippincott & Dame, 1964; Ropp, 1982; Howe, 1997b, 1998, 2009).

With the completion in 1885 of the 48 mile railway from Colon on the Atlantic coast all the way across the isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean, thousands of Americans wishing to travel between the east and west coasts of the US would travel by boat to Panama to use this railway. Once the trans-American railway was completed in 1896 this became a less popular mode (Ropp, 1982).

The US government recognised the benefits to trade of a canal through the narrow isthmus of Panama and became involved in negotiating to build the Panama Canal once the French attempt (1880 -1889) was finally aborted. From 1904 there was a huge presence of US personnel on site, together with foreign workers employed to build the canal.

The US played a significant role in assisting Panama to obtain its independence from Colombia in 1903 and endeavoured to maintain internal stability in Panama during its many political upheavals. The US

¹⁹ The exhibition opened 16 November 1997 at the Fowler Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, ran until 5 April 1998; then travelled to other US cities: 1998/1999 National Museum of the American Indian, New York City; 1999 Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; 2002/2004 Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, Albuquerque, New Mexico; 2005/2006 Museum of Man, San Diego. The National Museum of the American Indian opened in Washington, D.C. in 2004.

was enabled in this by the agreement reached to build the canal, which specifically allowed the US to intervene in Panamanian domestic governance.

During World War 2 the US military was heavily involved in protecting Panama, especially the Panama Canal, which was used to transport troops. A number of airstrips were built in the San Blas area in the early 1940s as part of this strategy.

The US did not intervene in the military coup in Panama in 1968; however it did eventually support the end of twenty-two years under a military dictatorship at the end of 1989.²⁰

A Panamanian referendum in 1979 led to the negotiation of the cessation of US control of the Canal Zone at the end of 1999 when the Panama Canal and the zone of land surrounding it reverted to the control of the Panamanian government. Whilst the US government no longer has sovereignty over land in Panama, the US still has a significant impact on the economic and political life of Panama. The US dollar is still the accepted currency in Panama. As well as continuing close economic ties, the strong cultural influence of the US remains and many Panamanians continue to be educated in American colleges and universities, including Kuna men and women²¹.

Some of the major milestones in history impacting on the US and Panama, since the mid-19th century are summarised in Table 4 below.

²⁰ Overy, R. (Ed.). (1999). *The Times History of the World* (New ed.). London: Times Books.

²¹ Personal observations made during trip to Panama February-March 2010.

Table 4. Some major milestones in history impacting on Panama and US since the mid-19th century.

| Year | Event in Panama history | Year | Event in US history | Year | Event in World history |
|-------------|--|-------------|--|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1851-1855 | Construction of Panama Railway financed by US. Journey reduced from 3 days to 4 hours. 7000 workers imported from Europe, Asia, Caribbean. Majority were Chinese. Many stayed. | | | | |
| 1855 | Panama Railway opened. Colon, the terminus for the railway on the Caribbean. Black and mulatto immigrant workers gained the right to vote | 1869 | US transcontinental railroad completed and results in reduced patronage of Panama railway | | |
| 1880-1889 | Unsuccessful attempt by French Canal Company to build a canal across Panama. Imported workers from Jamaica, Barbados. Many stayed. | | | | |
| 1903 | Panama becomes independent of Colombia | 1903 | US, under President Theodore Roosevelt, supported Panama's attempt to become independent of Colombia with objective of enabling US to construct Panama Canal. 1903 treaty gave US perpetual rights over land in canal area, and control and management of whole canal. | | |
| 1904 – 1914 | US constructed Panama Canal. By 1910 the Panama Canal Company employed 50,802 people; 72% were black. | 1903 - 1918 | Newly independent Panama very indebted to US. US had been granted power to intervene in Panamanian domestic affairs; this occurred 1903-1918 | 1912-1933 | US intervenes in Nicaragua |
| 1903 | Catholicism recognised as the major religion but constitution allowed freedom of religion. Government support given to Catholic mission and school for Kuna (Howe 1998: 54) | | | | |

| Year | Event in Panama history | Year | Event in US history | Year | Event in World history |
|----------------|---|-------------------|---|----------------|------------------------|
| 1903 – 1924 | Political turmoil in Panama | 1914, 1916 | US intervenes in Mexico | 1914 – 1918 | World War 1 |
| | | 1917 | 5,000 US troops in Canal Zone before US enters World War 1, 2 ½ years after the opening of the Panama Canal | | |
| 1907 | Panamanian government sends Catholic priest to San Blas island of Nargana to convert Kuna. By 1951 Kuna allowed erection of Catholic churches. | | | | |
| 1915 | Panamanian government establishes first school in San Blas on Nargana; 1918 school established on Tupile. | 1917 | US enters World War 1 on 6 April | | |
| 1923 | Political party called <i>Accion Comunal</i> formed by professional class against US domination; supporting nationalism and anti-foreigners, especially anti-black people. Arnulfo Arias joined this party in 1930 and was elected President in 1940, 1949, 1968. | mid-1920s | US firms establish banana plantations in San Blas area– with foreign workers and later Kuna workers (Howe 1998: 163, 219) | | |
| 1925 | Protestant missionaries already on San Blas islands banished by Panamanian government. 1933 Kuna Protestant missionary returned to San Blas and established a school on Ailigandi | 1931 | US does not intervene in Panamanian government coup | | |
| 1941 | Arnulfo Arias introduced new constitution aimed at limiting influence of immigrant shopkeepers with Hindu and Chinese origins. Possibly also anti-Negro. | 1939-1945 1941 | US troops stationed in Panama US enters World War 2; up to 67,000 troops in Canal Zone during war | 1939- 1945 | World War 2 |
| 1940s 1950s | Turbulent Panamanian political scene | 1954 | US intervenes in Guatemala | | |

| Year | Event in Panama history | Year | Event in US history | Year | Event in World history |
|-----------------|--|-----------|---|-----------|---|
| 1963 | first Peace Corps volunteers from US in Panama, including San Blas, until Panamanian government stopped in 1971; later recommenced | 1961 | 'Bay of Pigs' – failed US backed attempt to oust Castro as leader of Cuba | | |
| | | 1963 | US President Kennedy assassinated | | |
| 1964 | Riots in Canal Zone. Panamanian students attempt to raise flag on US territory [Canal Zone] | | | 1959-1968 | Cuban guerrilla movements in Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela. Cuba also attempts to invade Panama |
| 11 October 1968 | Military coup | 1964-1973 | US men conscripted to serve in Vietnam War US youth worked in Peace Corps, many in Panama. American boys could substitute [unofficially] Peace Corps service for army conscription and service in the Vietnam War | 1955-1975 | Vietnam War |
| 1977 | Plebiscite to ratify treaty with US to revert Panama Canal to Panama | | | | |
| 1989 | With assistance from US, Panamanian military government overthrown | 1989 | US intervenes in Panama to return democracy | | |
| 1999 | Panama Canal and Canal Zone revert to Panama | 1999 | US military departs Panama. Many American citizens remain in Panama. | | |

Sources: Ropp (1982); Overy (1999); Howe (1997); Sanchez Laws (2009); www.history.army.mil/html/books/panama/panamacanal/CMH-70-115-1-PanamaCanal.pdf, accessed 3 May 2012.

See also Table 5 for milestones in San Blas Kuna history.

2.6 History of the Kuna people since 1900

In describing the interaction between the Kuna Indians and Western colonialists over the last four hundred years, Sherzer notes that:

“from the 17th century to the present, the Kuna have witnessed a series of visits and expeditions. They have had their share of mineral prospectors, missionaries, well-intentioned doctors, and anthropologists. The outsiders have included British, French, Panamanians, and North Americans. And they have been interested in everything from building a sea-level Panama canal with nuclear explosions to studying the phonemes of the Kuna language. And while they have left their influence on Kuna language, culture, dress, and place names, no matter how much the Kuna incorporate from the outside, they have become even more fiercely independent: insisting on their ethnic, cultural, social, geographic, historical, and linguistic identity” (Sherzer, J., 1994: 902).

As discussed above, the Kuna Indians of Panama have been extensively studied by anthropologists. James Howe, the major American scholar in the field of Kuna ethnology has been investigating their culture for over thirty years, his most recent book being *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out* (2009). His 1998 book, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna*, comprehensively covers the history of the Kuna people from when Panama gained independence from Colombia in 1903 until 1925 when the Kuna gained an autonomous territory after the Kuna rebellion.

Anthropologists such as Howe, Sherzer and Salvador report that in the main the San Blas Kuna people, since their first contact with foreigners, have resisted acculturation and maintained their independence. Whilst adapting to many Western ways, for example the Kuna men wear a form of standard Western dress comprising a collared shirt and trousers, the Kuna have retained a sense of “separateness” and their culture continues to evolve as a distinct entity. Taussig (1993) writes about this extensively in *Mimesis and Alterity*.

The Kuna have been successful in maintaining their independence despite constant threats from outside. Hirschfeld (1977b: 115) explains that “subject to immediate and near-constant military threat from the European colonials since the Conquest, the Cuna [sic] retained their independence through shrewd politicking [sic] and military acuity”. Part of this skill was to play off the foreign powers and side with the country which offered self-government to the Kuna people. Consequently from 1903 the US became a firm ally of the Kuna.

The Kuna men had continual contact with the West from at least the middle of the 19th century: “Parties [of Kuna] visited Colon in large trading canoes, some men shipped out as sailors, and trading vessels visited San Blas regularly. Traders were confined on board ship, however, to the extent that some visited the coast for years without entering a Kuna village” (Howe, 1986: 11). Kuna women, around this time, began to develop the art of sewing mola blouses, based on trade cloth, as well as other components of their dress including the beads around their calves and wrists and wrap skirts (Howe, 1986: 11).

The influence of trade on the Kunas was significant, allowing them to buy goods which transformed their dress and also their building and agricultural methods. The existence of missionaries on some islands encouraged Kuna men and women to wear more Western-style clothing and the women began to fashion their unique form of dress, including the mola blouse. This would not have been possible without the constant flow of trading boats, and to some degree by Kuna men bringing home cloth from the mainland.

Howe describes how Kuna men worked as manual labourers in Colon and Panama City, in banana plantations in north-west Panama and “since the 1930s they have had a special contract with the U.S. military in the Canal Zone (now the Canal District) to do kitchen work on the bases [US military bases in the Panama Canal Zone]” (Howe 1986: 15). In the early 1950s the American Consul in Panama, Whitaker (1954) reports that over 200 Kuna men were employed on banana plantations operated by the (US) United Fruit Company.

The influence of Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Church of God, Assembly of God, Church of Christ and Mormon missionaries in the San Blas, 1903 – 1982, is discussed by Lane (1983). Attempts at conversion by many different Christian denominations were largely unsuccessful in the long term, however Lane notes that the missionaries had a strong impact on the introduction of formal schooling and instigated improvements in health care (1983: 141-145).

The timeline summary below shows important events and the close relationship between the Kuna Indians in the San Blas and the US, with particular emphasis on events since 1925. In later chapters aspects of Kuna history are explored in further detail.

Table 5. Some major milestones in San Blas Kuna history.²²

| year | event |
|-------------|---|
| 1690 - 1757 | First significant contact with Protestantism [via French Huguenots] (Lane, 1983: 21) |
| 1855 | From opening of the Panama Railway, the terminus at Colon on Caribbean side allowed greater contact of Kuna Indians with outsiders, including conflicts over competing for trade |
| >1900 | Trading boats stopping in San Blas originated from Colon or Cartagena Kunas preferred trading with English-speakers |
| 1903 | Panama gained independence from Colombia though some Kuna villages still loyal to Colombia till 1918 |
| 1907 | Catholic missionaries allowed by Panamanian government on Kuna islands Panamanian government sends Catholic priest to San Blas island of Nargana to convert Kuna. By 1951 Kuna allowed erection of Catholic churches. |
| 1913 | Protestant missionaries allowed by Panamanian government on Kuna islands |
| 1915 | Panamanian government establishes first school in San Blas on Nargana; 1918 school established in Tupile |

²² See also Table 4 for major milestones in Panama, US and World history.

| year | event |
|----------------|--|
| 1918 | Panamanian President Porras initiated plans to subjugate the Kuna Indians and remove their culture |
| 1919-1924 | Continual confrontations between Kunas and Panama government which tried to suppress Kuna identity and culture |
| Mid-1920s | Banana plantations established near San Blas; cease by 1934 |
| 1924-1925 | Americans, Markham and Marsh, assisted Kuna leaders in support of independence and with assistance of US Minister to the Republic of Panama, South, Kunas were able to negotiate a form of independence. |
| 1925 | Kuna Rebellion against Panamanian interference and law enforcement, aimed at giving Kuna people self-government and to allow them to maintain their identity (dress and customs). Protestant missionaries already on San Blas islands banished by Panamanian government. |
| 1933 | Kuna Protestant missionary returned to San Blas and established a school on Ailigandi |
| 1937 | First electric generator installed on Nargana by Catholic mission (Lane, 1983: 28) |
| 1940s (early) | Several airstrips built on San Blas coastal area by US military as part of strategy to defend Panama Canal (Lane, 1983: 74) |
| 1938 | Panamanian government recognised Kuna territory |
| 1945 & 1953 | Kuna constitution for self-government |
| >1945 | Kunas sold coconuts exclusively to Colombian trading boats Kuna men worked in Panama city and on banana plantations far away from San Blas, commencing during World War 2 |
| Mid-1950s | Kuna Protestants aligned with Southern Baptists Conflict between Kunas, Catholics and Protestants in 1950s and 1960s – related to work of missionaries |
| 1963 - current | US youth worked in Peace Corps in Panama ²³ , assisting Kuna communities e.g. establishment of mola cooperatives in mid-1960s A number of these Peace Corps workers continued their association with the Kuna people by carrying out fieldwork research for graduate degrees in the San Blas islands e.g. Salvador, Chapin |
| 1967 | First hospital in San Blas established on Ailigandi by Baptist / Protestant mission (Lane, 1983: 46) |
| 1968 | Military dictatorship began in Panama. Political parties banned until latter part of 1970s. |
| 1970 | Kuna New Testament translation completed by Wycliff Bible Translators (Lane, 1983: 46) |
| 1972 | Kuna gain representation in Panamanian parliament |
| 1977 | Plebiscite to ratify treaty with US to revert Panama Canal to Panama. Kuna people thought to have voted 'No' in plebiscite as indication of strong relationship with US |

²³ The Peace Corps was established by John F Kennedy in 1961 when he became US President and young American men and women volunteered to work in developing countries for periods of around 2 years. The Peace Corps was not present in Panama for a period beginning in 1971. In 2011 the Peace Corp website information shows over 200 volunteers in Panama.

| year | event |
|-------|--|
| 1980s | Potable water piped to Ailigandi and some other San Blas islands from the 1970s. 8 villages had piped water c. 1982. Summary of Panamanian Laws, 1972 - 2000, related to indigenous peoples, including Kuna Indians, in Appendix K. |

Sources: Howe 1986; 1998; 2009; Overy, R. (Ed.). (Ropp, 1982); Howe 1997; Lane (1983); www.peacecorps.gov, accessed 19 January 2012.

Kuna molas in museum collections have designs which show maps of Panama and neighbouring countries; contain political cartoons reflecting historical moments and views; and contain other images which attest to the awareness of the Kuna of local and world events.

Figure 8. Mola depicting isthmus of Panama.



Mola showing the isthmus of Panama with Costa Rica being indicated by lettering on the left and Colombia in the right. Kuna boats are shown in the sea. Private collection.

In this chapter, which completes Part 1 of this dissertation, I have provided brief background information about the location and history of Panama and the San Blas Kuna Indians. In the following chapters I write further about specific incidents in Panamanian and US history which have impacted on Kuna history.

I have noted the extensive literature available relating to the San Blas Kuna Indians, which has informed the writing of the following chapters. I draw on this extensive scholarly literature in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. As I have reported, extensive fieldwork in the San Blas comarca has informed this literature. My dissertation is based upon museum research, literature research, and a 25 day trip to Panama in February – March 2010.

The next three chapters comprise Part 2 of this dissertation. In Chapter 3 I discuss the origin of the term 'cultural authentication' and provide four case studies to demonstrate the applicability of the concept. In Chapters 4 and 5 I establish that each of the four components has occurred in a process by which Kuna mola blouses can be understood to have been culturally authenticated.

Part 2 Cultural Authentication

CHAPTER 3 THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION

This chapter begins Part 2 which describes the concept of cultural authentication and establishes its applicability to the development of indigenous textiles. There are three chapters in this Part: Chapter 3 (this chapter) in which I outline the origin of the concept and provide examples of the cultural authentication of non-Western dress and outline the relevance of the concept to mola blouses.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I establish that the evolution of Kuna molas can be explained through a process of cultural authentication and that each of the components of the process, confirmed by other scholars for non-Western dress are also applicable. My research is the first to expound this applicability using scholarly research from a number of fields including history, ethnology, anthropology, dress studies, linguistics and cultural studies to examine in detail the process for Kuna mola blouses. I build on other work related to the structural alteration of trade cloth by non-Western peoples and in Part 3 I link this authentication with the maintenance of unique group identity.

I commence this chapter by highlighting the dichotomy between the *globalisation of fashion* and the *indigenisation of fashion*. Next, I outline the origin of the concept of cultural authentication and the impact of tradition and the *invention of tradition* on culture. This chapter concludes with four examples of the cultural authentication of textiles which form part of non-Western dress.

3.1 Flow of culture

The study of the flow of aspects of culture between nations is not new and has been the subject of extensive work in the last two decades by Appadurai who suggests, in his landmark book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* [sic], five ways to explain the constant global flows of culture, namely by ethnoscaping, mediascaping, technoscapes, financescaping and ideoscapes (1996: 27-47)²⁴. These different types of flows may occur between nations and between large and small communities, across the world or within the same country.²⁵

Appadurai outlines in detail these terms he has coined as “landscapes” (1996: 33-36), with ethnoscape referring to the movement of people; technoscape referring to the movement of technology; financescape referring to the movement of capital; mediascape referring to the distribution of electronic information; and lastly ideoscape referring to the movement of ideas, frequently directly political ideas. Since this time other scholars have suggested additional landscapes, including systemscape and servicescape (Bryman 2004 cited by Kitamori 2009: 79) and mythscape (Kitamori, 2009: 79).

²⁴ Appadurai (1996: 27-47); originally published in 1990.

²⁵ Heyman and Campbell (2009) are critical of aspects of Appadurai’s landscapes and their concerns are recognised, however this is tangential to the argument in this chapter in which I am focusing on globalisation versus indigenisation.

Another term has been employed by Robertson (1995: 28-30), which I am suggesting as an alternative to the indigenisation of culture – the compound word “glocalisation” formed by the amalgamation of the two words “global” and “local”. He links this word to the Japanese concept of *dochaku* meaning ‘living on one’s own land’ (1995: 28). Robertson explains that this term has been used in Japan to refer to adopting a global outlook in an appropriate manner for local conditions.

Dochaku can be seen as a form of hybridity. Robertson (1997; 1995: 30) refers to the way glocalisation can be interpreted to mean two sides of a coin, both universality, which he maintains could refer to the homogenisation of culture and at the same time, indigenisation or the particular way culture is localised when it travels between countries. He maintains that the reality of the globalisation of culture is the achievement of both similar cultural transformations in different countries and different cultural transformations as culture is adapted. There is an expectation that culture will be continually changing, though it is recognised that the pace of change may not be constant in all societies or during all time periods. In Chapters 4 and 5, I refer to the impact on the Kuna people of over five centuries of contact with other cultures in terms of colonisation, trade and missionisation.

The flows suggested by Appadurai can thus create both homogenisation and indigenisation of culture, and I will be maintaining that the Kuna people have been successful in the indigenisation of one aspect of culture, namely dress, to create a distinctive identity for their people. In the face of what Appadurai glosses as “the forces (and fears) of homogenisation” (1996: 32), the Kuna have resisted both their original Spanish colonisers, the impact of missionisation, and more recent quasi-colonisation by the Americans, to remain independent, with a distinctive visible identity created through dress.

In Chapter 9 I investigate strategies adopted by Kuna leaders to ensure cultural survival of their people. In this chapter I explain a form of cultural indigenisation, the concept of cultural authentication, developed to explain the process of the evolution of distinctive forms of non-Western dress. I put into context the concept of cultural authentication as part of the global flow of culture in a number of non-Western societies which have developed their own distinctive form of dress. In the last century when globalisation has frequently resulted in cultural homogenisation, these examples of the indigenisation of dress are of interest and the reasons for their success most likely relate to strong leadership and resistance to assimilation, as well as a strong sense of identity and the ability to create some form of physical and/or cultural isolation. As mentioned, this is discussed further in Chapter 9.

3.2 Origin of the concept of cultural authentication

The concept of cultural authentication as an explanation for the development of dress was described by Eicher and Erekosima (Eicher & Erekosima, 1980; Erekosima & Eicher, 1981, 1994; Eicher & Erekosima, 1995), in particular as a theoretical construct “as a basis of distinguishing non-Western from Western dress” (1980). The consideration of cultural authenticity as a creative, transformative process was initially proposed as a result of the study of the manipulation of Western trade cloth by the Kalabari people of Nigeria (Eicher & Erekosima, 1980; Erekosima & Eicher, 1981). I discuss later in this chapter this work on the Kalabari people as the first of four examples of cultural authentication.

A review by Reeves-DeArmond et al (2011) of 306 articles published in the “Clothing and Textiles Research Journal” from 1982-2006 and “Dress” from 1975-2006 assessed the use of theoretical frameworks in the study of historic dress and textiles, including non-Western dress. This research found that of the 47 articles which referred to named theories, only 5 theories were used more than once, and that cultural authentication was one of these (2011: 227).²⁶ Since 2006, a number of articles have supported the use of cultural authentication as a promising research approach, including Skov and Melchior (2010), Kaiser and Looyzen (2010), Vollmer (2010), and Lynch and Strauss (2007). In *Changing Fashion: A Critical Introduction to Trend Analysis and Meaning*, Lynch and Strauss (2007) discuss “Artifacts as Harbingers of Change” and strongly support the use of cultural authentication as a theoretical framework:

“Focusing on the impact of cultural interchange on traditional dress patterns in non-Western settings, theories of dress change were developed incorporating dress styles from throughout the world. One of the most notable and influential theories emerging from this body of scholarship was the concept of cultural authentication. . .”(Lynch & Strauss, 2007: 154).

The cultural authentication process is divided into four parts or steps by Eicher and Erekosima, who assert that when examining the breakdown of the authentication process in this way, items of dress which appear to be the adoption of Western dress may be found to have been re-invented as an indigenous item (Eicher & Erekosima, 1980). Thus the term cultural authentication is specifically defined as “the process of assimilating an artifact [sic] or idea external to a culture by accommodative change into a valued indigenous object or idea” (Eicher & Erekosima, 1980). Other scholars have developed the concept and expanded the idea so that it may be considered to be:

“the process by which an outside aesthetic influence is integrated into and becomes a part of an existing style tradition. . . Stress is placed within the theory of cultural authentication on the importance of the creative transformation of borrowed artifacts [sic] by the accepting culture as a means of internalizing [sic] the outside influence” (Lynch & Strauss, 2007: 154).

It can be seen that this definition parallels and supports the concept of “glocalisation” (or “dochaku”) referred to in the previous section.

Whilst the concept was developed to elucidate the change processes which occur as a non-Western culture adopts cloth items which form part of dress, Eicher and Erekosima are careful not to limit the concept’s application, suggesting that it “may be useful for analyzing [sic] still other examples of borrowing and transformation in technology, aesthetics, institutions, values, and practices” (Erekosima & Eicher, 1981: 51). Arthur (2011: 115) proposes that the concept be applied to household and decorative textiles and demonstrates this in her study of Hawaiian quilts which I refer to below.

²⁶Coincidentally, the articles referred to are both cited in this chapter: Arthur (1997) and Eicher and Erekosima (1980). The term cultural authentication was introduced by Erekosima in his paper *The Tartans of Buguma Women: Cultural Authentication*, presented at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, CA, October 31, 1979. The following year the concept of steps in the process of cultural authentication was discussed by Eicher and Erekosima (1980).

Berlo (1996)²⁷ refers to the appropriation of Western cloth by indigenous cultures as a process which crosses cultural boundaries, which she terms ‘reciprocal appropriations’, in a similar manner to the selection and transformation components of the cultural authentication process described above. She states that:

“One of the most interesting aspects of the reciprocal flow of textiles and fibers [sic] is the ingenious use to which the native artist puts so-called finished European textiles. Hudson’s Bay blankets cut and festooned with imported Chinese buttons were fashioned into the inventive ‘button blanket’ of the Tlingit and Kwakiutl. European wool and flannel cloth was [sic] unraveled and rewoven into Navajo rugs. Kuna and Maroon women took European yard goods and totally refashioned them into indigenous products” (Berlo, 1996: 450).

By structurally altering Western trade cloth, the indigenous people, such as the Kuna Indians, are actively confirming their own aesthetic preferences and distinguishing and separating themselves from Western preferences. Berlo asserts that the indigenous women are “the agents of transformation . . . they incorporate otherness and make it indigenous” (1996: 463). Miller supports this view in the introduction to “Clothing as Material Culture” (Kuchler & Miller, 2005), when he refers to “tearing, shredding, reconfiguring and transforming the potential of fibre and textile as it moves from one context to another” (2005: 16) as a way for a non-Western indigenous group to negotiate their relationship with Western influence. The structural alteration of trade cloth may be considered “one of the means by which they seek to ‘tame’ the influence of missionaries and others and make this influence more appropriate to local sensibilities and customs” (2005: 14). I discuss this further in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.3 Steps in the cultural authentication process

The four steps, as outlined by Eicher and Erekosima (1995) for the cultural authentication process are selection, characterisation, incorporation and transformation²⁸. Each sequential step is inter-related and leads to the development of a new form of cloth which becomes part of indigenous dress. The steps are described as:

*Step 1 “a particular external cultural practice or product is **selected** as appropriate and desirable by members of another culture out of an almost unlimited number of other cultural options or offerings.”* This step may involve selection of a Western item of dress with a change of use of the item.

*Step 2 “the selected item is **characterized** [sic] in some symbolic form within the meaning reference-frame of the receiving society. The item may be*

²⁷ I am using the later, substantially revised, version of Berlo’s 1992 paper which comprises the penultimate chapter in Schevill, M., Berlo, J. C., & Dwyer, E. B. (1996). *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology*. Austin: University of Texas Press. The reference for the original 1992 article is “Beyond Bricolage: Women and Aesthetic Strategies in Latin American Textiles”. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 22 (Autumn), 115-134.

²⁸ Other articles by Erekosima and Eicher have slightly different definitions of each step.

renamed by members of the culture, in their own language, choosing the item or process or translating in any other expressive form into the mapping system of order by which the members of the culture conceptually define or iconically portray their experiences and artifacts[sic].” This step requires the specific naming of an item of dress.

*Step 3 “the innovation occupies some functional role within the receiving cultural system by being **incorporated** toward meeting some adaptation need in the society, at either individual or collective levels, and often at both.”* This step implies that the group will become identified with the dress.

*Step 4 “the adopted artifact (sic) or practice (which may initially have been foreign or else from another generation or other segment of the same society) is **transformed** in itself. This entails an accommodation of its old form and purpose to the new setting in a holistic way. The outcome of this final phase invariably involves a creative or artistic change that envelops the product and setting.”* The result of this step could be a new form of dress or the re-arrangement of adopted dress items. (Eicher & Erekosima, 1995: 145).

As a result of the completion of these four steps there is the adaptation of an item of dress, from one culture to another “whereby borrowed objects become transformed so that they are indigenously meaningful and useful” (Eicher & Erekosima, 1995: 161).

Other scholars have used this approach and some have suggested a changed order in some of these steps and others have suggested that not all the steps in the cultural authentication process occur. The concept of cultural authentication has been applied by Steiner (1994), Jirousek (1997), Arthur (1997, 2011), Ackerman (2008) and Vollmer (2010). Some of the four stages or steps of cultural authentication outlined by Eicher and Erekosima²⁹ (1995) may occur concurrently. Arthur found that “the order of stages is not a critical part of the concept” and some steps may occur concurrently (2011: 103).

Cultural authentication in the reverse direction, borrowing from non-Western to Western culture has been raised by Mead and Pedersen (1995) with an example from the 20th century of the influence of West African textiles on American fashion. These authors also cite another example, from Kim and DeLong (Mead & Pedersen, 1995: 432) which relates to the influence of Far Eastern textiles on American fashion in the late 19th century and early 20th century. A number of scholars have suggested that the cultural authentication process could be considered to be a continuous cycle between Western and non-Western cultures (for example Berlo 1996; Mead and Pedersen 1995; Rovine 2004).

Berlo hints at a continual influence between cultures (1996: 452-453) and her use of the phrase “reciprocal appropriations” (1996: 449) could be taken to mean that the authentication process could be two-way, not simply Western culture influencing non-Western culture. In her essay “Fashionable Traditions: The Globalization [sic] of an African Textile”, Rovine (2004) examines the global influence of African designers and states that: “The interplay between indigenous and global

²⁹ Eicher and Erekosima list the order of steps as selection, characterisation, incorporation, transformation.

influences in the realm of fashion is further complicated by the multidirectional movement of designers and their work in international markets.” (Rovine, 2004: 193). Mead and Pedersen, at the end of their article, question whether such instances could perhaps be considered to have been “twice culturally authenticated”? (1995: 450). As mentioned above, the globalisation of culture has indeed increased the opportunities for the exchange of influences, and the increased facility for communication between the Western and non-Western countries enables fashion changes to occur rapidly and to be derived from a very wide range of influences.

In this dissertation I am arguing that the evolution of Kuna mola blouses can be explained by the process of cultural authentication. I will also be providing evidence in Chapters 9 and 10 that once the mola blouse had become a part of the Kuna woman’s dress ensemble, it continued to be influenced by Western fashion in terms of the materials chosen, the size and shape of the blouse, and the motifs used on the mola panels.

The time for the process of cultural authentication to complete each of the four steps, as outlined by Eicher and Erekosima, is difficult to calculate for any of the examples which will be discussed later in this chapter. In some instances the process would perhaps have occurred over a few years; in other instances it may take decades. Whilst the dress of indigenous peoples, similar to Western fashion is never static, the process of cultural authentication is deemed to be complete once an indigenous group has transformed an item of dress and identifies with the item.

3.4 The invention of tradition

Created authenticity may be considered as a variation on the cultural authentication of dress. As discussed in Chapter 1, the phenomenon of created authenticity has been termed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) as “the invention of tradition”. The most prominent example of this appears to be the Scottish kilt (Vollmer, 2010: 74), created in the 1720s as a more practical item of male clothing than the existing flowing garment, whilst using the same material. The kilt is generally considered to have a tradition of many hundreds of years prior to this.

It appears that the first scholarly use of the term “the invention of tradition” was in the edited book with the same name in 1983, in which Hobsbawm defines the term invented tradition to include: “both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period”(1983: 1). He expands this explanation to stress that invented traditions, purporting to have a lengthy continuous past are “largely factitious” (1983: 2) and that such inventions occur at times when society is changing at a more rapid pace than in earlier times.

The most prevalent types of invented tradition, as espoused by Hobsbawm are “those establishing or symbolizing [sic] social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (1983: 9) and he particularly mentions the role of such inventions in establishing new nations (1983: 13). In the sense that the Kuna leaders were establishing the need for independent geographic spheres of influence for their people, they were creating a quasi-nation. The time frame for the evolution of the mola blouse is not precisely known: the earliest provenanced mola blouse found in a museum collection dates from 1906. It is possible that early blouses were worn over a short

painted wrap skirt, called a *picha*, which was the only known cloth item of dress previously worn by Kuna women.³⁰

A number of benefits can be gained from the study of the creation of invented traditions, the most important according to Hobsbawm being that these inventions are evidence of changes in the society: “the study of invented traditions cannot be separated from the wider study of the history of society, nor can it expect to advance much beyond the mere discovery of such practices unless it is integrated into a wider study” (1983: 12). This dissertation considers the cultural authentication of mola blouses in the context of Kuna history, culture and society.

Whilst some forms of ethnic dress may be considered traditional, with very long histories, others may have been invented by the assemblage of components from other cultures, albeit in a new manner. My research specifically relates to the evolution of the Kuna mola blouse and focuses on providing evidence to support the cultural authentication process (in Part 2) and the role of the Kuna leaders in creating or encouraging the invention of the tradition of Kuna women wearing their distinctive molas (in Part 3).

The compilation of all the components of the Kuna women’s dress may be considered to have been an “invented tradition” based on the availability of components at a given time. For example, the line painted on the ridge of a Kuna woman’s nose and the red paint on her checks are both made from locally obtained plant ingredients. The gold nose ring, gold earrings and gold necklaces may derive from trade with Colombians, though the gold ore may have been collected by the Kuna Indians since it is known to occur locally in the inland areas. Some of the necklaces are made from seed pods; some from glass and plastic beads, which the Kuna string. The glass wrist and calf beads are obtained by trade and hand strung to fit the women who will be wearing them. The wrap skirt fabric may be purchased on the San Blas islands or in Panama City. There is no sewing involved. Details about Kuna dress and the materials used to sew mola blouses are found in Chapters 6 and 7.

A further linking of the invention of tradition and cultural authentication is suggested by Steiner (1994: 91-92), based on four examples of indigenous peoples who transformed trade cloth into dress: the Seminole, Saramaka, Kuna and Kalabari peoples. He refers to the belief expressed in the essays in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) that invented traditions often derive from other cultural components and suggests that:

“Cuna [sic] designs, for example, are reported to come from traditional body painting; Kalabari designs are thought to derive from traditional hair styles and personal adornment; and Saramaka ‘narrow strip’ compositions are, at least in part, inspired by the narrow-band textile designs of the African ancestors from whom the Suriname Maroons are descended. This added feature to the notion of ‘cultural authentication’ gives the model some ‘historical’ depth which links the transformation of cloth to a people’s vision of their own history and their construction of the past” (Steiner, 1994: 91-92).

³⁰ The *picha* is further described in Chapter 4.

Support for the idea that the indigenised cloth may reflect other indigenous arts, such as weaving, ceramics or body painting for example, is also given by Berlo (1996). She writes that in other cases the indigenous women may be inventing a new tradition :“Remaking, altering, and inventing history is an on-going human preoccupation. . . .This is true in regard to textile traditions as well as other historical traditions” (1996: 455-456).

In her dissertation on *The Assumption of Tradition* Horner examines “the development of the concept of tradition in anthropological discourse” (1990: 1) and based her research on artefacts of the indigenous people of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon (West Africa). She finds that tradition can be considered from the point of view of its socio-political context and also as a process which is continuous. I suggest that the invention of tradition could be considered to be the starting point for this continuous process. Horner claims that:

“There is a tendency to ignore the processual [sic] nature of tradition, that of continual selection, and to assume that for non-Western peoples their present lives reflect the images of their pasts whereas it seems far more plausible that their images of the past most often reflect the realities of the present. Such overprivileging [sic] of the West and the power of Western representations always concludes with tradition on the verge of extinction” (Horner 1990: 308).

If one is to consider that traditions are continually invented, and that existing traditions are continually changing or perhaps re-invented, then would it be counterintuitive to consider the possibility of traditions becoming extinct? Hobsbawm (1983) and Horner (1990) are suggesting that tradition is a term in relation to whatever time period is under consideration. I will be discussing further in Chapter 9 the assumption of tradition by non-Western ethnic groups, such as the African groups studied by Horner, with particular reference to the group I am studying, the Kuna Indians, and how this may be understood as a response to external pressures. I agree with Horner that:

“Tradition is the raw material for creating meaning in a reality which by definition has no meaning of its own. Its most salient characteristic is the creation of identity by affiliating people with past events, places, persons, and things” (Horner 1990: 306).

In the next section I refer further to Steiner’s paper, and the four examples of cultural authentication he discusses.

3.5 Examples of non-Western textile authentication

In this section I review the application of the concept of cultural authentication to a number of indigenous textile forms to provide a context for understanding the process in further detail. In the following Chapter I begin to apply the process to the development of the Kuna mola blouse.

Early work pre-dating the development of the concept of cultural authentication links the non-Western textile work of the Kalabari, the Suriname Maroons and the Kuna. Schneider characterises the structural alteration of cloth by these three indigenous groups as “post-loom decoration” of cloth sourced entirely from the West (1987: 424-427). Acknowledging this work, Steiner (1994) builds on the linkages and discusses the textile work of the Seminole, Saramaka, Kuna and Kalabari.

Whilst not a detailed study of the cultural authentication process, Steiner's essay is the first found extension of the work of Erekosima and Eicher (1981) to other non-Western indigenous textile work.³¹ Steiner provides convincing evidence of the application of some of the four steps in the process to the Seminole, Saramaka, Kuna and Kalabari. These four cultures have no tradition of weaving cloth, so that the availability of cotton trade cloth was their first opportunity to develop cloth dress traditions. In each case this cloth is structurally altered to make it unique. Evidence cited by Steiner (1994: 90-91) for each step in the cultural authentication process is as follows:

- Step 1 Selection
Seminole, Saramaka, Kalabari and Kuna all selected fabric colours and patterns based on their cultural preferences
- Step 2 Characterisation
Saramaka and Kalabari gave specific names to different type of imported fabric
- Step 3 Incorporation
Saramaka, Seminole, Kuna and Kalabari all developed a distinctive way of adapting the cloth by choice of motifs and designs
- Step 4 Transformation
Saramaka, Seminole, Kuna and Kalabari all developed individual methods of structurally altering the cloth: the Seminole developed a strip style of patchwork; the Saramaka developed narrow strip textiles; the Kalabari created patterns in fabric by pulling and cutting threads; the Kuna developed a form of reverse appliqué on multi-layered cloth.

Steiner believes that this final step of structural alteration of the trade cloth, that of transformation, to create a unique and easily identifiable technique is the most important part of the process of cultural authentication.³² I am indebted to the work of Steiner (1994) and Schneider (1987, 2006) and build on their preliminary work in Chapters 4 and 5 where I discuss the applicability of the authentication process to the evolution of Kuna molas.

In the remainder of this section I will outline four examples of the cultural authentication process related to non-Western dress: the cut-thread cloth of the Kalabari; the Hawaiian holoku; the match coats of the American Indian tribes of the north east coast of America; and the ribbonwork of the American Indians tribes of the Great Lakes region of America. Each of these examples demonstrates the ingenuity employed by an indigenous people in creating a meaningful item of dress. Illustrations of each of these examples are provided in Figure 9.

I will commence with Erekosima and Eicher's study of the Kalabari, since their research led to the development by them of the cultural authentication concept and their advancement of the four steps in the process.

³¹ I have not researched non-indigenous, non-Western studies.

³² Steiner's concern about the Erekosima and Eicher process neglecting to link with cultural history has been addressed in Erekosima and Eicher's later work.

- The Kalabari cut-thread cloth

The concept of cultural authentication began with the study of the cut-thread cloth used for components of the dress of the Kalabari people in Nigeria (Erekosima & Eicher, 1994; Eicher & Erekosima, 1995; Michelman, 1995; Michelman & Erekosima, 1997). Eicher and Erekosima (1995) expanded on their research to examine complete dress ensembles of both Kalabari men and women and reflect that:

“None are technically indigenous but each has become identified as Kalabari through cultural authentication and resulting use. The construct of cultural authentication applies to specific articles and ensembles of dress identified as ethnic and considered indigenous when the users are not the makers or when the material used is not indigenous in origin” (Eicher & Erekosima, 1995: 140).

The process of authenticating cut-thread cloth began with the Kalabari women selecting particular styles of imported Indian madras cloth, generally with woven stripes and checks. Threads in the cloth were then removed, by cutting a length of thread with a razor and pulling out threads, to create geometric patterns. The technique is thought to date from the end of the 19th century. The resulting cloth has a lacy effect and the patterns perhaps relate to Kalabari body painting and patterns created in a woman’s hair in earlier times.

Names are given to the cutting techniques and to the motifs. The Kalabari identify strongly with the cut-thread cloth, which is worn as a wrapper as part of the dress ensemble of both men and women, mainly for special celebrations. The trade cloth has been transformed into a piece of fabric which is unique, since it would be difficult to duplicate each cut or pulled thread. The process was found by Eicher and Erekosima (1995) to occur in this order: selection, characterisation, incorporation, and transformation.

- The Hawaiian holoku

In her study of the holoku, which was adopted as a form of dress by indigenous Polynesian Hawaiian women, Arthur (1997) assesses the applicability of the concept of cultural authentication. She is able to validate that the four stages of the cultural authentication process did occur for the holoku, with the order of steps being selection, transformation, incorporation, characterisation – at variance with the order found by Eicher and Erekosima.

Arthur (1997: 129) suggests that the order of the four steps is not important but that there must be evidence of each step for the cultural authentication process to be completed. She found that the order of cultural authentication stages for the holoku began with selection, however the order of the next steps was different to Eicher and Erekosima, and were transformation, incorporation and lastly characterisation. Her sources included books, scholarly articles, newspapers and magazines; letters written by travellers and missionaries; various dictionaries of the Hawaiian language; historic photographs and paintings; and the examination of holokus in museum collections and reviewing

their provenance³³. I have relied on similar source material for my Kuna research in this dissertation.

From the beginning of the 19th century, missionaries began living on Hawaii and instituted requirements for modest dress, since previously the women had not covered their upper bodies. European cloth was available to native Hawaiians via trade in the early 19th century and with the assistance of missionary wives they were taught to sew. The upper classes and Hawaiian royalty, who were early converts to Christianity, wished to imitate the style of dress of the missionary women, however these women recognised the need for adaption to the much greater size of the Hawaiian women and also for comfort in the hot humid climate. The result was a looser fitting garment with an above the bust yoke. [There is no evidence that the missionary wives similarly adapted their dress!]

The style of dress spread to all indigenous Hawaiian women, though initially they added traditional components to the holoku to create their dress ensembles, but later wore it alone. By 1860 all Hawaiian women were wearing the holoku, at least for some of the time, especially at celebrations, and identified with this form of dress.

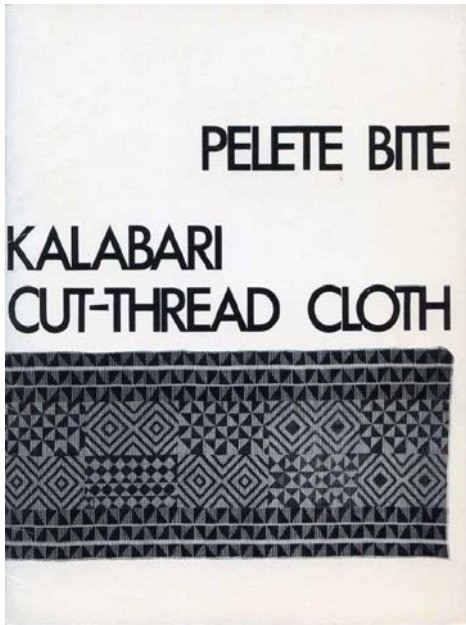
The origin of the word holoku is uncertain, though Arthur suggests that it developed some time in the mid-19th century and was in usage by the 1860s, and was possibly the result of the compounding of two words related to stopping and starting stitching on a sewing machine: ku and holo (1997: 137). She states that the importance of such naming is that “the characterization [sic] stage does not just hinge on naming; it also involves symbolic acceptance of the item into the culture” (1997: 137) and thus its identification with Hawaiian women.

Another influence on the Hawaiian indigenous women which resulted from contact with missionaries’ wives was that of quilting, which most likely occurred at the same time as the evolution of the holoku. Arthur (2011) tests the cultural authentication process on the evolution of this textile process also. Hawaiian quilting is different to European and American quilting and is called kapa apana³⁴. Arthur uses similar sources for her studies of holoku and quilts in Hawaii.

³³ The importance of examination of artefacts in museum collections is discussed in Chapter 6.

³⁴ There is also “contemporary” style Hawaiian quilting which is mainly machine sewn and unrelated to the kapa apana style.

Figure 9. Illustrations of examples of non-Western dress textiles.



Kalabari cut-thread cloth. Source: Cover of book, by Eicher & Erekosima (1982) *Pelete bite: Kalabari cut-thread cloth*. Goldstein Gallery, University of Minnesota, St Paul.



The Hawaiian holoku. Source: Google images honilima.com, accessed 21 May 2012.



A match coat. Source: Becker 2005: 739. Original caption: "Figure 2. A drawing depicting a Mohawk wearing an English coat of the pattern used for tailored matchcoats of the period ca. 1700."



Dress ensemble trimmed with ribbonwork. Source: Iowa State University, Textiles & Clothing Museum 2009. Exhibition flyer, www.hs.iastate.edu, accessed 3 June 2012.

From the 1820s missionary wives taught quilting to Hawaiian women, who then began teaching others in their extended families. Family quilt patterns were preserved, and cultural taboos influenced acceptable designs. Since the Hawaiian islands are relatively isolated, the quilt styles developed without substantial outside influence into a style unique to the islands, in a similar manner to the original designs on fibre materials made from bark. The technique and style is based on the top layer of the quilt being folded into eighths and the design cut out, resulting in a “snowflake” type design, which is symmetrical on all axes. This layer was appliquéd onto the base layer; both layers were generally made of plain coloured fabric, with the base layer a lighter colour. In other variations the top appliqué layer is made of appliquéd pieces of unconnected fabric and sometimes pieced quilts were also made. The kapa apana quilts typically incorporate a symmetrical central floral design, in a circular shape.

In Arthur’s 2011 study of textile quilting in Hawaii she found that the steps occurred in the same order for the kapa apana quilts as she found for the cultural authentication of the holoku:

- Selection – adoption by indigenous group of a Western item, followed closely by the next step
- Transformation – modification of the original form to become culturally distinctive
- Incorporation – the object becomes identified with a group as culturally authentic
- The characterisation step, defined as the “assignment of a name by the receiving culture signifies the symbolic appropriation of the item into the culture” (Arthur, 2011: 112) did not occur after the other steps but together with step 2 of transformation and step 3 of incorporation (2011: 106). The Hawaiian quilt did not become named kapa apana until it became standardised as a top layer cut on folded eighths and was an accepted part of indigenous culture.

Arthur concludes that:

“Each stage sheds light on the process, while helping to understand the cultural shift of meanings. Different cultures, in different temporal and spatial locations react in ways specific to their own unique contexts. Consideration of the characteristics of each stage is likely more significant in terms of guiding our study of textile artifacts [sic] than is the order proposed in the original theory” (2011: 115).

The Kuna mola panels could be considered in many ways to be “mini quilts”, hence the appropriateness of the inclusion of this example of the kapa apana quilts. One style of mola panel is comprised of two layers, with the top layer cut into and sewn using the reverse appliqué technique, whilst the Hawaiian two-layer quilts are sewn with surface appliqué.³⁵

³⁵ Some two layer mola panels are symmetrical on two axes; most mola panels comprise more than a base layer and one layer on top.

- The match coats of the American Indians

An example from American Indian research relates to “match coats”, which were part of the dress of the American Indian tribes in the north east of America, studied by Becker (2005, 2010) to determine their origin and history. His research highlights the importance of cloth as a desirable item, obtained by trade and gifting. The recorded use of match coat, sometimes used as the one word ‘matchcoat’, begins in the 17th century and may be derived from an American Indian word which was anglicised (Becker, 2010: 153). It has at times meant both a length of fabric and a form of jacket, originally a blanket-like wrap and later a jacket modelled on the American military jackets.³⁶ The cloth was frequently of a standard length and width, sufficient to make a coat, approximately two yards long. The jackets were indigenised by the accessories worn with them, such as handwoven belts or sashes (Becker, 2010: 154). This is similar to the indigenous items initially added to the Hawaiian holoku to express ethnic identity.

In the late 17th century the American Indians in this area were also able to acquire by trade loose-fitting, knee length linen shirts, similar to those worn by the Europeans in the area (Becker, 2010: 162). By the early 18th century the American Indians were trading, or receiving as payment in exchange for treaties, ready-made coats and shirts, and by the middle of the 18th century were dressed in a similar manner to the Europeans in the area (the colonialists) (Becker, 2010: 173-174). This dress would have been decorated with indigenous embellishments, related to tribal identity:

“members of each indigenous ‘nation’ developed specific decorative modes to retain and express their unique cultural identity. Through the use of the specific details of dress or costume or hairstyle each indigenous nation wove new elements into the fabric of their culture to retain identity and meaning. In the north-east the presentation of self and of indigenous cultural identity commonly depended on the incorporation of sashes or belts to fasten cloth match coats. These sashes, along with specific colours and/or patterns of beads and other decorations or ornamentation, reflected distinct cultural traditions and identity” (Becker, 2010: 176).

Becker does not explicitly refer to the concept of cultural authentication, however his research into match coats supplies evidence of the selection of specific types and colours of cloth and clothing; the transformation of the items by the addition of embellishments and by the colour combinations chosen; the identification of a number of different American Indian tribes living in the area with these male dress ensembles; and characterisation by the naming of both cloth and jackets as match coats. In summary, Becker (2010:154) found that the match coat “reveals the ways in which indigenous peoples incorporated major items of European-produced material culture into their traditional life ways without compromising traditional systems of self-identity”.

Another similar example relates to the bandolier bag associated with American Indian tribes living near the Great Lakes area of America. Gordon (1992) describes their development in a manner which can easily be related to the cultural authentication process. Bandolier bags are based on

³⁶ Similarly, the word mola refers to both cloth and clothing and this is discussed in Chapter 5.

bags used by Europeans living in America since the 17th century, most likely military in origin, for the storage of gunpowder. They are rectangular shoulder bags, made entirely from Western sourced materials – trade cloth and coloured beads, and were first made in the mid-19th century. The elaborate beaded bags, sewn by women, were worn for ceremonial occasions by men, and sometimes women, and Gordon reports that by wearing the bag the overall dress ensemble became identifiable as a tribal marker. The bag effectively transformed the wearer into an identifiable member of a tribe (1992: 70). These bags were very colourful, visible from far away, imbued with meaning, identity and prestige for the maker and the wearer. Whilst Gordon does not expressly refer to cultural authentication, it is the process which she describes.

The next example is also from North American Indian research. I suggest that these two American Indian examples, the match coat and ribbonwork, are particularly relevant to the study of Kuna Indian molas, with parallels related to the impact of colonialism, trade and migration of indigenous groups as a result of European settlement.

- The ribbonwork of the American Indians

The American Indians of the Great Lakes region ³⁷ have developed a form of decoration applied to items of dress since the mid-18th century called ribbonwork. Originally lengths of ribbon were used, though contemporary work uses strips of cut fabric, not ribbon, and is called ribbon appliqué. Contemporary work is mostly made by sewing machine and early work was hand sewn.

The strips of ribbonwork are sewn onto skirts and shirts as decorative trim. A description of the three basic styles of ribbonwork is given by Abbass (1979: 17-99) :

- Shingled style – a geometric style based on the saw-tooth technique, where a layer of traditional selvedged ribbon is placed on top of another ribbon, then the top layer is cut at intervals and then turned under to form triangular saw-tooth shapes (see Figure 19 in Chapter 4). For a shingled design, multiple layers of ribbon are placed on top of each other, progressively widening the resultant strip, with each added layer sewn with saw-tooth design.
- Negative ribbonwork – a geometric design comprising two layers of ribbon, where the bottom layer forms the figure and may be repeated with layers in the reverse order and joined to form a symmetrical pair.
- Positive ribbonwork – may be floral and curvilinear with the top layer forming the figure. This style is based on surface appliqué and may be drawn using a cardboard template. If it is sewn by hand the ribbon edge is turned under with a narrow hem and sewn. Alternatively, the pattern may be sewn by machine using a form of zigzag stitch and the excess fabric cut away to reveal the pattern. The designs may involve joining pieces of ribbon on the selvedge and may be symmetrical along the join and also bilaterally.

Designs are shared between generations, hence traditions within kinship groups develop. Sometimes embroidery is added to positive ribbonwork.

³⁷ These tribes include the Meskwaki, Kickapoo, Wannebago and others; and have similar culture, language and traditions. (Ackerman 2008: 9)

The cultural authentication of ribbonwork has been confirmed by both Pannabecker (1988) and Ackerman (2008). Pannabecker (1988: 55-56) found evidence of the selection of ribbon from the mid-18th century by Great Lakes American Indian tribes. The silk ribbon was obtained by trade and gifting. The transformation of the ribbon into decorative trim for garments was recorded as early as 1735 and has been identified as part of the material culture of American Indians from the area from this time.

Pannabecker struggled to find evidence of the stage of characterisation, however Ackerman, herself a member of the Meskwaki tribe who sews ribbonwork (specifically contemporary style ribbon appliqué) confirms that there is a name for ribbon and ribbonwork in the Meskwaki language (2008: 148). The strong identification of the Great Lakes Indians with ribbonwork has influenced Neill (2000: 167) to refer to ribbonwork as 'an emblem of ethnicity' for these tribes, and this identification persists. Her research investigated the different styles and patterns of ribbonwork associated with different tribes and foreshadows that her later work may discover different names for different patterns.

I return to a discussion on the cultural authentication of ribbonwork in Chapter 4 where I compare the ribbonwork technique with the appliqué and reverse appliqué work on mola panels, in the section describing the transformation of fabric into applied decoration.

3.6 Summary: Application of the concept of cultural authentication

The four parts in the cultural authentication process can be simplified as follows:

"Selection: The Indigenous Group Adopts the Western Item"

"Transformation: The Original Form is Modified for Cultural Distinctiveness"

"Characterization [sic]: The Item is Symbolically Appropriated and Named"

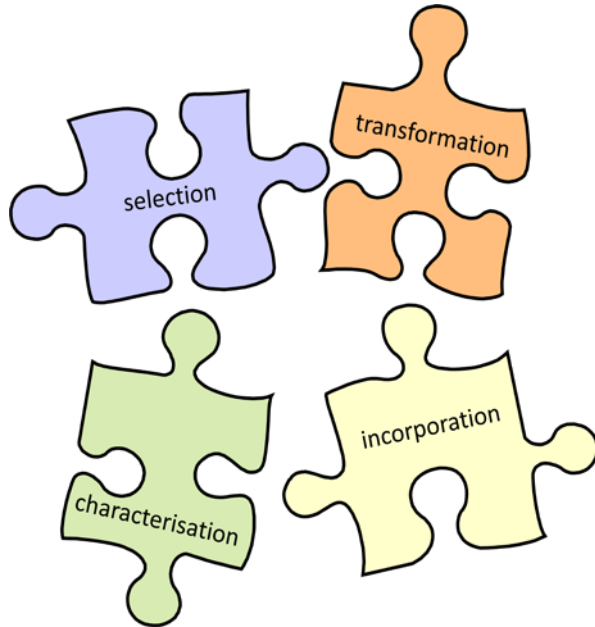
"Incorporation: The Item Denotes Social Group Membership" (from Arthur 2011: 106-112).

As has been discussed in this chapter, Arthur (2011) as well as other scholars, including Pannabecker (1988), question the order in which these four processes occur and whether each of the steps occur in all situations, where an item of dress is assimilated into an indigenous culture using Western materials and ideas. For example, Arthur found that the characterisation stage was concurrent with the transformation and incorporation stages in her research into the origin of the Hawaiian quilt.

In view of the concerns of Pannabecker and Arthur regarding the order of occurrence of selection, characterisation, incorporation and transformation, I will be approaching each of these as *components* in the process of cultural authentication rather than steps. The use of the word *steps* by Eicher and Erekosima implies that the process is sequential, with each step building up from the proceeding step until the process is complete. I agree with Arthur (2011) that the order of the steps is not important; it is the framework that studying the components of selection, characterisation, incorporation and transformation provides which is key. These components may overlap and one or more may occur concurrently. It may not be possible to determine when the process began, nor

may it be possible to suggest cut off points between stages. I have described in this chapter how the framework offers an excellent basis for the evaluation of the process of cultural authentication, provided it can be based on historical evidence, anthropological and ethnological scholarship, visual records, and other sources.

Figure 10. Components of the cultural authentication process.



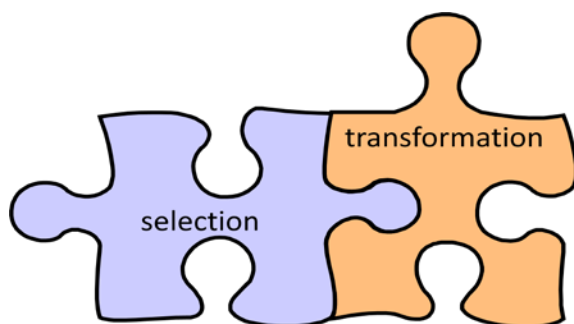
In the next Chapter I use the cultural authentication framework, in a similar manner to Arthur (2011), whilst following her advice to refine the process (2011: 115). By considering the selection, characterisation, incorporation and transformation components of the cultural authentication of Kuna molas as pieces of a jigsaw to be fitted together as shown in Figure 10, rather than as sequential steps, I aim to evaluate and develop the concept.

I investigate the development of the Kuna mola blouse from the receipt of trade cloth by colonial rulers in the 18th century, through to the adaption of a form a dress by Kuna women from the early 1900s. I will investigate the evidence for the four components from sources which have not previously been considered from this perspective.

CHAPTER 4 COMPONENTS OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION: PART 1

In this chapter and the chapter following, I provide evidence for each of the four components which form part of the cultural authentication process for Kuna mola blouses. I will discuss the relationship between each of the components of selection, transformation, characterisation and incorporation. In Chapter 4 (this chapter) the components of selection and transformation are discussed. The Kuna mola blouse came into being on the achievement of these two components.

Figure 11. The cultural authentication of the mola blouse – Part 1.



The selection and transformation components are linked.

In Chapter 5, the components of characterisation and incorporation are discussed. I will be suggesting that these latter components resulted in the identification of the mola as integral to Kuna identity from 'the inside' and 'the outside' – meaning self-identification and identification of the Kuna people by others. On completion of each of these four components, the mola was culturally authenticated by the Kuna Indians. Based on the examples of cultural authentication described in the previous chapter, the order of the four components may not have been sequential and components may have occurred concurrently. Together with Chapter 3, which outlines the cultural authentication process, Chapters 4 and 5 complete Part 2 of this dissertation.

The cultural authentication process for the Kuna mola blouse is examined in the order in which it most likely occurred, namely selection, transformation, characterisation and incorporation. These components would no doubt overlap and have no clear divisions, however I consider that the concept will be constructive in unravelling the development of the Kuna mola blouse. The imprecise nature of the components has also made it difficult to decide where to best allocate certain information, since some material could be considered part of more than one of the components.

4.1 Selection: trade cloth an essential prerequisite

“Selection: The Indigenous Group Adopts the Western Item” (Arthur 2011: 106).

The process of cultural authentication of Kuna molas began with the acquisition of trade cloth. The Kuna are not known to have produced fabric for clothing³⁸. Trade cloth refers to commercially manufactured, woven cloth, which may have been produced on handlooms or mechanical looms. The trade cloth would have been manufactured in a Western nation.

In this section I source information from firsthand traveller’s accounts, ethnohistory, reports of anthropological fieldwork, and also the study of Kuna ethnoaesthetics. I commence with a brief history of early Kuna contact with foreigners and the known use of cloth at this time. This is followed by an introduction to the acquisition of cloth as a form of gift or incentive by foreigners; and later acquisition by trade. Lastly, I discuss the particularities of the selection of trade cloth by Kuna women and the cloth used in molas in the early decades of the 20th century.

4.1.1 Long duration of Kuna contact with foreigners

The Kuna Indians have had contact with other cultures through colonisation, trade and through the first-hand experience of Kuna men employed on foreign ships for centuries. This pre-dates Appadurai’s concept of global ethnoscaapes (Appadurai, 1996) referred to in Chapter 3 but has the same outcome, whereby ideas from outside the Kuna communities are disseminated by Kuna men returning from trips. It is significant that a number of these well travelled Kuna men later became leaders of the Kuna people with an understanding of the importance of education and an understanding of the need to negotiate boundaries with outsiders in order to preserve the autonomy of the Kuna people (see Chapter 9).

The response by some of the Kuna Indians to the Spanish occupation was physical removal, firstly to the Atlantic coast and then to the islands off the coast in the San Blas archipelago³⁹. Many Kuna Indians were thus geographically close to Jamaica. Trade with Jamaica, which was an English colony by the end of the 17th century, became very important in the development of Kuna culture. Langebaek writes that:

*“Commerce with these newcomers transformed the Cuna [sic] economy and oriented some towards acquiring **goods** and **knowledge** from abroad”*
(Langebaek, 1991: 374) (My emphasis)

³⁸ Kuna used to weave hammocks from local natural materials. For many years hammocks have been purchased readymade. See Hartmann (1985: 100).

On a field trip to the island of Ailigandi in March 2010, it was found that INAC, the Panamanian National Culture organisation, had set up a learning centre there to teach the old skills of hammock weaving, basket weaving and mola sewing for young children.

³⁹ I will explore this strategy further in Chapter 9 when I discuss the isolationist theory put forward by Chernela (2011).

Not only did the Kuna gain access to Western goods such as weapons, gunpowder and cloth, but also gained knowledge of Western ways from a variety of different cultures and languages. The Kuna chiefs particularly travelled to Jamaica and learnt English and would have observed the clothing styles of English men, women and children.

Between 1698 and 1700 the Scots established settlements on the Atlantic coast and at one time there were up to one thousand Scots living there; albeit only for a short period of up to two years, until Spanish forces caused evacuation. The Kuna and the Scottish settlers were united against the Spanish and trade relations included the Kuna acquiring beads, knives, scissors, mirrors, felt hats and weapons (Langebaek, 1991: 375). During this time Scottish ships brought large quantities of cloth, including canvas, linen, serge, muslin, glazed calico and tartan plaiding (Salvador, 1997: 154)⁴⁰.

A Kuna chief is reported in 1702 to speak French, Spanish and broken English and had lived in the French colony of Martinica (Langebaek, 1991: 379). A French all male colony was present near the Kuna settlements on the Atlantic coast by 1754 and they traded with the Kuna. It is estimated that by the 1750s up to two hundred French men had married Kuna women and had children with them (Langebaek, 1991: 376). Some of the early shirts that Kuna men wore may have been based on the French men's shirts, in the style of a chemise.

Kuna relations with the French deteriorated when the French began to trade with the Spanish and imported African slaves bought from the British, to assist on the French cacao (cocoa in English) plantations. Between 1757 and 1758 the Kuna murdered a number of the French settlers and by 1761 all the French had left, with the result that the Kuna took over their cocoa plantations, estimated to include over 100,000 cocoa trees. The Kuna thus acquired a valuable item for trading of Western goods, especially with the British, who also gave them items as gifts to promote friendly relations. By 1761 Langebaek (1991: 378) cites sources which found excellent Kuna-British relations, including gifts of English flags and clothing, as well as Kuna chiefs who had travelled to Jamaica and spoke fluent English, and Kuna children who had been taken to Jamaica and taught to read and write English.

The transcontinental railway, across the isthmus of Panama, between Panama City and Colon, was constructed from 1850, opening in 1855. Colon is close to one end of the San Blas Islands and frequented by Kuna men trading wares. During the late 1800s it would have been a busy centre with Americans and others departing there to travel to the gold rush in California. The French began building the Panama Canal in a route parallel to the railway in 1880 but abandoned it in 1889 due to insolvency. There was therefore a large French presence also in Colon at this time, though English is most likely to have been the predominant language. The impact on the Kuna people of the construction of both the railway and the canal would have been large in terms of increasing trade and a widening of their knowledge of the outside world prior to the turn of the 20th century, most likely first learnt by Kuna men and then passed on to Kuna women.

⁴⁰ Salvador cites Prebble (1968) *The Darien Disaster* London: Secker & Warburg, as the source.

4.1.2 Cloth usage in early Kuna dress

The exact nature of items of cloth worn by Kuna Indian women and men prior to the 1800s is unknown. Various accounts describe lengths of draped cloth, and later in this chapter I report on accounts by Wafer (1903 [1699]) and others. Prior to the development of the mola blouse trade cloth was obtained from the 1500s as gifts. Cloth was considered by the Spanish to be a form of tribute as well as an incentive to guarantee the goodwill of the indigenous populations of their colonies throughout South America and also in the Philippines⁴¹. This gifting of cloth is also discussed in Chapter 5 in the section on the origin of the word mola which relates to this phenomenon.

Early observers of the Kuna people report that both the men and the women wore body adornments, including body painting, gold nose rings and earrings, and necklaces of natural materials (Salvador, 1997a: 153). Some early reports mention cloth used for lower body wrapping on Kuna women (Wafer, 1903 [1699]: 137)⁴² and also some later reports such as Roberts (1827), Bell (1909) and Verrill (1918), each cited by Salvador (Salvador, 1997a: 156). Similarly, Choco Indian women living in the inland areas of Panama are reported to be wearing wrap skirts and no upper body cloth covering. Photos of Choco Indian women in Bell (1909: Plates 13 & 14) document this, as does Pittier (1912: 654). The Choco

⁴¹ Vollmer (2010), referring to the gifting of cloth by the Spanish during its occupation of the Philippines, mentions that this “custom also carried subtle messages of subjugation that encouraged the authentication of Western fashions among the inhabitants of the Philippines” (2010: 71). I discuss the indigenisation of trade cloth as a form of resistance by the Kuna Indians in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.

⁴² Many histories of Kuna dress rely on Wafer’s 1699 publication *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America*, a document written by him in the main many years after his experiences in the area now known as Panama and Colombia. He writes in his “note to the reader” after the title page, that “I cannot pretend to so great an exactness” of all the content in his book, and he continues by advising the reader that “I kept no Journal” and “some things I committed to writing, long before I returned to England”. The events in his book which relate to the Indians in the Darien area, occurred in 1681; Wafer did not return to England until 1690 and the book was not published until 1699. Wafer suggests that the reader consult his “fellow-travellers” to compare their impressions with his. I would assume that the two illustrations in this book, which many scholars have assumed to be Kuna Indians, would have been drawn based on his descriptions, perhaps up to 18 years after he had seen the Indians and may not be reliable or in accordance with the descriptions he gave to the illustrator and may be quite fanciful. Ribeiro (1998: 322) cautions that depictions of dress by artists, based on an attempt to depict the exotic, which are imagined from the description in words, may be fanciful and reflect the fashion of the time in which the illustrator is living. Certainly it is not clear from the facial depictions and the lack of any indication of the size that Wafer is describing Kuna Indians. Joyce, in the Introduction to the 1933 edition of Wafer’s *A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America* (1933 [1699]: lxii), notes that the 1699 edition was not a direct transcription of Wafer’s original; that “One perceives the shadow of a hand equipped with a sure and discreet pencil moving across the manuscript of the surgeon-buccaneer, stabilizing [sic] spelling, inserting a telling phrase, suppressing untimely facetiousness, always making the most of a subject likely to appeal to readers yet deleting extravagances: the hand, in fact, of a competent sub-editor”. Joyce also warns (1933: lxii-lxiii) that most other publications about Darien published around this time relied heavily on Wafer’s book or that of his fellow buccaneer, Basil Ringrose who was present for part of Wafer’s adventures and had his account of his journey also published. The result being that these two firsthand accounts were used, without reference to the sources and perpetuated any inaccuracies in reportage. Perrin also appears to have some reservations about the accuracy of Wafer’s accounts when he comments “if Lionel Wafer is to be believed” (1999: 74).

Indian women are shown wearing wrap skirts made of elaborately printed Western style fabric. Some Choco women are wearing strings of beads around their necks as the only upper body adornment.

Figure 12. Choco women wearing wrap skirts, 1912.



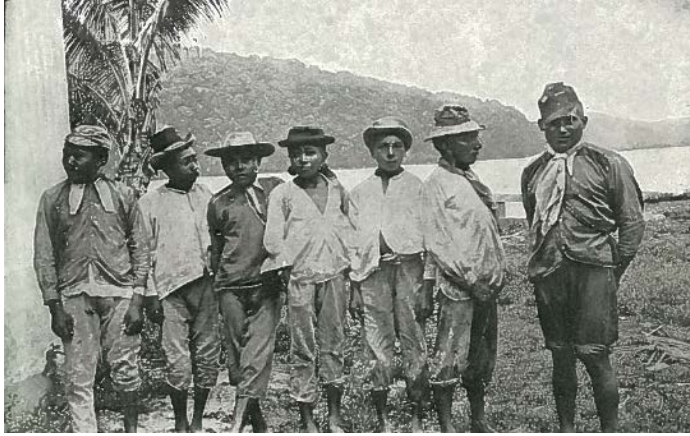
Original caption: “Choco Indian women of the Sambu Valley in their simple, every-day [sic] dresses: Panama” (Pittier, 1921: 654). Photographer: H. Pittier.

As noted above, cloth has been available to the Kuna for many centuries, however the earliest mola blouse was not recorded until the late 1800s (Puls, 1978: 123). Certainly prior to this time Kuna men have been known to wear Western style shirts and trousers. Stout (1947: 66) cites three reports of Kuna men wearing Western clothing: an account during the time of the Scotch colony (1698 - 1700) which reports that the Kuna, formerly naked were sometimes now wearing clothes similar to the Scottish men; and two accounts from visitors during the later 1860s which report that trousers and shirts were worn by many Kuna men. One of the reports notes that trousers and shirts were “an important item of barter” and another report that whilst most men were wearing trousers, only some wore shirts (Stout, 1947: 66).⁴³

The earliest photos of Kuna Indian men wearing shirts and trousers found were in Prince (1912), taken in 1911. The style of men’s clothes shown in the photographs below was probably typical for the decades prior to and immediately after the turn of the century. The Kuna men are wearing shirts which are buttoned or tied at the neck in these photographs and also in Verner (1920: 25 Fig.2).

⁴³ Stout (1947: 66) describes the style of shirt the Kuna sewed as copied from the styles worn by American men in the late 1880s, with short sleeves, rows of tucks and a short split at the centre front. Felt hats were also popular, originating from Kuna men who had worked as sailors on European boats.

Figure 13. The dress of Kuna men, early 20th century.



Original caption: "The Cuna-Cuna or San Blas Indians are of small stature: Panama" (Pittier, 1912: 647).
Photographer: E. D. Christopherson.



Source: Prince, 1912, Plate 8 after page 112. Photograph attributed to "Mr I N De Long of Cristobal in the American Zone", taken on San Blas island of San Jose de Nargana, at the end of 1911. Original caption: "San Blas group. The men dress in European style, but the women retain the native costume."

4.1.3 Cloth acquired as gift or incentive

The Kuna people have had contact with Europeans for over 500 years, characterised by Sherzer (1994) as both "encounters" and "confrontations". The Kuna have at all times resisted being subsumed by an outside culture, whilst at the same time appropriating ideas and materials with which to enhance their culture. The acquisition of cloth will be shown in this section and the next section to have been a significant item of gifting, exchange and trade.

As mentioned above, there is little evidence of Kuna weaving cloth for garments, so early observations of Kuna wearing garments wrapped around their torsos would necessitate gifting, trading or purchasing of ready-made fabric. In his detailed paper Langebaek (1991), using source material from the Spanish colonial archives in Spain, from both the Archivo General de Indias and the Servicio Historico Militar, together with contemporaneous primary sources, such as Dampier's and Wafer's accounts of their

voyages in the late 1600s, and Walberger's account from 1748, together with many secondary sources, provides ample evidence of the availability of reliable supplies of cloth for the Kunas from the 18th century, with trading of beads, needles and bells known to have occurred as early as 1635.

During the time of the Spanish colonisation of the region the Kuna did not trade directly with them (Langebaek, 1991: 372) but rather with other European nations with a presence in the region. The Kuna did however receive gifts of cloth from the Spanish in return for ceasing aggressive actions against them (Gallup-Diaz, 2004). Diaz-Gallup focused on the period 1630-1750 and describes the interaction of the Kuna with European visitors, including colonists, pirates and traders, from Spain, Scotland, England and France. The Spanish colonial archives recorded gifts of textiles to the Kuna from 1676 and by the mid-18th century were part of the ongoing relationship between the Kuna and representatives of the Spanish rulers (Gallup-Diaz, 2004: 13)⁴⁴. The gift of cloth was appealing to the Kuna because they did not make cloth of the quality or quantity which the Spanish were offering to them in exchange for food and shelter.

Initially only the Spanish were offering gifts of cloth; following the arrival of English pirates such as Dampier and Wafer in the 1680s, other sources were available by gifting and trading. During the time of the Spanish colonisation of the region the Kuna did not trade directly with them (Langebaek, 1991: 372) but rather with the other European nations with a presence in the region. The reasons the Kuna were not on friendly terms with the Spanish were attempts by them to enslave them as enforced labour in the gold mines; and attempts to convert the Kuna into a Christian way of life (from 1648) including settlement in Spanish-style villages (Langebaek, 1991: 373-4).⁴⁵

In a book titled *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America*⁴⁶ (Orlove ed. 1997), Langer writes about the importation of cloth between 1839 and 1930 into Bolivia. He notes that:

"It is difficult to find information on the consumption of foreign-made textiles among indigenous groups in the historical past. Descriptions of such consumption by travelers [sic] and anthropologists, potentially prime sources for such a study, are hard to come by" (Langer, 1997: 94).

His research into the acquisition of foreign cloth by an indigenous group of Bolivia, the Chiriguanos, may be applicable to other South American ethnic groups. Similar to the Kuna, this group also resisted

⁴⁴ In Chapter 5 I describe the origin of the word mola, which derives from this gift exchange process.

⁴⁵ The Kuna anti-Spanish historical record includes the following examples: in 1726 and 1751 Kuna massacred a Spanish garrison; in 1754 Kuna attacked Spanish fortresses; in 1758 Kuna set fire to an inland Spanish village; and in 1761 Kuna ambushed Spanish fishermen.

⁴⁶ Individual chapters provide examples from Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Mexico and Costa Rica, with particular reference to indigenous groups. I believe that the sentiment expressed in the title would have been applicable also to the Kuna Indians in Panama at the same time (1830 - 1930). Until 1903 Panama was part of Colombia.

the Spanish and were able to maintain their independence, at least until the 1860s. The Chiriguanos were gifted cloth by settlers in their area as inducements to allow them to graze their cattle without damages (Langer, 1997: 95). The source of the cloth was foreign, though there had been a Bolivian cloth industry earlier. Fabric was imported from Britain, France, Belgium and Germany from the mid-1800s. It is posited that similar fabric sources would have been available to the Kuna but it was not possible to substantiate this⁴⁷.

4.1.4 Cloth obtained by trade

A number of scholars have posited that a major reason for the Kuna moving from the inland areas of the Darien province to the San Blas islands was to establish coconut plantations in order to have a sought after good able to be exchanged for Western products including cloth (Stout, 1947: 54; Howe, 1986: 14-15; Tice, 1995: 36). Other reasons for moving to the San Blas islands, from the mid-1800s, related to the desire to be closer to the trading avenues, as well as removal away from the malaria areas of the inland (Stout, 1942: 89; 1947: 54). Howe (1986: 10) maintains that “the motives for this move . . . seem to have been the pull of trade and the push of insects, snakes and disease”. In summary, Stout writes that this was gradual move from about 1859 from the inland to the San Blas islands area and that:

“They [the Kuna] had, of course, been familiar with the islands for centuries past; now the relatively quiet external political conditions of the period, the lure of the traders and the development of the coconut and tortoise-shell trade, and the relatively greater salubrity of the islands, as compared to the insect and disease-ridden mainland, became factors in their change of habitat” (Stout, 1947: 54).

By locating closer to the Atlantic Ocean the Kuna were able to trade with other European countries via ships coming from Scotland, France and England. The Kuna traded tortoise shell, vegetable ivory, cocoa, ipecac, and coconuts, the latter being the most significant source for trading goods and “by the 1870’s [sic] the increasing growth of trade and the increasing desire of the part of the Indians to obtain more and more of the foreign articles offered by the traders led to the planting of coconuts, i.e., crop culture not for subsistence but for market” (Stout, 1947: 73).

Stout cites an 1853 observer reporting that by the 1850s the Kuna were able to obtain by trade: cloth, shirts, trousers, mirrors, beads, knives, machetes, hatchets and gun powder (Stout 1947: 70). The sewing of Kuna clothes relies entirely on Western goods including trade cloth, needles, scissors and thread. As discussed above, Kuna men had much greater direct contact with outsiders and sometimes

⁴⁷ Research at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, examining hundreds of fabric swatches in their archives, did not point to the origin of the cloth found in mola blouses which were examined in a number of museum and private collections.

were employed as sailors on foreign boats. Kuna men learnt to sew their own shirts and pants and Tice (1995: 59) reports that in 1985 she found some men who still sewed their own clothes, though most were purchased.

Another source of trade for the San Blas Kunas was with the Kuna still living in the mountainous areas of the Darien. This way they were able to obtain ivory nuts, cocoa and rubber from the inland areas.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Stout was told by his Kuna informants (1947: 67) that trading boats visiting the islands exchanged Kuna coconuts for bright coloured cloth used on mola blouses and later with patterned fabric, which he refers to as “figured blue trade cloth” which was used for the women’s wrap skirts. Later a large variety of patterned fabric became available for wrap skirts. Note that the Kuna make no alteration to the rectangular pieces of cloth used as headscarves and wrap skirts. The loom width fabrics are cut to the required length but no alteration is made to the width. Examples in museum collections were found to be rarely hemmed on the cut (raw) edges.⁴⁸

An observer in 1890 describes some Kuna women as being adorned with “heavy gold rings through their noses . . . bracelets and anklets which oppress and disfigure the arms and legs. They wear only a short skirt reaching to the calf.” (Valdes, 1890 quoted by Bell, 1909: 626-627). There is no mention of mola blouses being worn. Similarly De Puydt, who explored a possible canal route on trips in 1861 and 1865 reports that he found Kuna Indians living in the inland region area, which is now around the border between Panama and Colombia, wearing “short-sleeved chemises, descending to the knees, and such ornaments as necklaces composed of the teeth of animals (tigers or caimans), or of coloured seeds. At Tanela I saw many with broad gold or silver rings through the nasal partition, and hanging down as far as the chin” (De Puydt, 1868: 97).

Cloth was also obtained by Kuna men travelling to Colon who brought it back to the islands. Stout mentions that he was told (during fieldwork in 1940-1941) that Kuna men “in very recent years” (1947: 67) i.e. the 1930s, returned to the Carti group of San Blas islands with small fabric scraps, some as small as four inches square, purchased from dressmakers in Colon. These pieces of fabric were then sold to Kuna women and incorporated into mola panels. During the 1930s a number of American companies sold small pieces of fabric as a set of “quilt patches” (Brackman, 1989: 32)⁴⁹ and it is possible that these were also sold in the Canal Zone, where it is known that many Kuna men were working at the time for the US Army⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 6. It is possible that the museum artefacts had been purchased as examples of new fabric, not as examples of worn skirts. A picha examined in the Berlin Museum fur Ethnologisches was hand hemmed on three sides. See Footnote 26 in this chapter.

⁴⁹ Brackman (1989: 32) includes an illustration of a packet of quilt patches which had been purchased from a Sears catalogue for 25 cents, which were designed for quilters needing small pieces of a variety of fabric during the scrap quilt craze.

⁵⁰ Kuna men worked in kitchens on US military bases in the Canal Zone from the 1930s (Howe 1986: 15).

4.1.5 Influences on Kuna dress

The move to the San Blas islands, which began in the mid-1800s, required adjustments to the different climate. On the islands there were cold winds and frequent rain, which created cool periods during the day (Hartmann)⁵¹. Kuna women, previously carrying out daily activities with very little coverage of their bodies, perhaps only a wrap skirt on the lower half, began to clothe the upper body (Hartmann, U., 1985: 99).

The influence of missionaries may also have had an impact, though the first missionary to live on a Kuna island in the San Blas was not until 1907 (see Chapter 2). By 1913 a Protestant missionary, Anna Coope, is reported to have discouraged the wearing of all Kuna women's traditional dress, including molas (Perrin, 1999: 25). Well travelled Kuna sailors and Kuna boys who had been educated in foreign lands may also have returned with ideas of foreign dress and modesty for the women.

Bell (1909) describes appliquéd mola blouses and a mola blouse which she collected in 1906 in the San Blas is in the NMNH⁵².

4.1.6 Kuna colour preferences

It is hypothesised, based on similar circumstances in Bolivia from 1830 to 1930, that the attraction of trade cloth was the availability of the bright colours, the patterns and the textures; and especially the kudos gained from wearing clothes made from cloth obtained from white people who were deemed to be superior (Langer, 1997: 97). It is known from studies of Kuna ethno-aesthetics (Salvador, 1976a, 1978) that bright colours are liked by the Kuna people for their mola blouses.

Kuna body painting was reported to be in very bright colours by Wafer (1903 [1699]: 136), mainly red, yellow and blue. He himself was painted by Kuna women so his recollection is likely to be correct⁵³. Keeler refers to specific tree species which were most likely the source of these colours, noting that one of the colours, develops from a dull blue to become black when exposed longer to the air (Keeler, 1969: 21). Navy blue was a popular colour in molas in the early years of the 20th century, whilst later black became much more prevalent and navy became rare as a layer in mola panels⁵⁴. The other popular

⁵¹ Ursula Hartman, personal communication, 27 May 2011. Dr & Mrs Hartmann made many visits to South America, including Panama, from the late 1960s till 1999. They have both published about the Kuna Indian culture based on ongoing relationships with Kuna informants.

⁵² This blouse is discussed below in the section on estimating fabric yardage. It is the earliest provenanced blouse found in a museum collection [N01].

⁵³ Wafer was also seen by Dampier on his return from his sojourn with the Kuna with body paint and a nose ring, confirming his account in the publication of his adventures.

⁵⁴ This is a finding based on my museum "reference collection" and is discussed in Chapter 6 when I examine changes to colour preferences over time.

colours in the early molas were red, orange and yellow. Cheap bright colourfast cotton fabric became available in the San Blas islands around 1900 (Salvador, 1978: 14). It is probable that traders visiting the San Blas islands specifically stocked fabric in the colours known to be favoured by the Kuna women.⁵⁵

4.1.7 Variety of cloth used in early mola blouses

Mola blouses are comprised of two parts: the top part with the yoke and sleeves, a single layer of fabric; and the pair of mola panels which are made from two or more layers of fabric. Additional fabric pieces may be added to bind a drawstring neck, as decorative bands above and below the panels, and as trimmings to yoke and sleeves.

- Morsala (yoke) fabric

A wide variety of cloth was used for early mola yokes, which includes the sleeves (and sometimes separate sleeve gussets), and this is termed a *morsala* in the Kuna language, referring to the upper part of a mola blouse, above the mola panels (Holmer, 1952: 79)⁵⁶.

The earliest mola blouse found in a museum collection was collected in 1906⁵⁷. In addition to this 1906 blouse, the “reference collection” established for this dissertation, outlined in Chapter 6, includes 20 blouses collected prior to 1921⁵⁸. There was a variety of yoke fabrics found in these early mola blouses:

- One of the early blouses has a navy velvet yoke [N02 – 1917]; one has a flannelette large check yoke [N03 – 1921]; one has a seersucker yoke with a small floral pattern [F08 – 1917]; one has woven cotton checks [F02 – 1917].
- Plain cotton fabric was used for the yokes of four early blouses, in a variety of colours [F05 – 1917 cream canvas, F12 – 1917 pink, A02 – 1918 navy, N05 – 1921 cream]. Four blouses have cotton calico yokes (i.e. plain base with small printed figures⁵⁹), all collected in 1917 [F01, F03, F07, F13].

⁵⁵ Salvador found in her study of Kuna ethnoaesthetics in 1974 that the colours favoured continued to be red – the predominant colour, and orange, yellow and black (Salvador, 1978: 39). Fieldwork in 2010 confirmed that textile wholesalers and retailers in Panama City stocked a wide variety of mostly Japanese fabric, in colours known to be popular with Kuna women (personal communication – various shopkeepers).

⁵⁶ Definition of *morsala* from Holmer’s *Ethno-linguistic Cuna Dictionary* (1952). Confirmed also during my fieldwork in 2010; can also be spelt *morsana*.

⁵⁷ In the collection of the National Museum of Natural History (catalogue no. E263359-0) collected by Eleanor Yorke Bell (Bell, 1909), who had been commissioned by the Smithsonian to write a research report about the Kuna Indians whilst she lived in Colon. It is a very good blouse and perhaps her knowledge and appreciation of hand-sewn workmanship may have influenced her selection of this mola blouse.

⁵⁸ These 21 early blouses, 19 from the San Blas area, date from 1906 [one blouse]; 1917 [15 blouses – 4 most likely children’s – F02, F11, F12, F13]; 1918 – 2 blouses from inland area near the Colombian border; 1921 – 2 blouses. All showed evidence of wear. These early examples were drawn from 5 collections in 3 museums.

⁵⁹ American calicoes are described as generally having a plain coloured base with one or more colour printed with small geometric figures or small flowers in a regular pattern.

- Nine blouses have yokes with self-woven cotton fabric in a variety of plain colours, woven using a variety of designs, mostly small in scale, some of which included shiny threads [N01 – 1906, A01 – 1918, F04, F06, F09, F10, F11, F14 – all 1917, N04 – 1921].

All fabric appeared to be made of cotton fibre. Some of this material may be re-purposed (re-cycled) fabric, such as second-hand clothing given to the Kuna people. For example, the fabric in two early mola yokes resembles tablecloth fabric [A01 & F08]; one is sewn from navy velvet perhaps from an American dress; one is sewn from fabric which resembles canvas, possibly from a sail; some of the calico, small figured fabric may also have been sourced from items of Western clothing.

- Mola panel layer fabric

The colours of the layers in the mola panels of the 21 early mola blouses in the “reference collection”, in order of frequency were red [19], orange [17], navy [14], white [3], black [2] and cream [1]. The patterned fabric included calico patterns [12] and other patterns [4].⁶⁰ All the panel fabrics would originally have been bright, highly saturated colours. The patterned layers were generally placed as base layers. The combined effect of the interposed fabric layers, exposed by the sewing techniques, is seen in the finished mola panels, in which the relationship created between coloured layers enhances contrast and thus visibility.

These colour choices also reflect the colours found in early body painting and later confirmed in Salvador’s study of Kuna ethnoaesthetics (Salvador, 1976a, 1978), as mentioned above. It is possible that some of the calico fabric was re-purposed, as discussed in the yoke fabric section, and this may be part of the reason it is frequently used as a base layer, since it may have been damaged or stained in parts. Flour sacks and feedsacks containing animal feed, tobacco, sugar and salt were also potential sources of fabric for the Kuna, perhaps brought back by Kuna men working in the Canal Zone or from produce purchased by the Kuna to feed domestic pigs or chickens. At this time, early in the 20th century, feedsacks were most likely to be made of a type of unbleached calico.⁶¹ From the end of the 19th century it appears most likely that fabric was obtained from Colombian traders who visited the San Blas islands on a regular basis, sometime monthly and also from Kuna men who travelled away from the San Blas to work.

4.1.8 Estimating fabric yardage

Taking into account that each blouse is comprised of a pair of panels, the usage of fabric was considerable and increased in proportion to the number of layers used. For these early examples, on

⁶⁰ Where panel colours had faded original colours were determined by examining seam allowances.

⁶¹ Also at a later time some of the base layer fabric may have originated as patterned feedsack fabric. In the US feedsacks were printed in small gingham patterns of checks, stripes and plaids from 1925 and from the 1930s were printed in pastels and calicoes also. A sack of flour was reported to yield “a yard of 32-inch gingham” (Nixon, 2010: 29). One pair of mola panels collected in the 1960s [private collection] has a cream coloured flour sack as the base layer, with lettering in Spanish showing the name of a Panamanian flour company.

three blouses, the mola panels were sewn with 2 layers (all assumed to be young girl's molas); on 7 blouses the mola panels were sewn with 3 layers, on 6 blouses the mola panels were sewn with 4 layers, on 3 blouses the mola panels were sewn with 5 layers and on 2 blouses the mola panels were sewn with 6 layers.

Young girl's blouses may have been sewn with scrap fabric. One small blouse from 1917 [F13] made with careful workmanship has many joins to the panel layers.

These early blouses were much wider than later mola blouses and this is discussed in Chapter 6. Most early panels were wider than the available fabric loom widths and were found to be joined at widths ranging from 54 - 63 cm [21½" - 24¾"], measured selvedge to selvedge. The exceptions were girl's blouses; one was sewn using loom width fabric [F02] and others were much smaller [F11, F12].

In order to gain an idea of the amount of fabric which would have been used to sew a mola blouse, calculations for two of the early mola blouses were made, for a blouse with 4 layer appliqué panels – Example 1, and a blouse with 6 layer appliqué panels – Example 2. The fabric cutting layouts were also determined by examination of the location of selvedges and the grain of the fabric to gain an understanding of the economic use of fabric. Where narrow seams were noted this indicates that the maximum fabric width was used. These two examples confirm that the blouses required access to a large amount of fabric and that there was a variety of fabric used in each blouse.

Imperial measurements are used for these calculations since the fabric was manufactured and sold in these units. One yard measures 36", which is approximately 91.5 cm. A width of 60 cm measures approximately 23 5/8".

Example 1

Figure 14. Mola blouse, 1906.



Example 1. N01. Source: NMNH online catalogue. Larger photographs of both sides of this blouse are in Chapter 6. Panel width 68.5 cm [27"].

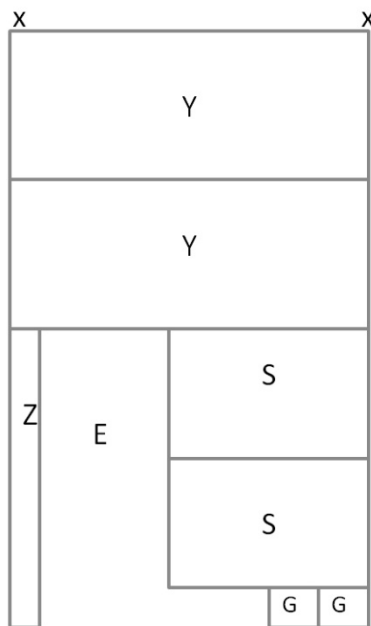
- Morsala (yoke) yardage

Calculations of yardage used for the yoke of this blouse [N01] took into consideration that the yoke fabric had been joined about 1" from the side seam, on both sides of the blouse, revealing that the available loom width fabric was too narrow.

The self-woven stripes on the yoke reveal the way the fabric was cut from the piece, as well as the sleeves and gussets.

Figure 15 shows this layout. The yoke required 1 ¼ yards of 27" fabric.

Figure 15. Cutting layout of fabric for morsala for mola blouse, 1906.



X = fabric selvedge (vertical)

Y = yoke – would be cut as one piece & neck opening created at centre

Z = strip to add to yoke

S = sleeve

G = sleeve gusset

E = excess fabric

Example 1. Blouse N01. Based on vertical woven striped fabric (i.e. lengthwise in direction of warp). Total width 29" fabric, comprising 27" fabric plus strip of 2" fabric, for a finished width of 27"; total length of fabric required is 43" [approx. 1 ¼ yards].

Perhaps the fabric had been re-used from a dress. It was not possible to determine the existence of selvages which would indicate that the fabric had been obtained as yardage.

- Mola panel yardage

For this blouse, bright red, navy and orange fabric layers are used for the appliqué panels over a base layer of white calico with floral spots, a total of 4 layers. The size of the blouse was not determined by the loom width of the fabric layers in the mola panels, since there were joins in the layers. Selvedge to selvedge measurement of the layers was approx. 60cm [23 5/8"].⁶²

I have calculated the yardage used to sew this blouse, the earliest mola in the "reference collection", and found that 2 yards of each of navy, red, orange and a figured calico would be needed for the pair of panels, totally 8 yards. There would be enough fabric left over to sew two pairs of mola panels, each of 2 layers, of the size of the 1917 young girl's molas [for example F11, F12, F13], with some excess fabric.

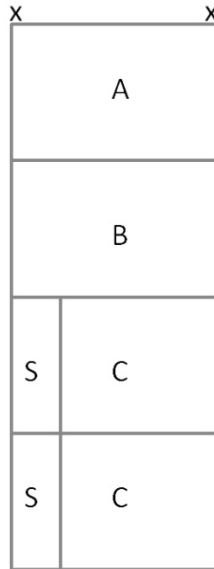
The following assumptions were made: a fabric width of 27" based on the observation of joins on the panels of the blouse at 23 1/2" and with hem allowances of 1/2" on four seams.

The calculations here, based on a detailed examination of a mola blouse collected in 1906, demonstrate that the determinants of its size do not relate to the loom width of fabric. The width of fabric used for the yoke and panels was joined and thus exceeded loom widths. The reason for the large size of the mola blouse is not known; Kuna Indians are small in stature with narrow shoulder width. Perhaps some fabric was available in wider widths at this time, so this blouse was made to match the size of larger loom widths.

Figure 16 shows the fabric requirement for each layer.

⁶² Selvedge to selvedge measurements were recorded during museum based examination of molas to provide information on loom widths. For mola panels, measurements were frequently close to but not exactly 22", 23", 24", 25", 26".

Figure 16. Fabric requirement for each layer of panels for mola blouse, 1906.



X = fabric selvedge (vertical)

A = mola panel for front of blouse

B = mola panel for back of blouse

S = strip to sew to A & B

C = child's panels [there will be excess length]

Example 1. Blouse N01. A & B are 23 ½" x 18". Total of 2 yards of 23 ½" fabric per layer.

Example 2

Figure 17. Mola blouse, 1917.

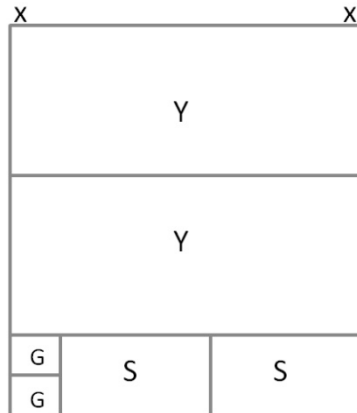


Example 2. F14. Source: Field Museum catalogue. Panel width 65 cm [25 ½ "].

- Morsala (yoke) yardage

The yoke appears to use a piece of 27" fabric. The finished width is approx. 25 ¾". The layout is shown in Figure 18. A length of 22" fabric would be needed – approximately ¾ yard of fabric.

Figure 18. Cutting layout of fabric for morsala for mola blouse, 1917.



X = possible fabric selvage (vertical)

Y = yoke – would be cut as one piece & neck opening created at centre

S = sleeve

G = sleeve gusset

Example 2. Blouse F14. Cutting layout of fabric for morsala. Fabric width could be 22" or 27".

- Mola panel yardage

There are 6 layers in the panels of this blouse: plain red, orange and navy; and 3 patterned layers, each with two kinds of patterns, with the same colour combination since the fabric was joined for each layer.

Some layers may be loom width since the panel could be sewn from a 27" loom fabric, and narrow seams were found. Joins were found in some plain layers and some patterned layers. Joins were found at approx. 23" widths, so an additional 4" strip would be needed, for the finished panel width of 25 ½".

Each pair of panels would use a 40" length of fabric, and there are 6 layers so the minimum yardage would be 6.7 yards. Joins were found in 2 layers, so it is possible that each layer would require an additional 4" strip, 40" long. The fabric cutting layout would be similar to Example 1, Figure 16.⁶³

⁶³ Additional fabric calculations for blouses collected 1917 – 2003 are discussed in Chapter 6 and Appendix G.

4.1.9 Section summary

In this section I have discussed the acquisition of trade cloth by Kuna Indians by gift and by trade. I have shown that the cloth has been selected based on colour preferences previously associated with body painting and the colours used in mola panels are highly saturated and thus highly visible. I have demonstrated the large quantity of cloth which was needed to construct the early mola blouses, by calculating the yardage of fabrics needed for two mola blouses collected in the early 20th century. It is apparent that the mola blouse did not simply function as a body covering; the fabric was carefully selected and a significant investment was made both in the cost of fabric and in the time needed to sew the blouse.

4.2 Transformation: structural alteration of cloth to create molas

“Transformation: The Original Form is Modified for Cultural Distinctiveness”
(Arthur 2011: 107).

In this section I outline the way the trade cloth in mola blouses has been structurally altered by the Kuna Indian women to create the blouses which are now an integral part of their dress. It has been suggested that the painting of designs on a small underskirt, called a *picha makkalet*, may be an intermediate step between the Kuna body painting designs and the development of the mola appliqué panels (Keeler, 1969: 83; Salvador, 1997a: 164-165). Designs similar to body painting and basket weaving designs were painted onto hand-woven cloth of the *picha*, in either black or indigo blue. Keeler reports that in the 1950s he was able to observe an old Kuna woman paint geometric designs on a piece of cloth with indigo obtained from traders (1969: 83). Examples were collected by Verrill in 1918 and 1924, Nordenskiöld in 1927, and Stout in 1940-1941.⁶⁴

4.2.1 An explanation for the development of appliqué techniques

To inform my understanding of the level of skill and the amount of time needed to sew mola panels I had lessons. I gained basic skills and learnt about the difficulty of reverse appliqué and surface appliqué, the complexity of the layering, the need for careful planning of the placement of different fabric colours, and the method of sewing without the use of pins, ruler or tape measure. I expand on this in Chapter 6. This knowledge informs the comments in this section.

⁶⁴ I examined a *picha* (VA 62838) in the Berlin Museum für Ethnologisches which has a small collection of Kuna artefacts collected in 1927 by Nordenskiöld and obtained by exchange. The fabric was thick, canvas-like with a blue pattern on the lower part; it measured 139 cm x 50.5 cm and was hand hemmed on three sides. It is assumed that the selvedge side was wrapped around the waist. The *pichas* collected by Verrill and Stout are in the NMAI.

The origin of the development of the appliqué techniques used to sew mola panels is not known. Appliqué techniques are also used by a number of American Indian tribes which originally were located around the Great Lakes in North America. In Chapter 3 I discussed the cultural authentication of ribbonwork.⁶⁵ In this section I compare the development of these two similar indigenous techniques for manipulating fabric to create intricate designs. Whilst I am not suggesting a direct relationship between the development of molas and ribbonwork, I am suggesting that the development of both techniques is a logical progression from existing expressions of material culture. I also suggest that the techniques may have begun by the placement of one layer on top of another with shaping to reveal the base layer, which then progressed to more intricate designs. I am positing that whilst mola appliqué and ribbonwork developed independently, neither technique required direct instruction from an outsider and that the initial techniques are easily achieved and there is a progression to more complicated techniques.

Ribbonwork originally consisted of lengths of silk ribbon layered upon each other and structurally transformed by firstly reverse appliqué and at a later time also surface appliqué. These ribbon strips are then sewn onto garments, particularly women's skirts and shawls (which are rectangular and interchangeable i.e. dual purpose). The techniques have been described by Neill (2000: 147) who notes that "ribbonwork is a syncretic tradition – a composite of European materials and Indian style", which is the case also with Kuna molas. There are parallels with the Kuna designs also – ribbonwork is described as "often bilaterally symmetrical, and some intricate panels incorporate more than twenty layers of ribbon" (Neill, 2000: 147).

Another similarity with molas relates to the identification of the appliqué technique with the various American Indian tribes: "The persistence of ribbonwork-adorned clothing for more than two hundred years suggests that it is both an important tradition and a significant marker of ethnic identity" (Neill, 2000: 147)⁶⁶. Thus ribbonwork techniques were developed many years prior to mola techniques and use both appliqué and reverse appliqué; for both Kuna and the different American Indian tribes across which ribbonwork techniques were diffused by geographic proximity, the adopted technique as applied to clothing is unique. The study of American Indian ribbonwork reflects similar objectives found in Kuna cultural research including research based on museum collections (Neill, 2000) such as in this (my) dissertation; acculturation and cultural transfer (Pannabecker, 1988); qualitative research to gain an understanding of the cultural meanings to the makers, including ethnoaesthetics (Ackerman, 2008) and a comparison of contemporary artefacts with museum artefacts, including the development of descriptions of the techniques used (Abbass, 1979).

Neither ribbonwork nor the Kuna appliqué technique has been used by other ethnic groups in the same manner. There does not appear to have been any transfer of the technique between the American Indians from the Great Lakes area and the Kuna people, though it would have been possible for Kuna

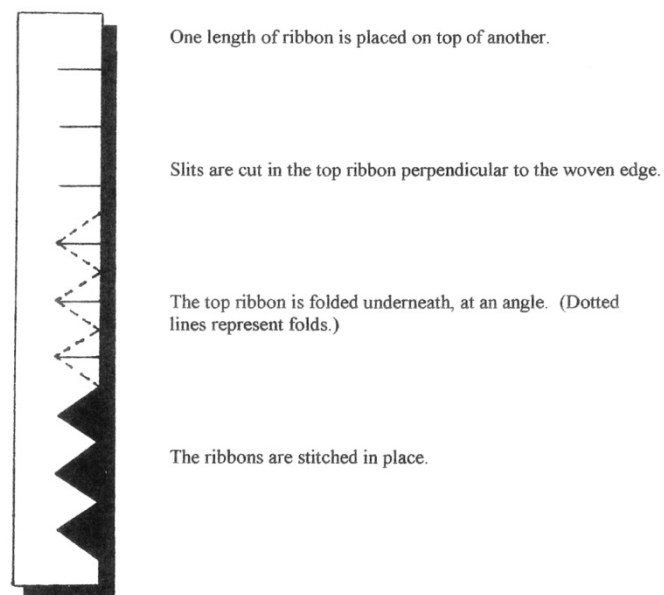
⁶⁵ At least 10 different tribes sew ribbonwork (Neill, 2000: 148).

⁶⁶ See also Chapter 9.

sailors to have had contact with American Indians as part of their sea journeys, possibly to North America.

Different American Indian tribes have created different patterns of ribbonwork and a number of studies have reported on the different styles, motifs, colours and construction techniques. One of the simpler ribbonwork techniques, which Neill suggests was invented by American Indian women as a way of manipulating trade cloth (2000: 149) is the same technique called by Kuna women “dientes” (meaning teeth or perhaps saw-tooth) in mola panels, suggesting the universality of this simple yet visually effective technique. The saw-tooth technique is not difficult to sew and Figure 19 explains the steps in the technique. Figure 20 shows some examples of American Indian ribbonwork.

Figure 19. Saw-tooth design method for ribbonwork and mola *dientes*.



Source: Neill 2000: 151. Original caption: “Construction of a simple ‘developmental’ strip.”

It is likely that ribbonwork developed from other traditional designs of material culture artefacts of the American Indians such as twined bags and quillwork, in a similar manner to some of the early mola designs which resemble Kuna basketry designs and possibly body painting designs.

Different typologies have been developed to classify types of ribbonwork designs by Abbass (1979: 17-37). There has been no evidence supplied that the American Indians have specific names for different techniques; though there are names for ribbon and ribbonwork in the Meskwaki language (Ackerman, 2008: 148). The Kuna have specific names for techniques and types of molas, and this is discussed in Chapter 5.

To summarise: a number of scholars have written about the development of ribbonwork (Abbass, 1979; Pannabecker, 1988; Neill, 2000; Ackerman, 2008), which uses both surface and reverse appliqué work similar to the Kuna women, but using lengths of ribbon and later strips of fabric, which are then applied to items of dress. As discussed in Chapter 3, Pannabecker (1988: 55-56) and Ackerman (2008: 147-152) confirmed that the concept of cultural authentication could be applied to the ribbonwork of the Great Lakes Indian tribes. The development of ribbonwork outlined by Neill (2000) can be directly paralleled with the development of Kuna molas, albeit over a 200 year period, whereas the mola developed around 100 years ago. In addition to the characteristics reported by Neill, Ackerman (2008: 19) suggests two further characteristics which parallel with Kuna history: the suppression of the American Indian tribes by colonisers; and the creation of a self-governing independent territory. All of these characteristics contributed to a strong sense of ethnic identity for both the American Indian tribes and the Panamanian Kuna Indians. Table 6 below summarises this information.

Table 6. Comparison of the development of Great Lakes American Indian ribbonwork and Kuna Indian molas.

| | ribbonwork | molas |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1 | developed for over 200 years | developed for around 100 years |
| 2 | reverse appliqué on earliest ribbonwork; surface appliqué appeared at beginning of 20 th century, 100 years later | based on “reference collection” reverse appliqué predominated until early 1930s when half the molas had extensive surface appliqué ^B |
| 3 | women invented new techniques for utilising trade cloth | same |
| 4 | many layers of ribbon (up to 20) | many layers of fabric (up to 7) |
| 5 | cross-stimulation from other plastic arts – patterns from quillwork and twine bags | patterns from basketry and possibly body painting |
| 6 | sewing machine used – from 1917 earliest evidence of machining ^A | earliest example of machining in “reference collection” 1917 [F4] – joins in mola panels are machined & neck of blouse |
| 7 | ribbonwork originated with narrow silk ribbons, possibly ½ inch wide and over time fabric widths as wide as 12 inches were reported. This development could be related to the cost of ribbon or the desire to create more complex designs when the surface appliqué technique was introduced | early molas closely linked to loom width fabric; later mola panels show evidence of the panel widths being cut and torn to size |
| 8 | not static – designs change | some old mola designs repeated; many new designs based on Western images and goods |
| 9 | skills taught by older women to young girls | same |
| 10 | meanings of designs – colour – American Indian cosmology related to myth of the Sky Sisters and cardinal directions; colours used have significance but not explicitly stated ^C | colours of body painting had meaning and were replicated in early molas; colours used may have significance |

| | ribbonwork | molos |
|----|---|--|
| 11 | meanings of motifs – different tribes attribute different meanings to particular patterns; some purely decorative | different Kuna people, contemporary and historically have given different meanings to similar designs; some purely decorative; 30-50 designs considered to be ancestral [<i>sergan</i> in Kuna language] which originally had meanings primarily related to plants and animals ^D |
| 12 | significant time available to sew | same |
| 13 | use of synthetic fabric increases design options | same |
| 14 | dress incorporating appliqué displays wealth of wearer | same ^E |
| 15 | incorporation of trade cloth – foreign goods – into clothing highly valued ^F | same |
| 16 | interpretation may differ according to viewer – different geographic locations, different family | same |
| 17 | marker of ethnic identity | same |
| 18 | metaphor for traditional life ^G | same |
| 19 | colonising power attempts to destroy culture – by genocide ^H | by ethnocide – by forced removal of molos ^I |
| 20 | establishment of own territory ^J | same ^K |

Sources: Neill (2000); Ackerman (2008); Perrin (1997)

- A Neill (2000: 154).
- B For a discussion on the incidence of reverse appliqué and surface appliqué over time see Chapter 6. It can sometimes be difficult to actually distinguish between both forms of appliqué depending on the colours used and the number of layers used in a mola panel. Note that reverse appliqué is easier to sew.
- C Neill (2000: 162) refers to the “sociocultural significance” of the colours related to the culture but found no specific compelling explanation.
- D Perrin (1999: 97-98).
- E This is further discussed later in this chapter.
- F Neill (2000: 163).
- G Neill (2000: 164).
- H Ackerman (2008: 19) refers to the French policy to exterminate the Meskwaki tribe from 1728.
- I Howe uses the term ethnocide to refer to events in the lead up to the 1925 Kuna Revolution – see Chapter 9.
- J Ackerman (2008: 19) refers to the purchase of land by the tribe, commencing in 1845, expanded to the current holding of 7000 acres.
- K The Kuna were allowed to self govern after the events of 1925 and continue to do so, with a representative in the Panamanian parliament.

Figure 20. American Indian ribbonwork.



Meskwaki robe with borders of ribbonwork. Source: NMAI online catalogue, No.14-1158



Oklahoma-Shawnee-Kickapoo tribe ribbonwork detail. Surface appliqué has been cross-stitched by hand on ribbon. The selvedges are joined at the intersection of the red and the cream ribbon. Pitt Rivers Museum, cat. no. 1939.8.B.26.

It is difficult to know whether the reverse appliqué used to sew mola panels was developed in advance of learning the surface appliqué technique, since many early molas include both reverse appliqué and surface appliqué. The primary technique on the early molas in the “reference collection” was reverse appliqué, with the addition of surface appliqué from 1917. The surface appliqué is sewn from pieces of fabric which are not part of a complete layer of fabric and covers only a small area of the panel. The two-layer mola panels are sewn with reverse appliqué.

No embroidery was found in early molas. Embroidery was very rare, with only a small amount of stitching, until the 1950s. There were no inserted pieces of fabric between the layers in early molas. Early molas tended to have more complete layers; later molas with small pieces of inserted fabric were made with fewer complete layers.

It is interesting to learn that this very creative process of sewing mola panels was beginning at a time when Kuna Indian men were mimicking European clothing, so that they resembled the contemporary men's dress, and that Kuna women were creating blouses which were original and very distinctive in colour and style. Taussig (1993) specifically refers to the dress of Kuna men and women, and compares the function of mimesis and alterity in his eponymously named book. Taussig describes the way that "While Cuna [sic] men, particularly in their high status and sacred roles, adorn themselves in Western attire with felt hat, shirt, tie, and pants, Cuna [sic] women bedeck themselves as magnificently Other" (1993: 177) in mola blouses, with nose rings, beads and wrap skirts. This difference in clothing styles between the Kuna men and women is by mutual accord, according to Taussig who writes that this is "a positive connivance in Cuna [sic] men being mimetic with white men, and Cuna [sic] women being Alter" (1993: 154).

As has been described in this section, the early molas show inventive stitching, with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué. The quality of workmanship, whilst not nearly as good as later molas, shows deliberate care and the choice of colours, the arrangement of layer colours, the choice of yoke fabric to enhance the visual impact of the blouse, each demonstrate that the Kuna women were intent on creating a dress which was distinctive. Whilst the colour choices appear to reflect colour preferences derived from body-painting colours, the purposeful creation of contrast and the colour highlighting indicate that the women knew that they would be creating a visual impact, whether for their own delight, or their communities or to indicate their distinctiveness to outsiders, will be discussed later in the section on incorporation in Chapter 5.

4.2.2 Development of early mola blouses

It may not have been possible for non-Kuna observers to see Kuna women's blouses prior to 1900 due to restrictions on access to the Kuna inhabited islands and no contact was allowed with Kuna women (Puls, 1978: 121). Earlier blouses worn by Kuna women may have been sewn using different techniques, different to the type of appliqué found on the 1906 blouse. Stout found by questioning Kuna people during his fieldwork in 1940-1941 that the Kuna were able to provide a limited history of the development of the mola blouse, and he summarises the information he was able to obtain in decades, working from sixty years ago and fifty years ago and forty years ago, from the time of his fieldwork⁶⁷. This oral history from Stout (1947: 67) has been cited by later scholars (Puls, 1978: 122; Tice, 1995: 61) as evidence of the mola blouse developing from around 1880s when the blouse comprised a knee length garment of dark blue fabric with a red band at the bottom with a wrap skirt underneath painted with geometric designs⁶⁸. Using Stout's information, from 1890 - 1900 the blouse used brighter trade cloth and had simple appliqué on the panels; and after this half the blouse was

⁶⁷ There was a delay between his fieldwork and his anthropology dissertation (which comprised his 1947 publication according to Howe 2009: 187) due to World War 2 and Stout's military service.

⁶⁸ Examples of this wrap skirt, called a *picha*, can be found in museum collections, for example Berlin Museum für Ethnologisches, which has an indigo blue painted pattern about half the width for the full length. See also Footnote 64.

appliqué. Stout's informants believed that the earliest wrap skirts, of patterned blue cloth, were obtained from boats which visited the islands from 1900⁶⁹.

Confirmation that the earliest mola blouses, with a pair of rectangular panels of appliqué, did not exist before the turn of the 20th century is given by Howe (2009: 227-228) who was informed during fieldwork in 1970 that molas were new and evolving at the end of the 1800s⁷⁰. Apart from using cloth as a wrap skirt, it is not known how cloth obtained by trading was used by Kuna women prior to this time.

4.2.3 Simplicity of rectilinear construction

The influences on the sewing skills of Kuna women may include contact with missionaries, though early missionaries to the area were Jesuit and Dominican priests (Howe, 2009: 266) who are unlikely to have had more than rudimentary sewing skills. As mentioned earlier, Kuna men did learn to sew their own skirts and pants, possibly as sailors, though there is no known research about how these skills were acquired. Kuna men have been observed wearing shirts and trousers since the 1800s and perhaps they wore these items earlier as sailors on European boats. The illustrations of shirts and trousers earlier in this chapter indicate little shaping of these items and they appear to be constructed of rectangular pieces of cloth. Their origin in all likelihood dates from the Spanish occupation⁷¹.

An explanation for this type of clothing being introduced in the Spanish empire, including the areas occupied by the Kuna, is that the costumes of the Spanish were replicated by the inhabitants. Vollmer describes the Renaissance style shirts adopted by men and women and notes that from the mid-16th century a number of European countries published patterns and instructions for sewing clothes and copies of these would have been shipped to their colonial empires, including the Spanish empire, where

⁶⁹ Note also that there may be some discrepancies in the dates taken from Stout's decade references because some later researchers have back-dated from 1947, the date of his publication, rather than 1940-1941 when he did his fieldwork.

⁷⁰ Howe states that "This uncomfortably brief history, though undoubtedly well known to some senior men and women today, has never been acknowledged publicly in any Kuna accounts that I have heard or read" (2009: 227-228). He also notes that whilst outsiders understand the mola as an identifier of the Kuna people, for the Kuna ethnographers and scholars they are not the subject of study. He suggests that the reason for this "is probably simple: molas are female, and Kuna public intellectuals and students of culture are almost all male" (Howe, 2009: 227, citing Price, 2005). He continues "Native ethnographers, like other Kuna, take great pride in molas, but needlework lies outside their domain, and studying or writing about molas would provide discomfort." He notes that this could be exacerbated because "the few men who do sew molas are mostly homosexuals" (2009: 227, Footnote 26). He concludes his assessment of this lack of interest by Kuna intellectuals in researching molas by stating: "Thus what is celebrated, discussed, and endlessly analyzed [sic] by outsiders remains stubbornly visual, implicit, and unspoken among both mola makers and wearers and their male kin". Citing Jackson and Warren (2005) as his source Howe states that "indigenous women are often taken as prototypical representatives of their people [which] applies with full force to popular *external* images of the Kuna, but for nativist ethnographers, the heart of their culture so far seems to be mostly male" (Howe, 2009: 227).

⁷¹ Other South American ethnic groups have clothing items which comprise rectilinear construction, however these are based on hand woven fabric. An example is the Mayan huipil from Guatemala.

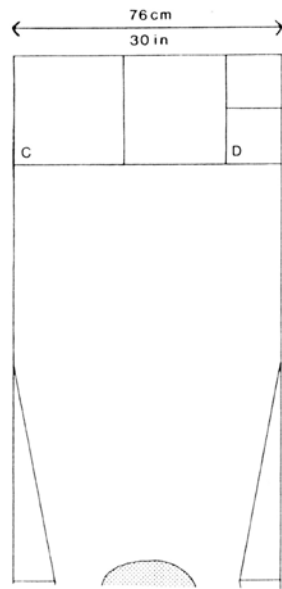
Western dress was introduced in the Philippines from the 16th century (Vollmer, 2010: 72). This phenomenon in one part of the Spanish empire may well also have occurred during the Spanish rule in South America. This could also explain the influences on men's shirt styles and the origin of the Kuna woman's blouse could also derive from Spanish sewing instruction manuals⁷². The construction of mola blouses is likely to mirror the Renaissance use of loom width fabric and economic layouts, with the size perhaps determined by directly fitting on parts of the body, but without closely adhering to the body shape.

The yoke, sleeves and panels of a mola blouse are sewn from rectangular fabric pieces. This has been termed "rectilinear construction" and this form of construction frequently relates to the woven width of the available fabric. When fabric was hand loomed there was no desire to waste any of the fabric created. In *Cut My Cote* Burnham maintains that "the material from which a garment is made is the factor that has the most influence on the particular shaping of it" (1973: 2). She asserts that the material has more influence than climate on the shapes and patterns of clothing, importantly based on the loom width of available fabric. Research Burnham carried out on Eastern European ethnic dress in the Royal Ontario Museum confirmed that the loom width of fabric influenced the style of both sewn and unsewn items of dress. In considering dress components made from loom width fabric, with no sewing, Burnham notes that there has been almost global adoption of some items of dress, where a length of fabric is wrapped around the body. This includes the ancient Greek and Roman clothing and Indian saris and other wrap skirts in South East Asia. The Kuna wrap skirt similarly consists of a piece of wrapped cloth, with the selvages at the waist and hem. The Kuna headscarf consists of a piece of unsewn cloth, draped on the head as a mantle and more recently sometimes folded and wrapped at the back of the head.

The earliest sewn garments are described by Burnham as a "shirt, shift, tunic, robe, dress, frock, smock, chemise" (1973: 9) and she provides a number of diagrams showing how the components of this type of garment, from different cultures and over many centuries, are cut from lengths of loom width fabric with little or no wasted fabric. She states that "the widths of woven cloth are important in the shaping of garments made from them. There are certain widths of looms belonging to different cultures and these influence the clothing of those cultures" (1973: 34). She also notes that once a method is developed by a culture based on this method, even when cloth is available of a different width later, the same method of cutting out the cloth will most likely remain (1973: 3). It would appear that this is the case with the Kuna mola blouse. Measurements of molas in the "reference collection" show that many of the yokes of the early molas were cut from loom width fabric and that perhaps the original reason for the narrow sleeves, with added in gussets were the product of the fabric width. In Figure 21 the sleeves are labelled as "C" and the gussets as "D"; the blouse could be cut on the fold at the shoulders, shown here at the bottom of the diagram.

⁷² The shirts worn by Kuna men at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, as seen in archival photographs in this chapter, also appear to be based on rectilinear construction methods, possibly based on an early Renaissance style shirts. Dupuis (2011) describes the simple methods used to sew such shirts and how the use of fabric was very efficient, there is minimal fitting, and it is relatively simple to sew.

Figure 21. Diagram of an 18th century American woman's chemise.



Source: Burnham (1973: 15). Part of illustration.

In the Kuna blouse there is no removal of the triangular pieces of fabric at the side. Instead, shaping at the neckline is obtained by the inclusion of a drawstring channel at a slit in the centre of the fold, which is then adjusted on the body. Also the yoke is small in the Kuna mola, since it is attached to a pair of mola panels to form the blouse. The rectilinear construction however is remarkably similar to this example for the early molas. Later molas follow the same layout, even when wider fabric became available. The extra wide fabric now used for yokes has enabled very wide sleeves to be cut, although the sleeves remain rectangular, with many pleats inserted at the shoulder seam and the cuff to narrow the fabric width.⁷³

The yoke piece has a central lengthwise slit for the neckline which is edged to create a channel in which a drawstring is inserted. This was the prevalent style until the 1990s when some blouses began to be sewn with shaped necklines⁷⁴, though many women, of all ages, were seen wearing molas with drawstring necklines in the San Blas islands in 2010.

There is minimal shaping of the sleeves in early molas, often a simple tuck at the shoulder join with the shaping created primarily by adjusting the gathers with the drawstring. Some yokes have additional tiny tucks or gathers sewn at the centre back and front of the neck slit, created prior to the application

⁷³ This is discussed in Chapter 6 and Appendix G.

⁷⁴ Shaped necklines began to appear following the availability of flowing synthetic fabric, which influenced the increased size of the blouse sleeves as well as the neckline. This fabric has a much wider loom width. Sleeves are frequently seen with the selvedge used as the hem, left untreated.

of the bound channel. Once the blouse is placed on the body to be worn, careful adjustment of the drawstring allows fitting to an individual's desired level of comfort and fit.

A significant factor with regard to mola blouses is the economical use of fabric for both the panels and the yoke components. The yoke fabric, in nearly all blouses examined in the museum "reference collection", comprises different fabric to the mola panels. The yoke required very little fabric until the late 1970s - early 1980s when the increase in sleeve dimensions increased the fabric allowance.

Long lengths of fabric were not needed to create a blouse. The laying out of the fabric for the two rectangular sleeves and rectangular yoke, a total of three pieces of fabric, in most cases leaves very little excess fabric. Patterns based on measurement obtained for the "reference collection"⁷⁵ were made and placed on fabric. It was found that for molas in the early parts of the 20th century frequently the sleeves had been minimised to allow cutting within the narrow loom width available at the time and that gussets were inserted in the sleeves, cut from remaining fabric, which would increase movement around the arm holes. Sometimes gussets are found made of different fabric to the yoke. Gussets are often cut on the cross which also increases the flexibility of movement of the arm within the sleeve, so there may be a double motivation in cutting the sleeves in small widths.

Until the late 1970s - early 1980s, when sleeves became much larger and fuller, this economic use of fabric remained the case. There is evidence from patterns taken of more recent blouses that the loom width is also relevant for these wider sleeves, since the fabric width has increased significantly with the popularity of reasonably priced synthetic fabric for mola yokes.

4.2.4 Influence of sewing materials on techniques

The sewing of mola blouses does not require elaborate measurement, important when low levels of literacy were prevalent in the early 1900s, even when the men were often bilingual (Kuna and English) it is thought that they were often unable to write (Howe, 2009: 23). With limited resources for sewing, for example, no large tables to cut out fabric, it appears that the fabric was measured directly on the body. This would be useful for the shoulder width and sleeve width. The size of the mola blouse may relate to body image preferences or to the need for flexibility of size to maximize usage of the blouse. A mola blouse for a child may initially fit as a smock-like dress and as the child grows taller, a skirt is wrapped underneath it, or the blouse could become a woman's blouse. For adult Kuna women of child bearing age, the blouse may be sewn to be large enough to be worn through multiple pregnancies. This is discussed further in Chapter 7 when I report on the construction of a replica mola blouse.

Loom width fabric was frequently found in mola panels in the "reference collection" up until the 1940s, and in later pairs of panels it appears that the loom width may have been split for the panels for some layers, with one panel in each pair having one selvedge on the left or right seam. The loom width, used

⁷⁵ In addition to the patterns for N01 and F14 in this chapter, patterns were made of eight blouses representing different eras from 1917 – 2003. See Appendix G.

across a mola panel, determines the width of the blouse and whilst some early blouses were wider and required joins, it is possible that during some periods the loom width determined the loose fitting blouses which were prevalent.

Early mola panels are comprised of full layers on top of each other; five and six layers were found in the “reference collection”. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s many small pieces of fabric were inserted between layers to create visual interest and perhaps this required less fabric to be purchased. The decision may have been economic or based on the availability of a wide variety of patterned fabrics to use as inserts.

The fabric appears to have been torn rather than cut to size. Documentaries showing the construction of molas show the ripping of fabric (Huber & Huber, 1975; Perrin, 2003; Lipke Vigessaa, 2009). This method does create square edges, since the tearing would be along the warp and / or the weft of the fabric. The initial cut at the edge of the fabric could be from a sharp knife or razor blade. The development of the safety razor blade began in the early 20th century in America. Mr Gillette, whose original company was called “The American Safety Razor Company” began selling safety razors with razor blades in large quantities in 1904, the same year that the Americans began work on the Panama Canal. It is possible that the Kuna men working in and around the Canal Zone were able to obtain razor blades from the Americans, perhaps used or blunted blades. With the completion of the Panama Canal and the occupation by large numbers of American civilians and military, later access to razor blades would have been relatively easy. An advertisement for Gillette razors in 1905 shows a complete set of razor and seven “ever-ready” blades in a box sold for \$1 (US) and that seven additional blades cost 25 cents. A 1903 advertisement shows 20 blades sold for \$1 (US) (source: ebay.com, accessed 22 August 2011).⁷⁶

Examination of early blouses in the “reference collection” supports the idea that scissors may not have been available and that razor blades may have been used. The sewn edges of appliqué are not smooth – there are noticeable changes in direction. The technique of reverse appliqué especially is carried out by the method of “cut a little, sew a little” where only a small section is cut at a time, then folded under with a needle, held with the thumb of one hand and sewn with the other. A single edged razor would have been an appropriate tool to cut small sections of cloth, perhaps 2 cm [less than 1”] at a time. In this way the shape of the outlines can be controlled better and with a degree of accuracy.

For successive layers placed on top to create border lines to a design, the line is formed by the fingernail creasing the fabric using the underneath layer as a guide, then cutting on this creased line, and sewing in a similar fashion as for the previous layer described.

⁷⁶ As an aside, safety razor blades are used in the manufacture of the Panama hats in Ecuador (where they originate), to shave off the excess fibre after weaving the hat. For this process the razor blade is halved down the centre, leaving one side only with a blade, which makes the blade less flexible and easier to use.

The first safety razors appear to have used single edge blades and early safety razors used both single and double edged blades, from the 1870s. Source: Wikipedia 15 February 2012, entry on safety razors.

Figure 22. Examples of rough cutting on a mola panel.



V43 1927⁷⁷

Actual size details



F12



F14

⁷⁷ This blouse was collected by Nordenskiöld in 1927 and exchanged with the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum in 1928.

4.2.5 Ease of fabricating a mola blouse

The assembly of the components of the mola blouse is simple, requiring straight sewing only. Most blouses in the “reference collection” were sewn by hand, though there are early examples of machine sewing of part of a blouse and also a complete blouse. Of the 21 mola blouses collected prior to 1921, 16 had no machine stitching visible. On one blouse [A02 – 1918] the appliqué panel was sewn entirely by machine and the blouse was assembled also by machine. This blouse was collected in the inland area of Panama near the Colombian border. Four other blouses had machine stitching used for part of their assembly [F04 – 1917, N03, N04, N05 – all 1921; F4 machine joined layer in panel also]. Stout (1947: 72) reports that at the time he was doing his fieldwork in the San Blas, 1940 -1941, sewing machines were becoming widespread, and were being used for some mola blouse construction.

Sewing together the mola panels, yoke and sleeves generally would follow these steps⁷⁸:

- Join the top of each panel to the yoke with the seam facing to the front (outside)
- Sew a band on top of this seam to cover this join – this frequently comprises a strip of fabric onto which there has been sewn appliqué shapes, embroidery or ribbon
- Tucks may be sewn into the centre back and front of the neck opening
- The neck opening is bound by fabric to create a channel or rolled in and hemmed to create a channel
- The sleeves are attached to the shoulder of the yoke
- If desired sew a hem onto each of the mola panels
- If desired sew a band on to the sleeve hem and a frill or band below the panels
- Lastly, starting from the hem or cuff of the sleeve sew the side seam on one side incorporating any sleeve gussets, then the other side, completing the blouse.

The drawstring cord is generally tied at the centre front, though sometimes is found at the centre back and sometimes at one side of the front of the blouse⁷⁹.

The first blouse found in a museum collection, which was also included in the “reference collection” established for this dissertation, was collected in one of the San Blas islands in 1906 [N01]. I have used this blouse as Example 1 earlier in this chapter, to demonstrate the fabric yardage required to sew the complete blouse. It is sewn with considerable skill on both the yoke section and the appliqué panels. There is an effective use of four layers to create visual contrast and the design has

⁷⁸ I confirmed this by sewing mock ups of four blouses from the “reference collection”. See photographs in Chapter 6 of a replica mola blouse.

⁷⁹ Observation of “reference collection” mola blouses; confirmed in email from Francisco Herrera, 1 September 2010, who obtained this information from one of his Kuna students.

been changed by swapping the order of the layers of fabric in each panel. Workmanship quality varied in the early molas and may reflect collector bias, including whether the collector had an understanding of sewing techniques.

Early molas, perhaps those seen in the “reference collection” up until the 1950s, could have been created without the use of scissors or pins. The circular shapes and spirals in some of the molas after this time support the use of scissors. Appliqué on top of a layer, which is more difficult to sew without scissors, did not become popular, except for small pieces, until the 1930s based on the molas in the “reference collection”.

4.2.6 Assembling a Kuna woman’s dress ensemble

The mola blouse is distinctive as a Kuna blouse; no other fabric blouse with a similar shape or design has been found around the same time in the same geographic region. This effect is compounded by the remainder of the Kuna woman’s cloth dress ensemble, comprising the red and gold headscarf and the navy wrap skirt which may also have yellow or green or light blue as the second colour on it. Together these three components are readily identifiable as Kuna dress. Whilst the size of the mola panels and the yoke and sleeves of the mola blouse have changed over time, the overall silhouette of the ensemble has remained unchanged.

The manipulation of fabric which distinguishes the mola panels has been characterised by Steiner (1994) as comprising the “structural alteration” of the cloth and he suggests that “by transforming the cloth they receive in trade into garments that are unique expressions of their aesthetic independence and cultural sovereignty” (1994: 75) they are able to maintain their identity as a people. Whilst the materials needed to manufacture the mola all are derived from trade with Westerners, the result is uniquely Kuna and the cloth is changed by the sewing techniques into patterns and designs which have meaning to the Kuna.

Since it appears that the Kuna women did not wear cloth coverings on the upper body prior to the mola blouse, it is suggested here that the naming of the blouse and the mola sewing techniques were subsequent to the development of the appliqué techniques.

4.2.7 Section summary

I have demonstrated in this section that limited resources are needed to sew mola panels and mola blouses, making them accessible to all Kuna women, regardless of the wealth of their male family members. The amount of fabric needed for mola panels relates to the number of layers. It appears that early molas for children were often two layers, reflecting the limited life of the blouse. Early molas, due to their width and tendency to have more layers, used much more fabric for panels than later molas. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, before Kuna women became involved

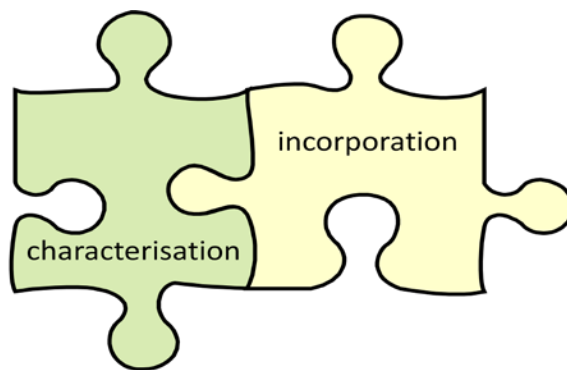
in the commercialisation of molas, which gave them an independent source of income, Kuna men were relied on to supply the fabric by purchasing it from traders in Colon and later from small shops on the islands and from trading boats visiting some of the San Blas islands on a regular basis. This means that mola blouses were relatively “democratic” in availability, requiring limited financial and material resources to make, just ample time to sew. The quantity of mola blouses a woman possessed may reflect the wealth of her family, as would the amount of gold jewellery; however each individual blouse a woman wears is similar to those worn by all Kuna women. There does not appear to be a distinction between the quality of the fabric used, only the quality of the workmanship and some designs are more complicated to sew and the women who sew these are regarded highly (Salvador, 1978: 22). In Chapter 8 I discuss the lifestyle of the Kuna family which allows sufficient time for the sewing of molas.

In the first part of the next chapter I look at the origin of the word mola and the development of words to describe different types of molas, based on the design on the panels and different names for mola sewing techniques. In the second part of Chapter 5, I discuss the component of cultural authentication which resulted in the identification of the mola by the Kuna Indian people as a symbol of their ethnicity and recognition of the mola by outsiders as a symbol of the Kuna Indians.

CHAPTER 5 COMPONENTS OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION: PART 2

In this chapter, I continue my examination of the components of the cultural authentication of Kuna mola blouses, and draw on the theoretical framework I have adopted to develop my argument for the development of mola blouses. In Chapter 4, I outlined the selection of cloth and materials, and the transformation of the cloth into a blouse. This chapter examines the characterisation (naming) component and the incorporation component of the cultural authentication process.

Figure 23. The cultural authentication of the mola blouse – Part 2.



The characterisation and incorporation components are linked.

I develop the characterisation component in the first part of this chapter, where I begin by determining the historic development of the word mola to describe cloth, from the time of the Spanish colonisers, and the subsequent extension of its meaning to the Kuna blouse. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that the mola blouse and other parts of the Kuna women's dress were an integral part of Kuna identity prior to 1919. In Chapter 4, it was determined that the mola blouse was first sewn, as a rectilinear garment with a pair of appliquéd panels, around the beginning of the 20th century. In this chapter, the cultural authentication process is found to conclude prior to 1919, by which time the mola was identified with the Kuna people. Based on available scholarship, the process of cultural authentication appears to have been achieved in around two decades.

5.1 Characterisation: naming of molas and mola techniques

"Characterization[sic]: The Item is Symbolically Appropriated and Named" (Arthur, 2011: 112).

In this section I explain how the characterisation or naming associated with mola blouses occurred in two stages: the designation of the word mola to relate to cloth and clothing worn by Kuna women; and later in the attribution of names for the motifs portrayed on specific molas and the names given to types of molas and the sewing techniques on the mola panels on the backs and fronts of mola blouses.

5.1.1 Etymology of the word *mola*

The Kuna people, from the early 1500s were visited by Spanish, Scottish, English and French settlers and pirates, with whom gift exchange was an accepted practice to gain the favour of the local population. Gallup-Diaz (2004) describes how a Spanish word for a gift of cloth has evolved to become the name of clothing worn by Kuna women and I will now interpret the evidence he has provided.

The first official recorded gift of textiles by the Spanish colonialists to the Kuna in Panama was in 1676 and by the mid-1700s such gifts were important to Spanish / Tule⁸⁰ relations (Gallup-Diaz, 2004: 63-64). The Spanish terms “paniquiri” and “mora⁸¹” originally denoted cloth goods and by the end of the 18th century were specifically related to Kuna clothing, the “mora” for females and the “paniquiri” for males⁸². The *Diccionario geográfico-histórico de las Indias Occidentales o América*, in five volumes (1786 - 1789), is referred to by Gallup-Diaz as a substantial reference source designed to prepare the Spanish colonial administrators. By including a definition of “paniquiri” and “mora” within their dictionary the importance of continuing this form of gift was institutionalised (Gallup-Diaz, 2004: note 29, Chapter 3, under entry for Darien).

The 1739 treaty between the Tule and the Spanish defined “paniquiris” and “moras” as a type of clothing and decreed continued provision of these – for decency as well as “compensation packages” in return for the Kuna agreeing not to rebel “against the Spanish administration” (Gallup-Diaz 2004: 181-183). Gallup-Diaz cites a document he found in the Spanish colonial archives of 1745 which reports that the King and the Council of the Indies, the colonial government appointed by the King (which was responsible for the administration of the Spanish Empire), that both “greatly approved of clothes being given to the Indians to ‘enhance their decency’ ”(Gallup-Diaz 2004: 182). This desire for the Kuna Indians to be clothed is not surprising given the strong Spanish Catholic religious influence and the attempts by Jesuits living among the Kuna at this time to convert them.

The garments made with the fabric obtained by this gift exchange are not known. The gift of cloth by the Spanish to the Kuna people was important because “the Tule did not manufacture in the quality or quantities the Spanish could provide” (Gallup-Diaz, 2004: 63-70).

⁸⁰ The words Tule and Kuna are interchangeable. The Kuna people refer to themselves as Tule or Dule, which means person in the Kuna language. Kuna is the name of their native language.

⁸¹ Mola and Mora are considered the same word in many texts.

⁸² Neither *paniquiri* or *mora* are in contemporary Spanish dictionaries, however in Portuguese, one of the meanings of the word *mora* is deferred payment or incentive, which perhaps reflects the fact that this was a trade item used by the Spanish colonialists as an incentive, and could be considered as a form of persuasion or sweetener. Source: http://au.babelfish.yahoo.com/translate_txt, accessed 28 March 2010.

5.1.2 Extension of the meaning of the word *mola*

In the Kuna native language the word for clothing is “morra”, or “mor” or “mola”⁸³. It is proposed in this dissertation that the word “mola” was adopted from the Spanish usage of the word “mora” in the 18th century described above, since the Kuna people were not accustomed to wearing clothing prior to this date⁸⁴. It is posited that the pronunciation of the word *mora* would have sounded close to the way the word *mola* is pronounced in the modern Latin American Spanish and Kuna languages. The letters “l” and “r” sound similar in some languages; linguists call these two sound phonemes “liquid sounds” and the way the sounds are produced in the mouth is similar. Price (2005: 109-110) in her thesis about developing a standard Kuna orthography explains that the liquid phoneme sound in the Kuna language “results in the possible pronunciation of /mola/ ‘cloth, clothing’, for example, as [mola] and [mor] (sic)” and that there is debate on how to write the “l” or “r” in Kuna for many words. This was confirmed in the standard orthography adopted in 2011.⁸⁵

The evolution of the word “mola” from the time of the Spanish colonial administration as outlined above, has expanded to mean more than being associated with the clothing of Kuna women. De Puydt (1868), who explored the isthmus to investigate a French proposal for an inter-oceanic canal, in both 1861 and 1865, developed a list of Kuna words. He defines *mola* as “clothes, vestment, linen” (De Puydt, 1868: 102). In his *Ethno-Linguistic Cuna Dictionary*, Holmer (1952: 78-79) provides five meanings for the word *mola*: a piece of cloth; typical garment of the Cuna [sic] women; clothes in general, especially shirt; curtain; and cloud. Holmer defines the word *mora* as “a piece of garment which is being made . . . whereas *mola* is the completed garment” (1952: 79)⁸⁶. Thus in the Kuna language the words *mola* and *mora* have been found to be very closely related, both by meaning and pronunciation.

⁸³ See De Obaldia (2005: 338 footnote 3) and Price (2005) for discussion.

⁸⁴ Whilst a number of Kuna men were educated and able to read and write in English or Spanish in the early 20th century, the Kuna language was an oral language until the 20th century when the influence of the missionaries progressed its development in order to translate the Bible into the Kuna language. Sherzer states that “there is no official Kuna writing system and for this reason the language has been written in different ways by different individuals” (1997: 131). Generally the Kuna words are recorded in letters phonetically, based on Spanish pronunciation. Price (2005) describes efforts by the Kuna people to develop a standard orthography, with a specific project to do so commencing in 2004. There are records of picture writing from the early 20th century, used as a basis for chants and stories (Severi, 1997).

⁸⁵ The first Kuna-Spanish Dictionary endorsed by the Kuna General Congress advises that the letter “l” in the Kuna language can be pronounced as “r” depending on the position of the letter within a word (Orán & Wagua, 2011: 15). See also Footnote 2, Chapter 1. This dictionary appears to be the first output of the project to develop a standard Kuna orthography. The entry in this dictionary is: “mor / mola - atuendo, ropa, vestido, tela; blusa de mujer”, thus the words *mor* and *mola* are both given five alternative, but related meanings, translated into English as: attire, clothes, clothing, fabric or cloth; woman’s blouse.

⁸⁶ Salvador states that “*Morro* or *mor-* actually refers to the handwork, while *mola* means blouse or clothing” (Salvador, 1978: 25). I have not seen this usage elsewhere, though it relates to Holmer’s dictionary entry for *mora*, mentioned above, which can be understood to be the actual process of sewing the *mola*.

Sherzer and Sherzer (1976) who conducted their initial fieldwork in the San Blas islands 30 years later, describe how the word mola may mean different but related words in the Kuna language and that these meanings can be understood also as the stages in making and using a mola. The meanings of the word mola are:

- Cloth, in the sense of fabric
- Clothing
- A shirt for men or a blouse for women
- A single rectangular panel
- A complete blouse for women, made up of two rectangular panels. (Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976a: 23).

The polysemous nature of the word mola remains in contemporary usage.⁸⁷

In this dissertation the word mola is used only with the meaning of a blouse worn by Kuna women and mola panels will be differentiated from a mola blouse in order to make clear whether a reference is to the whole or part of a blouse. The top part of a mola blouse, the yoke and sleeves, is referred to in the Kuna language as the morsana and this term will also be used. Homer (1952: 79) spells this as morsala and provides the Kuna name for a sleeve as morsakkwa.

The naming of mola *designs* and *techniques*, discussed later in the chapter, may have been a later step in the cultural authentication process after the incorporation component, which is different to other examples of cultural authentication. Arthur (2011: 106), in her study of Hawaiian quilting, found that the characterisation component occurred concurrently with the transformation and incorporation components.

5.1.3 Classification of designs

It is not known when the development of naming different types of molas began. It is possible that this was after molas were well established as a form of textile art and the naming was developed to explain the techniques to younger generations. Certainly the naming of designs based on the motif is quite straightforward, though in some cases for non-Kuna observers, it may be difficult to recognise the motif without an explanation.

Descriptive or representational names

The names of some of the mola designs given by Kuna people are recorded by Holmer (1952: 76-78) in his *Ethno-Linguistic Cuna Dictionary*, based on fieldwork he carried out in 1947. Examples he recorded are given in Table 7:

⁸⁷ See Footnote 85 above.

Table 7. Examples of names of designs on mola panels.

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| chuchumor | butterfly mola |
| kalamola | guitar mola |
| kannirmola | chicken mola |
| kochonmor | pillow mola |
| koleikalamola | spiral mola |
| kurkumor | gourd mola |
| kwanurmola | iguana mola |
| kwekimor | hearts mola |
| mankomor | mango mola |
| moromola | turtle mola |
| namor | rattle mola |
| nilakamor | leaves mola |
| pipamola | pipe mola |
| sappimola | tree mola |
| sukkumola | sword-fish mola |
| surmola | monkey mola |
| temalnusumola | sea worm mola |
| titoltomola | water tent mola [umbrella] |
| tupkarmola | bobbin mola |
| uakunnai | man and woman eating fish |
| usilsak- | bat's wings mola [also umbrella |
| kanmola | mola] |
| wekkomola | bird mola |
| yarpurwamor | south wind mola |

Source: Holmer (1952)

Ancestral designs

A number of mola designs are considered by the Kuna to be ancestral, and these are referred to as sergan designs. The word sergan, according to Perrin (1999: 97) “refers to ancestors, the dead, elders”. These designs are repeated in consecutive generations, and for those Kuna who have been inculcated with Kuna learning of cosmology, there are unambiguous meanings to these designs, with different islands preferring different designs, with perhaps 30-50 designs in the ancestral repertoire (Perrin, 1999: 97). Fortis describes how these ancestral designs may have begun as representational and over a period of time become more abstract (Fortis, 2002: 85-91). Figure 24 provides an example from Fortis (2002), demonstrating the way the design of the maraca mola may have developed:

Figure 24. Evolution of a mola design.

Nasis mor - maracas



The development of a sergan mola with the theme of maracas (musical rattles made from gourds). Designs on gourd have been adapted in a mola design, as well as abstracting the shape of a pair of maracas. Source: Left. Fortis (2002: 85). Right. Prenzlau exhibition of Kuna artefacts from Hartmann Collection, April 2011. Designs have been carved into a gourd.

Some sergan designs may originally have been copied from other plastic arts, such as basket weaving, the wini beads wound around the arms and legs of Kuna women, and designs on ancient Coclé ceramics. Table 8 lists some of the names of sergan molas and Figure 25 shows three sergan molas.

Table 8. Examples of names of sergan designs on mola panels.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| ake bandap tummat | large hook vine |
| yar purba mor na (nasis) mor | shadow of the mountain maracas [musical instruments] |
| yauí mor | sea turtle |
| sur punnu mor | monkey tail |
| put'tara mor | sea urchin |
| sue (sua) mor | rainbow |
| nu kuabakewat mor | four pigeons |
| pipa mor | pipes [tobacco pipes] |
| kansu (kan purwi) mor | little benches [stools; seats] |
| wirwir (nasi) mor | kitchen whisk |
| yokor mor | knee [body part] |
| Pab Igar mor | Way of the Father [in Kuna cosmology – Creator of the world] |
| no mor | frog |
| yampina mor (kuegi) | peccary liver or heart [a large animal hunted on the coastal areas for meat] |

Multiples of each design may be on a panel, ranging from two to scores of the design on a mola panel. Source: (Perrin, 1999: 97-98). Explanations in brackets are mine.

Figure 25 illustrates three of these sergan designs.

Figure 25. Examples of sergan mola designs.



5.1.4 Naming types of molas

Various names have been given by the Kuna to describe the layering arrangements of mola panels. It is not known how early this naming occurred. Salvador (Salvador, 1976a; 1997a: 172-174) records the Kuna names as follows:

- *mor gwinagwad*, meaning one colour mola, since the base layer is not counted as part of the mola layers.
- *obogaled*, meaning the layer on top of the base is comprised of two colours, in an overlocking pattern; often with the two colours swapped between a pair of mola panels
- *mor gonikat*, meaning many colours, with two or more layers sewn on top of the base layer and frequently many other small areas of fabric of other colours.

In later research, Perrin (1999: 35) found other terms in use to describe mola panels, with different terms for the same type of mola used in different parts of the San Blas archipelago. Examples include *apinniwat*, meaning “that which is double, to describe a two layer mola”; *tarbaguat* to designate a three layer mola; *tarbakeguat* to designate a four layer mola.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Terms for the arrangement of layers and fabric in mola panels are also provided in the Field Museum database:

- *mormamaralet mola* – “a base layer and two full layers on top of it. Sometimes this term is used for molas with more layers if each layer is a full layer and no other additions (like snippets of different colored fabric) are sewn on”. Many older molas, from the 1920s and earlier were found in the “reference collection” to have over 4 complete layers.
- *morguinnagwat mola* – “two color mola”. Similar description to *mor gwinagwad* above.
- *morgonikat mola* – “many colors, often including embroidery and appliqué”. Similar description to *mor gonikat* above.
- *obogalet mola* – “one base layer and two alternating colors on top (technically this [type of] mola has only two full layers: the base and the top layer, but the top layer is two-colored). Sometimes another layer is added on top of this and then it becomes difficult to distinguish from *mormamaralet* molas (especially if you don’t have both molas from the pair)”. Similar description to *obogaled* above.

The concept of layers is significant in Kuna cosmology and is discussed in Chapter 6.

5.1.5 Naming sewing techniques

A characteristic of the Kuna language is termed by linguists as reduplication, which means the repetition of the same word. In the Kuna language these words also seem to be onomatopoeic. Perrin (1999: 39) notes that since the fillers are repeated in the background, the names of each different filler type is also repeated and that his observation is that the Kuna words are “pronounced sensually, as though repeating were pleasurable in itself” (1999: 39)⁸⁹. His fieldwork found that different names may be used on different islands for some of these techniques, though the reduplication was constant. For example, on some islands *tas-tas* are called *mare-mare*; *gwini-gwini* may be called *siko-siko*.

In general the names adopted in this dissertation are based on the ethno-aesthetic research carried out by Salvador (1978).

A number of different techniques are used as background filler including:

- *bisu-bisu* which is an overall geometric maze or pattern filling a large part of the mola, with many sharp changes to angles, like large zigzags
- *tas-tas*, which are parallel slits, which may be horizontal or vertical or diagonal
- *gwini-gwini* which are small circles, similar to *tas-tas*, but often very small in size; sometimes can be squares
- *nips* which are small triangles, which are cut into the base layer. These inset triangles are called *wawa-naled*. The small appliquéd pieces on top are called pips.
- *dientes* which is the name for the edging with a zigzag or saw-tooth pattern; appears to be derived from the Spanish word for teeth, which could also relate to the shape of the teeth of a saw, since in English this pattern could be called saw-tooth, which is the resultant pattern created by this technique. Perrin notes some alternative Kuna names for this technique are *nail-nali*, literally meaning shark and *ata-ata*.⁹⁰

Figure 26 illustrates three of these techniques.

Wording quoted from Field Museum database, attributed to Louise Young, who donated molas she collected between 1993 and 2007, to the Field Museum in 2008.

⁸⁹ A number of studies of the Kuna language have noted the common characteristic of reduplication including Prince (1913); Price (2005); Sherzer (1996), though only Perrin has commented on this use related to mola sewing techniques.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 8 for a discussion on the use of repetition in the Kuna language, shown here in the naming of sewing techniques.

Figure 26. Three mola sewing techniques.



F6 – 3 1917
rows of *dientes*

N15 1932
vertical *tas-tas*

F05 1917
triangular three layer *pip* – the *wawanaled* is orange

Examples are actual size (2" x 2"). See Appendix B for a more detailed explanation and illustrations of sewing techniques.

5.1.6 Section summary

In this section I have discussed the origin of the word *mola* and how it came to mean a blouse worn by Kuna Indian women. I have also discussed how Kuna names have been given to different designs on *mola* panels frequently based on descriptive or representational names, and how a group of designs have become known as ancestral designs which appear to be in constant use for *mola* panels; and also how Kuna names have been used to describe different sewing techniques and parts of the *mola* blouse, and the arrangements of layers between the pair of *mola* panels used to sew a *mola* blouse.

5.2 Incorporation: the identification of the Kuna people with the *mola*

“Incorporation: The Item Denotes Social Group Membership” (Arthur, 2011: 110).

In this section I discuss the adoption of the *mola* as a symbol of Kuna identity in the early 20th century. In Chapter 9, I discuss how the *mola* continues to support Kuna identity and how in the second half of the 20th century the *mola* became part of Panamanian national iconography. It appears that the identification of the Kuna people with the *mola* followed only a few years after the transformation of trade cloth into distinctive appliqué panels sewn into blouses.

An approach to considering the incorporation of molas into Kuna culture could commence by considering the phenomenon termed by Pratt (1991) as the “contact zone”, defined as the zone where cultures meet, frequently with asymmetrical power relationships, for example when a people are colonised. The Kuna were firstly subject to the Spanish colonialists, then later influenced by other foreigners. Pratt suggests a possible response by indigenous people living in a contact zone may be considered to be transculturation⁹¹. Transculturation, Pratt explains is a concept coined by Ortiz to “characterize [sic] culture under conquest” (1991: 36); it describes “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (1991: 36). The indigenous group is thus able to gain some control over the powerful colonisers by accepting or rejecting aspects of the culture.

By transforming the trade cloth into striking appliqué panels, the Kuna have created distinction, and a sense of pride in their ability to create difference. Whilst the women were encouraged to cover their bodies by outsiders, the resultant mola blouse, skirt and headscarf, does not resemble Western dress in either shape, silhouette, iconography or colour choices. They are not simply following the fashion of their foreign oppressors; rather they are in control of the image they present to each other and to the world. The Kuna women have created “Cunaité”, a term first used by Sherzer and Sherzer (Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976b: 10), which could be translated as *Kunaness* or perhaps even as *Kunification*, the latter described as “outside influences being absorbed into their culture” (De Leon, 2009: 33).

The Kuna have adopted some forms of Western clothing, particularly the men, as discussed in Chapter 4. The women have adopted a form of dress which almost completely covers their body. This commenced with the selection of trade cloth for the headscarf, for the wrap skirt and for the creation of mola blouses. For the creation of the mola blouse, Western sewing methods were utilised once needles, thread and cutting implements such as knives, razors and scissors became available.

5.2.1 Kuna identification with molas prior to 1925

The Kuna Revolution in 1925, which is discussed in further detail in Chapter 9, resulted from resistance by the Kuna people to edicts of the governing power, the Panamanian government, for the Kuna people to adopt Western clothing, particularly the requirement for Kuna women to abandon wearing the nose-ring and the mola blouse. Christian missionaries also discouraged Kuna women from wearing these items. Elements of the dress ensemble of Kuna women were strongly opposed by the Panamanian government. These were the nose ring, the wini binding the legs, and the wrap skirts and mola blouses.

⁹¹ She suggests also a second response - the creation of autoethnographic text, which she defines as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (Pratt, 1991: 35). In some ways mola panels may be interpreted as text, communicating a message, though this is not explored in this dissertation. Autoethnographic text is further discussed in Chapter 9.

The first two were seen as barbaric, since they permanently deformed parts of the body. The skirt was seen as immodest since it became unwrapped during daily activities. Nose painting was also prohibited (Tice 1995: 61). The Kuna Revolution has been the subject of detailed investigation by Howe (Howe, 1991, 1997b, 1998, 2009).

My concern in this section is to show that the mola was identified by the Kuna people as an integral part of their identity prior to 1925. Tice asserts that “Kuna women’s right to wear their ‘traditional dress’ was at the heart of the revolution” (1995: 41). The Kuna Revolution served to reinforce the role of the mola as a symbol of identity. One of the Kuna chiefs who instigated the Revolution, Nele Kantule, encouraged the wearing of molas. This has been passed down in Kuna oral history:

“Nele Kantule said:

Bab Dummad [Great Father, the Creator] gave us culture. So that my culture is not lost and so that we recognize [sic] ourselves as the Olodulegan [the Kuna – the Golden People], our sisters must continue to wear their molas, their gold nose rings, their earrings and gold breastplates.

I am happy that we have gandurgan [a chanter at Kuna ceremonies] and that there is communal labor [sic] in the construction of houses and canoes. . . . If we start to lose our culture, we will be going down another road, right away things won’t be as they were, and everyone will think in terms of money” (Ventocilla, Herrera, Núñez, & Roeder, 1995: 5, based on the oral testimony of a Kuna chief, Enrique Guerrero, 1992). [My words in brackets].

The Kuna Revolution was a direct result of the suppression of three key elements which the Kuna perceived as crucial for their ethnic survival (though not specifically in these terms!), namely, “dress, drink and dance”. Howe uses this succinct alliterative phrase (1991: 43) in his discussion on the ideological causes of the Kuna Revolution. The common denominator is that each factor relates to Kuna women and the culture’s creation of difference and separation from outsiders.

The strong link between dress, a form of material culture, and the ethnic identity of the Kuna people was demonstrated by the strength of their reaction to attempts by the Panamanian government to force Kuna women to wear Western style clothing and cease wearing their mola blouses and nose rings. From 1919 the Panamanian government instituted bans on the wearing of components of a Kuna woman’s dress. Kuna resistance included insubordination, violence and migration to more remote islands. Howe labels attempts to break these ties as amounting to the killing of their culture, and he terms this as “ethnocide” (Howe, 1986: 214; 1998: 177; 2009: 82, 67-70).

Whilst the campaign of ethnocide lasted for six years, Howe (1991: 43) notes that Kuna women’s dress “already functioned as an ethnic marker”, hence the resistance from the beginning of the government campaign in 1919 until the Kuna Revolution. This is interesting because at this time the mola, as

discussed in Chapter 4, would appear to be less than a generation old, since there is no record of molas, with appliqué panels covering the majority of the front and back of blouses, prior to the turn of the century.

The granting to the Kuna of a province in which the Kuna leaders became the governing body was a direct result of the Kuna Revolution and precipitated the Kuna sense of nationhood, with the leaders encouraging the women to wear mola blouses, as shown in the quotation above, as part of the complete dress ensemble.

5.2.2 The cultural lifecycle of a mola

An approach suggested by Kopytoff (1986) to studying the material culture of both Western and non-Western societies is to look at the life-cycle of an artefact, which he terms the “cultural biography of things”. He outlines the questions this approach could consider:

“Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized [sic] ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life’, and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?” Kopytoff (1986: 66-67).

The strengths of this approach include an extension of the cultural authentication interpretation of the way outside influences are adopted by indigenous groups. He states that: “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff, 1986: 67).

The cultural biography of the Kuna mola may be considered in terms of the cultural authentication process. By the time the process had completed its first iteration, the mola blouse had become identified with Kuna women. In the long term the mola became identified with the Kuna nation. I am suggesting that the continuity of the mola blouse as a cultural identifier relates to the lifecycle of the mola. The components involving acquisition of materials to make a mola were discussed in the Chapter 4; the ethnoaesthetic design criteria and the design influences are discussed in Chapter 6, and the function of the mola blouse as part of a Kuna woman’s dress ensemble is discussed in Chapter 7. Three other aspects of the mola, in terms of its cultural biography, relate to: the importance of mola sewing as a meaningful daily activity for Kuna women; other uses of the mola; and the commercialisation of molas. These aspects are addressed in Part 3 of this dissertation.

Further elucidating the process of establishing a cultural biography, Kopytoff suggests that:

“What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. A culturally informed economic biography of an object

would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986: 68).

In terms of commoditisation of objects, the Kuna leaders have promoted the mola as an item of dress and later as an item of trade. The opposite of commoditisation, explains Kopytoff, is “singularization” [sic] whereby an item resists becoming a commodity, sometimes because the host society places a sacred value on the item. There is a continuum between commoditisation and singularisation which can become circular, with items becoming valued as singular after a period of commoditisation (Kopytoff 1986: 73-80).⁹²

The Kuna mola may be considered one in which commoditisation has been very extensive for at least one hundred years, similar to Western societies. Kuna trading was not always monetarily based, frequently using the coconut as currency. Molas would have been considered as items with an “exchange worth” (Kopytoff 1986: 83) from the early 1900s when outsiders offered trade items in exchange. Thus their value has been, from the early days in their development, both as a singular unique object and as a commodity. Whilst the mola has a meaningful role in Kuna society, it has always had a dual role as a commodity. There is little evidence that molas were sewn for trade until the 1960s⁹³, rather molas were traded when old and no longer valued; or traded in times of need, sometimes even when the mola was incomplete⁹⁴.

5.2.3 Section summary

In this section I have provided evidence that the mola blouse was part of the identity of Kuna Indian women by the end of the second decade of the 20th century. The Kuna Revolution was in part the result of the suppression of the mola blouse as part of the Kuna women’s dress ensemble. Whilst there were other issues which led to the Kuna Revolution, the creation of difference by Kuna Indian women through their distinct dress, and the attempts by the Panamanian government to force Kuna women to wear Western clothes, demonstrated the importance of the maintenance of difference for the entire Kuna people. I have also shown that the mola became a valued commodity, with a cultural lifecycle beyond its use as an item of dress, from the early 1900s.

⁹² In Western society, molas originally collected as souvenirs by tourists have become valued as “primitive art” and increased in value, thus returning to the state termed by Kopytoff (1986: 81-83) as singular.

⁹³ Sewn for trade here means a mola was sewn with no intention of being used to make a mola blouse; purposeful commercialisation may date from the establishment of mola cooperatives in the mid-1960s with the assistance of Peace Corps volunteers (McGeary, 1986).

⁹⁴ Some molas in the “reference collection” were found to be incomplete or showed evidence of not being worn, for example the basting (tacking) was in place, from 1917. Some unworn molas were likely to have been sewn by Kuna girls to be part of their trousseau or dowry. Stout (1947: 67) found that it was common for at least twelve molas to be sewn prior to marriage.

5.3 Dissemination of mola expertise

Before commencing Part 3, it is useful to make some comments about the spread of mola expertise. It is significant that the beginning of the cultural authentication process corresponds with a time during which the Kuna communities were migrating from the interior of Panama to the coast and from the coast to the San Blas islands. The move to the islands has been discussed in Chapter 4 and is believed to have commenced in the mid-1800s and to have been completed by the 1920s or 1930s (Howe, 1986: 10; 1998: 15), though a few communities remain on the coast and the islanders continue to regularly visit the coastal areas to harvest crops, hunt, fish and obtain medicinal plants.⁹⁵

Migration between San Blas islands was explored by Keeler (1953) as part of his investigation into the high incidence of albinism amongst the Kuna.⁹⁶ Keeler determined that there were a number of trails linking the remaining mountain Kuna communities to the coast, facilitating visits between kinship groups. His informants reported to him of extensive inter-island migration:

“The most extensive migrations took place when Padre Gasso founded his Catholic mission at Nargana in 1907. Many Indians from Nargana fled from the ‘horrors’ of Christianity and civilization [sic], founding the towns of Tigre, Ukupa, Irkanti, Itirrkanti. Individual families took refuge in various already established towns that would receive them along the coast. . . .

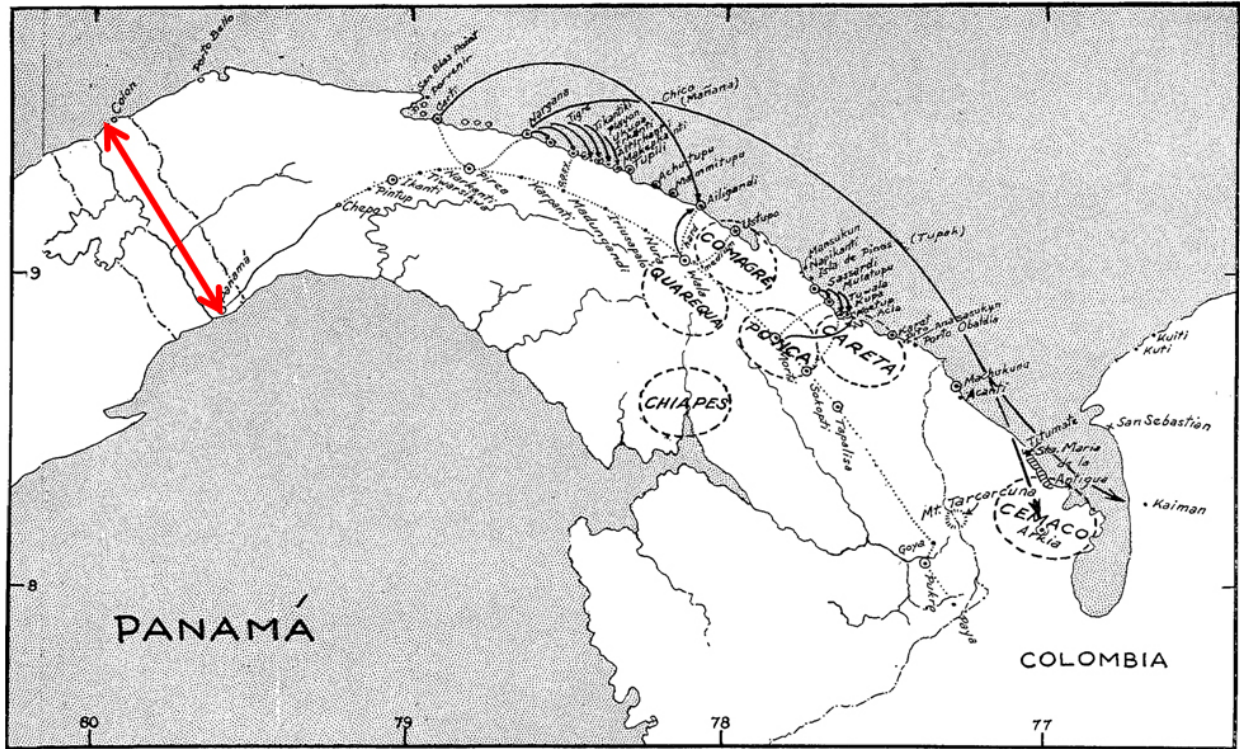
Again, in 1924, during the [Kuna] Revolution, another migration took place although it was not as extensive as the 1907 shift of population” (Keeler, 1953: 171).

Figure 27 shows that this migration, whilst sometimes to neighbouring islands, also included migration from the western end of the San Blas archipelago to as far away as the eastern end and into neighbouring Colombia, encompassing large distances.

⁹⁵ Small communities remained in the interior. Since the 1960s, there has been substantial out-migration to the urban areas, mainly Panama City where over half the Kuna population now resides. In the beginning of the 20th century the migration was circular, meaning Kuna men, and sometimes women, left the San Blas communities for periods, typically a year to work, and then returned to their home island.

⁹⁶ He secured the cooperation of the Kuna by his involvement in the preparation and printing of the first Kuna orthography in the form of a child’s ABC. I have seen copies in the Smithsonian archives; as seen in his hand-drawn map in Figure 5, Keeler was an accomplished graphic artist. He was assisted in his fieldwork by Western and Kuna (Protestant) missionaries and visited most of the inhabited Kuna islands over successive visits.

Figure 27. Kuna migration within the San Blas area.



LOCATION OF THE CARIBE-CUNA TOWNS

Figure 4

Map of Panama showing most of the Kuna settlements. Arrows indicate the known migrations of the past fifty years. (Note: After the cut for the above map was made, it was discovered by the author that the towns of Achutupu and Mammitupu lie between Ailigandi and Ustupo, rather than between Ailigandi and Tupili as shown on the map.)

This map includes migration likely to have occurred 1907-1953. To give an indication of scale, the road distance between Colon and Panama, indicated in red on the map, is approx. 80 km [49 miles], around the same length as the Panama Canal measured from the deep waters of the Atlantic to the deep waters of the Pacific (www.pancanal.com, accessed 8 June 2012). Source: Keeler (1953: 168). Original caption is included below the map.

This inter-island migration would have promoted the dissemination of mola expertise from its early development. Continued migration patterns explain the fact that specific styles have not developed in specific geographic areas. The relative uniformity of materials used to sew molas most likely relates to the supply sources, in all likelihood primarily from Colombian trading boats which are known to have made regular stops at the main Kuna communities, and later small Kuna-operated stores on some islands. Kuna men working away may also have sourced materials from Colon and Panama City as gifts or to re-sell to Kuna women on the islands.

Frequent travel between islands for social visits, trade, lifecycle events, Kuna historic events and perhaps to access medical services, would promote the dispersion of mola *fashion*.⁹⁷ The sleeves of mola blouses have changed in size and shape; the neckline has also changed so that the blouse now has a differentiated front and back; the size of mola panels has decreased over time. Whilst the early molas, discussed in Chapter 4, were not uniform in size or shape, there has developed, over the 20th century, much greater diversity in mola fashion.

These changes to the appearance of the mola blouse, and the overall dress ensemble of Kuna women, are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 6).

5.4 Summary of Part 2

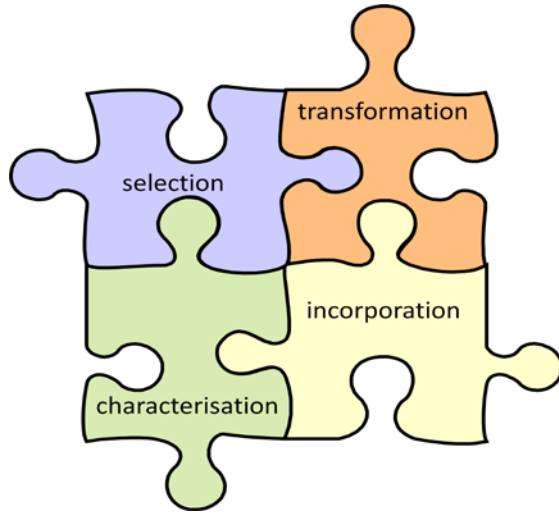
This chapter concludes Part 2 of this dissertation, in which I have demonstrated that the cultural authentication framework can be applied to explain the development of the mola blouse. The mola blouse can be seen as a product of cultural authentication, achieved by a process carried out over a period of around 20 years, from the end of the 19th century. It has been shown that molas, as part of Kuna women's dress, were an important part of Kuna identity prior to 1919 and that this is exemplified by the strong resistance to the prohibition of various components of the Kuna women's dress ensemble in the years leading up to the Kuna Revolution in 1925.

The staging of the four components of the concept of cultural authentication – selection, transformation, characterisation and incorporation – is not able to be separated into distinct phases, though on the completion of the selection and transformation components the mola blouse came into being. Referring to the blouse as a mola has been shown to be a logical step, since the word was used for gifts of cloth from the 18th century. Continued development of Kuna words to describe the different sewing techniques, including layering, designs and filler techniques, would most likely have occurred concurrently with the identification of the mola with the Kuna people and continued afterwards. The spread of the mola would have been facilitated by the trade and migration patterns of the Kuna people, between settlements on the coastal strip and the San Blas islands. It is known that trade continued with the Kuna people remaining in the interior areas of the Darien.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ The rapid spread of designs on mola panels has been noted by many observers (Salvador, 1976a: 47; Perrin, 1999: 34). This may be explained by continued inter-island travel, but is also facilitated due to the practice of a group of women making near identical blouses for a special event, multiplying the exposure of a new design and also because it is known that Kuna women continuously seek new inspiration for mola designs, so when a new design is observed it is frequently copied, oftentimes without knowledge of the source of the design. Hence whilst a design which may have had a meaning to the Kuna woman who initially sewed it, Kuna women who copied the design may simply be attracted to it visually.

⁹⁸ Museum collections, including the NMAI, the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum, contain molas from the interior. These have not been the subject of research and perhaps later scholars will compare these with molas from the San Blas.

Figure 28. Completion of the cultural authentication process.



The four components work together to complete the process.

The cultural authentication concept does not answer all the questions: for example, there has been no evidence found that sewing techniques were taught to the Kuna men or women, either formally or informally. It is likely that the men copied the sewing of sailors in developing the ability to sew rudimentary trousers and shirts and that this knowledge influenced Kuna women's rectilinear design for the mola blouse. The Kuna men are known to have used sewing machines and this skill could also have been taught to Kuna women by them. It is possible that missionaries taught the Kuna women to sew appliqué and to embroider.⁹⁹

The simple rectilinear sewing techniques used for the mola blouses can be easily modified to accommodate varying body shapes and sizes. The drawstring neck allows adjustments to fit once the garment is placed on the body. The early blouses were very large and would most likely be large enough for maternity use; and alternatively could be worn as a smock-like garment for young girls.

The advantage of the cultural authentication approach is that it provides a lens through which to view the development of Kuna blouses. By considering each of the four components – selection, transformation, characterisation and incorporation in detail, the cultural authentication process sharpens the focus onto the origin of the mola, the actual pre-conditions necessary for its development, to become an important and integral component of Kuna dress. Cultural authentication, originally developed as a concept to explain the origin of Kalabari cut-thread cloth by Eicher and Erekosima, has been shown here to be applicable to another non-Western indigenous textile development. The four components proposed by Eicher and Erekosima are applicable to Kuna molas.

⁹⁹ Perhaps later researchers will find historical evidence.

Kuna cosmology provides a mystical explanation for the origin of the mola:

“Kuna oral tradition teaches how Olonagegiryai, one of the wise mothers of the tribe, traveled to a sacred place called Galu Dugbis, a place where all the designs and colors of the molas dwell. She brought back the art, the designs, and the technique of the molas, and taught Kuna women how to sew it using cotton. The Kuna men were jealous and tried to stop her from teaching this art to the women. Olonagegiryai persevered and defied them because she was bringing good to the community” (De Obaldia, 2005: 356-357)¹⁰⁰.

An explanation based on the four components of cultural authentication has been provided in Part 2 of this dissertation – Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – which is based on the interpretation of available historical evidence, careful examination of blouses in museum collections and scholarly research. My research appears to be the first detailed discussion of the cultural authentication process applied to an American Indian group in South America, however the colonisation process, the availability of trade goods and the missionisation process parallel in both continents. My research may be relevant for future students of indigenous textiles in both North and South America.

¹⁰⁰ De Obaldia cites as her reference for this information an official Kuna publication: Wagua (2000) *En Defensa De La Vida Y Su Armonía : Elementos De La Religión Kuna*. Kuna Yala: Instituto de Investigaciones Koskun Kalu del Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna. Earlier Kuna work referred to Nakekiryai [now *Olonagegiryai*] and Kalu Tukpis [now *Galú Dugbis*] reflecting ongoing changes with Kuna orthography.

Part 3 Cultural Preservation

CHAPTER 6 MOLAS: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT

In Part 2 of this dissertation I demonstrated how the mola blouse came into being by a process of cultural authentication, which resulted in the mola blouse being recognised as an integral component of Kuna identity. In Part 3, Cultural Preservation, Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, I evaluate the *raison d'être* for the mola. Why has it persisted as a component of dress, sewn and worn by Kuna women? How has the dress of Kuna women changed in the last one hundred years? What role does the mola play as part of a strategy of cultural survival?

I begin this chapter by outlining the role of museums in collecting ethnological artefacts, particularly from cultures where the local conditions are detrimental to long term storage. The physical climate in the San Blas islands and the political climate in Panama City are not conducive to the preservation of Kuna molas.

I continue this chapter by explaining the rationale for establishing a representative “reference collection” of molas from museum collections, how this was achieved and what can be learnt from a detailed examination of molas collected between 1906 and 2007. I outline the criteria used to select which molas to study and which characteristics were examined.

Museum collections provide evidence not only of the evolution of mola blouses but also the continuities and discontinuities of style, technique, iconography and colour preferences. Development of a mola database provides a means to compare mola characteristics over the last one hundred years and to gain an understanding of the rate of change in a form of non-Western indigenous dress.

In Chapter 7, I compare some of the molas examined in Chapter 6 with contemporaneous photographs, in order to visually analyse the dress of Kuna women *as it is worn*. Chapter 8 examines the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for sewing and wearing molas and Chapter 9, which concludes Part 3 of this dissertation, examines the role of the mola in Kuna strategies to promote cultural continuity.

6.1 Benefits of studying molas in museum collections

Lou Taylor, in *Establishing Dress History* (2004) notes that, from the end of the 19th century, dress in ethnological museum collections was collected by anthropologists and ethnologists as part of their fieldwork and that these collections were sometimes motivated by “scientific racism” (2004: 82-88). This was in fact the case with a number of the early Kuna researchers, who were motivated to seek out and conduct investigations into the characteristics of the “White Indians of Darien”, including Marsh (1934) and Harris (1926). There is a high incidence of albinism amongst the Kuna Indians and early explorers to Panama considered the possibility of the existence of an undiscovered tribe of white Indians. Many of the early photographs of Kuna Indians contain albino children and adults and the accompanying captions specifically refer to them. The Kuna Indians became one of the most studied

indigenous groups following this early eugenicist interest, influenced partly due to the close proximity to the Panama Canal Zone during its construction; and in the decades after due to the strong American presence within it. As a result there are substantial collections of Kuna artefacts in major US museums and a few museums in Europe and the UK.

Mola blouses, but far more commonly mola panels excised from mola blouses prior to acquisition, may be found in many museums with words such as ethnology, anthropology, natural history, textile, cultural history, world culture or American Indian in their name. This variety of nomenclature reflects the diverse considerations given to the study of Kuna culture over the history of museum collecting since the beginning of the 20th century and has resulted in a disconnect between the study of the complete dress ensemble worn by Kuna women and mola panels which are only a small part. The mola panels are worthy of separate study due to their highly developed iconography, workmanship and artistry, however to understand the role of the mola, as it has evolved in Kuna society, it is considered important to understand the composition of the complete dress ensemble and this is discussed in Chapter 7.

Previous research (Kapp, 1972; Parker & Neal, 1977; Perrin, 1999) has generally focused on the study of mola panels, with the exception of Jennings-Rentenaar (2005) who examined mola blouses in one museum.¹⁰¹ By studying complete mola blouses, additional information about garment style, the fabric used for the yoke and sleeves and any applied decorations will provide further material evidence for dating assessment. Some indicators of age may also be possible by the identification of events portrayed in the words or images on the mola panels related to known historical events, for example election candidates or the national census. The meaning of the motifs incorporated into molas will not be considered in depth, since their meaning has been the subject of extensive anthropological research since the 1920s (Agnew, 1956; Wassen, 1964; Hirschfeld, 1976; Salvador, 1976a; Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976a, 1976b; Hirschfeld, 1977a, 1977b; Nordenskiöld, 1977 [1938]; Helms, 1981; Salvador, 1997; Perrin, 1999).¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ These molas are from the Denison Museum, Ohio, the majority dating from 1964 to 1969 and Jennings-Rentenaar's research is based on an assessment of 40 Kuna molas primarily for the purpose of comparing the quality of the mola panels with the quality of the overall mola blouse.

¹⁰² The meaning of designs on mola panels has no relevance to Kuna women who sew them, according to fieldwork by Fortis conducted in 2003-2004, though the women were interested in sharing details of the construction techniques and design types. Fortis reports that his "obsession with the meaning of designs [on mola panels] appeared to be meaningless to Kuna women" (2008: 9). See Chapter 8 for a discussion on the meaning of molas for Kuna women.

6.1.1 Usefulness of museum collections for the study of ethnological objects

There are no public museums in Panama with historic collections of mola blouses, however as mentioned above, extensive collections exist in museums in the US, Canada, Germany, the UK and Sweden. These collections have been acquired during scientific expeditions to the San Blas islands, by workers in the Canal Zone, by missionaries and by traders. As a result, it is possible to study Kuna mola blouses in museum collections.¹⁰³

In a philosophical vein, writing in the Afterword of an anthology of *Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, Clifford (1985: 236-246) reflects on the place of objects from non-Western cultures in Western museums. He posits that objects, which would by his definition include Kuna Indian artefacts, oscillate between being considered by curators as belonging either in a natural history museum as a cultural artefact, with a scientific classification as part of the study of human societies, or alternatively in an art gallery where the object is appreciated as a thing of beauty, based on a study of aesthetics. He notes that “the separation of ethnography and art has not, however, been watertight. Certain classes of object have moved from one context to the other” (Clifford, 1985: 242). This ambivalence about museum objects is relevant to the study of Kuna mola blouses since it has become apparent that many of these artefacts in museum’s collections have been treated as aesthetically pleasing objects and their documentation histories do not include a careful scientific assessment and often include very little documentation¹⁰⁴. Pearce (1989: 9) noted over two decades ago that “the study of material culture in its museum aspect, embracing not only the formal interpretation of artefacts, but also the analysis of collections and their history, and that of the museum as a cultural phenomenon is only just starting”.

Collections documentation is of critical importance for researchers in order to be able to verify theories of cultural change. Museums need to have available the date and place of collection of each object in their ethnology collections in order to contextualise the artefacts. Kaeppler (1989: 86) stresses that “objects are material manifestations of societal transformations and form a crucial part of the understanding of society and culture and their changes over time”. This argument is extended by Furst, who states that:

“Dated material culture provides a useful diachronic record of culture in transition. Thus, objects in museums can enrich and qualify ethnohistoric data in reconstructing historical processes since ethnographies present native societies often implicitly as changeless” (Furst, 1989: 98).

¹⁰³ The situation regarding museums in Panama is discussed in Chapter 10.

¹⁰⁴ This became evident during visits in 2009 and 2010 to six museums in the US holding large mola collections: Denison Museum, Ohio; Fowler Museum, UCLA; National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC; National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC; the Textile Museum, Washington DC; and the Benton Museum, Connecticut.

He continues by suggesting that this is because, typically, fieldwork is carried out by anthropologists over too short a time period to be able to quantify change. He decries the fact that research into museum collections in the 1960s and 1970s found that many ethnographic artefacts had very little accompanying documentation (Furst, 1989: 98-103). In the 1980s it became evident to researchers that not only were museum curators become concerned about this scarcity of documentation, but that:

“Anthropology museums have a direct responsibility, not only to their visitor audiences which are drawn primarily from their own society, but also to the people whose cultural material they display” (Reynolds, 1989: 111).

When there is limited documentation, Reynolds (1989: 116) suggests that information can be gleaned by careful examination of the object, to answer questions such as “What is it made of?”; “How was it made?”; “What can it tell us about the people and their culture?” He also predicts that scientific analysis will become an important tool “to draw information from the artefacts themselves” (Reynolds 1989: 117). He mentions also the benefits of sharing information between museums with collections from the same cultures.¹⁰⁵

6.1.2 The role of museums in preserving Kuna molas

The value which can be obtained by examining museum repositories of material culture is frequently underestimated. As time elapses and there are no longer people or artefacts remaining in the original communities, the role of ethnology collections is being re-evaluated. Kuna molas have become very popular as collection pieces in Western countries, but the role of museums as a source material for Kuna communities in the San Blas islands is now becoming valued.

Phillips (2005) supports the case for maintaining museum collections of artefacts from Native American Indian groups. She refers to the possibilities of studying a class of museum artefact, together with archival research to gain a better understanding of the ways different styles develop. With particular reference to Native Indian tribes of Canada, she notes that the benefits to them of sharing results of such research include a reciprocal sharing of cultural knowledge with the museum curators. In regard to Kuna molas in US museums, this consultative process was followed by Salvador (1997: xxii) as part of the preparation for *The Art of Being Kuna* exhibition in 1997.

The humid tropical climate and the lack of adequate storage in the San Blas islands, where the Kuna people live, make it very difficult for mola blouses to survive in good condition¹⁰⁶. Howe makes reference to Kuna artefacts in foreign museums thus: “Kuna recognize [sic] that had this material remained in the tropics, it would have disintegrated or been discarded” (2009: 273, footnote 39).

¹⁰⁵ Information collected during museum research will be shared through the public availability of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁶ Salvador (2003: 61) provides two additional reasons – “a [Kuna] woman’s molas were generally buried with her” and mola blouses had been sold to foreigners since the 1920s. This may also explain the enthusiasm for obtaining photos of old mola designs found in books, referred to in this chapter. Similarly, Arthur (2011: 3) notes that few Hawaiian quilts from the early 19th century remain due to the climate and because on a woman’s death many of her textiles were burnt.

When Hoover donated a large collection of Kuna artefacts to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in 1976 he explained that:

*“our first objective was to bring together and preserve the finest and oldest – as well as the best of the contemporary – items produced by the Cunas since these primarily cloth and wooden objects so quickly deteriorate and rot away due to the dampness of the climate of the islands. We sought to obtain as many of the older, traditional pieces as possible, and we generally had the full cooperation of the island tribal chiefs . . .”*¹⁰⁷

It seems from the work of Salvador (1997), Howe (2009) and Hoover (1976) that the Kuna leaders recognise the benefits of their artefacts being housed within museum collections, so that later generations of Kuna will have access to their cultural heritage. There are no museums in Panama with collections of molas, hence US museums may continue to be the main repositories of Kuna material culture accessible to the Kuna people. This is further discussed in Chapter 10.

The value of a museum to the Kuna people was conveyed to Fortis during his fieldwork as being “like a *kalu*, a spiritual village where cultural skills and knowledge are kept under the surveillance of the chiefs of animals” (Fortis, 2010: 43). In the Kuna language a *kalu* has been glossed, in the spiritual sense, as a “domain”; a “stronghold” or a “sanctuary” (Chapin, 1983: 557). Fortis mentions this role of the museum as a *kalu* in relation to some of the Kuna artefacts in the Gotebörg Ethnographic Museum, and I suggest that this could be extended, in view of the experiences of Hoover and Salvador, referred to above, to be a reflection of the prevalent Kuna attitude.

Scholars have also mentioned that Kuna women appreciate viewing photographs of mola panels in museums (Salvador, 1997; Perrin, 1999) which are used as design inspirations and are copied. Kuna women have been able to revive ancestral and other early designs by copying molas in museum collections. Salvador noted that Kuna women, learning that she would be visiting overseas museums as part of the research for *The Art of Being Kuna* exhibition, asked her to bring back photographs of molas for them to copy¹⁰⁸. Perrin describes the welcome he received when he showed Kuna women in the San Blas photographs of molas from museums in Goteborg and London as “a kind of reverse ethnographic study” (Perrin, 1999: 34). Kuna women were keen to view these photographs and also to copy the designs, to sew on their own molas. He believes that sharing these photographs with Kuna women “was reinforcing collective memory, stimulating reflection on the past and assessment of the present. Nostalgia was being awakened, creativity was being stirred” (Perrin, 1999: 34).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Letter in NMNH archives dated April 29, 1976 relates to his donation of a collection of Kuna artefacts to the museum.

¹⁰⁸ Personal communication, 23 March 2009.

¹⁰⁹ For these reasons it is suggested that the Kuna people will strongly support the concept of “digital repatriation” for molas; see Chapter 10.

In his most recent book *Chiefs, Scribes, and Ethnographers: Kuna Culture from Inside and Out*, Howe (2009) considers the ways the Kuna people have actively portrayed their culture to the outside world. Salvador and Howe, in the introduction to *The Art of Being Kuna* (1997) observe that:

“The Kuna are keenly aware of how outsiders observe and represent them, and that their survival as a people depends not just on the internal strength of their society but also on a dialogue with the outside world. They cannot share their poetry and chanting with others as readily as they have shared their mola art, but it matters very much to them that outsiders understand the worth and richness of their culture. Anthropologists and museums have played an important role in advancing this goal” (Salvador & Howe, 1997: 51).

The four themes mentioned above, namely the lack of good documentation of ethnographic collections in museums; the importance of studying these collections to assess cultural changes over time; the value to contemporary people of non-Western cultures of these museum collections; and the importance of a consultative process between museum curators and representatives of non-Western communities in examining and exhibiting objects from these collections, each support the benefits of studying museum collections of molas.

6.2 Establishing a mola reference collection

It became evident in discussions with curators and ethnographic staff that many mola collections had scant provenance information apart from the date acquired by the museum, in most cases by donation¹¹⁰. The molas may have been made many years prior to the date they were donated or purchased by the respective museums¹¹¹. This lack of reliable provenance information is not unique to

¹¹⁰ In the US for many years donations to museums have been attractive due to tax relief exemptions. I have found that many anthropologists and scientists who have worked in the San Blas islands over the course of their careers have donated large collections when they cease working in the field. This is the case for collections in the Denison Museum, the Textile Museum, the NMNH and the NMAI. The Benton collection originates from the 15 year period when the donor and his wife lived in Panama and was donated in 1994 in memory of the wife. As a result of the length of time between collection and donation, important information such as collection date and island of origin appears to be frequently unknown. In general, museum staff collectors and members of research expeditions deposited artefacts soon after collection. Longer term researchers tended to donate at the end of their careers.

¹¹¹ Karen Sommer at the Benton Museum provided the documentation associated with its collection which provides no detailed assessment of the age of the 300 molas, apart from nominating a group of eleven molas dating from earlier than the 1960s, possibly from the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s or earlier. This is a broad time frame. This collection was accumulated between 1963 and 1977. Ann Rowe provided information about collections donated to the Textile Museum, and reports that many donors were not able to specify the date acquired, and frequently gave a broad date range of 20-30 years. The NMNH database provides detailed information about its collections, but frequently date of donation is the only known date, except when items were specifically collected as part of Smithsonian sponsored expeditions. This is similar to the American Indian Museum [now NMAI] which was a private museum until it joined the Smithsonian network in 1989, though the founder did commission specific research and sent collectors to various countries including Panama to build up its collection, so these dates are known.

Kuna collections; however it presents significant difficulties for historical studies because there is little supplementary material available to assist. This fact presents challenges for museum curators and collectors, and adds to difficulties in placing molas in their cultural contexts. By studying artefacts with known collection dates¹¹², my research aims to provide guidance about the likely time of fabrication of molas which have no documentation.

The approach taken to tracking changes in the design, materials and workmanship of Kuna molas, commenced with the establishment of a “reference collection” of a representative sample across the study period, nominated as early twentieth century to early twenty-first century, from museum collections.¹¹³

Sourcing artefacts to populate this “reference collection” involved detailed research since there was no individual collection which met the following selection criteria:

- Reliable provenance, particularly date of collection, for a representative sample over the last one hundred years, since a chronology of development was required;
- Complete Kuna blouses were given priority in the sample because more information could be elicited from them, and since mola panels are sewn in pairs, the complete blouse would ensure that the two molas studied were part of a pair. Some museum collections of mola panels do include pairs, and catalogue these together; others have individual panels which may have been collected as a pair but have been separated during the museum registration process;
- It is known that the Kuna Indians have been producing and selling molas specifically for the tourist trade since the 1960s, possibly earlier. Wherever possible items were selected which showed evidence of use since *made for trade* molas may not reflect contemporary mola styles or quality
- Where provenanced collections of mola blouses were not available, mola panels were included;
- Distribution, wherever possible of comparable numbers of molas from each decade;
- Wherever possible more than one source was selected for each decade, either from the same museum or from different museums. The purpose of this was to minimise possible collector bias, created by the collector’s aesthetic preferences, place of collection, relationship with the supplier etc.
- It was also hypothesised that collectors commissioned by a museum or working for a museum would have different collection strategies to Western visitors or residents of the Panama Canal Zone, two of the major collector backgrounds. Similarly missionaries and anthropologists who lived with the Kuna people for extended periods may also have different selection biases.
- Molas which came into collections, whether by direct museum collection or by donation, close to the date of collection, were preferred. This reduces concerns about changes in the condition of

¹¹² Samples of mola blouses studied were chosen based on available museum documentation including known collection date. Many mola blouses in museums do not have detailed provenance information. The sample includes mola blouses from different collectors and different collector categories, over different time periods, with efforts made to include samples from each decade of the study period.

¹¹³ The earliest mola in the sample was collected in 1906; the latest in 2007. These were supplemented by a few additional molas collected during fieldwork for this dissertation in 2010.

items between collection and accession into a museum collection as well as the possible unreliability of collection date.¹¹⁴

Research in Panama in February and March 2010 confirmed that there are no mola institutional collections there, either in a museum in Panama City or in the San Blas islands¹¹⁵. As mentioned above, a number of museums in the US have large holdings of Kuna artefacts, including molas. The proximity to Panama, and the inclusion of the study of the native peoples of Central and South America, together with the study of the Native Americans in the US, has influenced the collecting and acquisition policies of US museums. It was found that many of the mola collections had no reliable provenance and had been infrequently studied since the time of acquisition. Contact was made with a number of US museums and collections identified which contained mola collections for this research, based on the selection criteria discussed above. No one museum contained mola blouses or mola panels with examples from each of the decades to be studied in my research and no US museum contained sufficient examples from the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the “reference collection” of molas for this research is from these six museums:

- National Museum of the American Indian, a Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC
From <1920, 1920s, 1940s, 1950s
- Denison Museum, at Denison University in Granville, Ohio
From 1940s, 1950s, 1960s
- The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago
From <1920, 1950s, 1960s, 1990s, >2000
- Logan Museum of Anthropology, at Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin
From 1950s, 1960s, 1970s
- National Museum of Natural History, a Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC
From <1920, 1920s, 1930s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s
- Ethnologisches Museum, formerly the Museum fur Volkerkunde, Berlin
From 1920s, 1970s, 1980s.

It can be seen that the “reference collection” includes molas from three museums for the period prior to 1920; three museums for the 1920s; one museum for the 1930s; two museums for the 1940s; four

¹¹⁴ Molas were examined at other museums also which have excellent collections, but excluded due to lack of reliable provenance. These include MINPAKU, Ethnology Museum in Osaka; The Textile Museum in Washington DC; the Benton Museum at the University of Connecticut, Hartford; the Fowler Museum for Cultural History at UCLA, Los Angeles; the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. After the “reference collection” was studied, I examined additional molas at the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and in private collections in Japan and Australia. This knowledge is included in this dissertation but is not included in the “reference collection” database at this stage.

¹¹⁵ I was told that prior to the Noriega years (1968-1989) there was a museum with a mola collection.

museums for the 1950s; four museums for the 1960s; three museums for the 1970s, two museums for the 1980s; and one museum for the 1990s and post-2000.

Thirty different collectors are represented and Appendix D includes the names of the collectors for each of the six museums and the decades from which these mola blouses and mola panels were sourced. It also includes information about the wide ranging backgrounds of these collectors. Where the donor was not the collector and the collector's name is known this is the name recorded. For comparison purposes, molas collected during fieldwork in 2010 are compared to the post-2000 collection.

The "reference collection" comprises 162 mola blouses, 13 pairs of mola panels and 72 individual panels. Table 9 below shows the distribution by decade. There are 422 mola panels in the sample, including 350 in pairs which comprises 82.9% of the "reference collection". The count for the pairs includes the panels in the blouses and the panels in pairs. This is important because examination of pairs enables comparison of panels in terms of techniques used and the arrangement of the layers in the panels, since many panels have fabric swapped between pairs of panels and design motifs in a pair of panels are often related. I will be arguing later that museum collections have a role in collecting and displaying Kuna molas, preferably complete mola blouses, and if not possible then the focus should be on pairs of molas. Single mola panels remove a sense of the panels belonging to a blouse, and the intention of the maker in creating a relationship between the molas in a pair is not longer apparent. There is also a role for museums to collect *made for trade* molas, which may include individual panels, though some pairs and complete mola blouses are also *made for trade*.

Table 9. Distribution of molas in the reference collection by decade.

| Year | Blouse | Pair of panels | Panel | total |
|---------------|------------|----------------|-----------|------------|
| <1920 | 17 | - | - | 17 |
| 1920s | 39 | 4 | 4 | 47 |
| 1930s | 20 | - | - | 20 |
| 1940s | 7 | 1 | - | 8 |
| 1950s | 10 | - | 13 | 23 |
| 1960s | 19 | - | 5 | 24 |
| 1970s | 29 | 1 | 1 | 31 |
| 1980s | 4 | - | 18 | 22 |
| 1990s | 1 | 4 | 11 | 16 |
| >2000 | 16 | 3 | 20 | 39 |
| Totals | 162 | 13 | 72 | 247 |

The 1940s is under-represented in this sample, most likely due to the impact of the Second World War on visiting the region and the decline in anthropological research during this period. Some of the molas collected at a later time may date from the 1940s and mention will be made of this later. The 1920s

was a prolific decade of collecting by museum-based collectors, Americans living in Panama and a large collection acquired by Lady Richmond Brown and Mr Mitchell-Hedges can now be found in the NMAI, the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and other museums.

In relation to the time of collection, it is important to note two points: firstly, when a museum records information for a collection date over a range of years, the latest date of collection has been used, to minimise the likelihood of recording a mola as older than it may be. Wherever possible research was undertaken to narrow the range, and where a range wider than five years was given the item was not included in this sample.¹¹⁶

Secondly, the actual date a mola was sewn may have been many years earlier. This will relate to the age of a mola at the time the Kuna woman or man parted with the blouse or panel – for example, it may have been considered too old or in poor condition and no longer wearable; it may have been part of a large ownership of blouses and the design was no longer popular; it may have been kept for many years to use as a model for sewing later molas. Alternatively, it may have been new, perhaps not even yet completed, however the mola may have been traded for a needed item or for cash.

It is rare to find contemporary examples of artefacts in museum collections, since many items are donated by major non-museum based collectors at the end of their collecting lives. It was thus providential that the Field Museum in Chicago had received a donation collected over the period 1993 to 2007, and this museum had also sent a museum curator on a trip to collect Kuna molas in 2006.

The earliest mola blouse in the “reference collection” was collected in 1906 by Eleanor Yorke Bell on the island of Cidra in the San Blas and donated to the Smithsonian in 1911.¹¹⁷ It is illustrated in Figure 29 and Figure 30.

¹¹⁶ In most cases the range was no more than 2 years; a few were up to 5 years – I spent considerable time in researching collection dates using museum and other archival material in order to refine dates as much as possible. In some cases the museum dates were found to be inaccurate.

¹¹⁷ Bell donated one other mola blouse and one mola panel in 1942; these have no collection details. These three artefacts are now in the NMNH. The 1906 example alone represents the period prior to 1917 in the “reference collection”.

Figure 29. The oldest mola blouse in the reference collection.



Source: Photographs of blouse from NMNH online catalogue. N01 1906.

It can be seen that one side of this blouse, either prior to donation or during exhibition or storage, has become faded.¹¹⁸ The faded panel, seen in Figure 29, is assumed to be the front panel since the drawstring tie was on this side. The yoke seam allowance indicates that the yoke fabric was originally pink. The photograph on the left in Figure 30 shows the panels at the side seams, clearly indicating the colour changes in this early mola. It also illustrates the way the red and navy layers have been swapped between the panels. The photograph on the right in Figure 30 shows the calico fabric used as a trim, also used as part of the base layer, seen in the photograph on the left.

Figure 30. Details from the oldest mola blouse in the reference collection.



N01 1906



Actual size (2" length of dientes)

6.3 Understanding Kuna ethnoaesthetics

The study of the Kuna aesthetic system has found strong congruence between the principles applied to molas and to other Kuna arts, especially the verbal oratory of Kuna men: “parallelism and repetition with minor variation, subtle asymmetry, filled space, embellishment, and appropriate content – basic criteria for evaluating molas – are similar to those documented for Kuna speech, chants, lullabies, and flute music” (Salvador, 2003: 59). Two components of Kuna cosmology may be considered in relation to molas: the Kuna concept of layers of the world and the Kuna view of the world as duality. The concept of layers has been reported by Nordenskiöld, who based his understanding on an explanation

¹¹⁸ The pattern of fading is not consistent with fading during wear, when only the top part of the mola panel is frequently faded since the lower part of the panel is tucked into the skirt. The pattern of the yoke and sleeve fading on this blouse also indicates sun damage. See Chapter 4 for discussion on fabric used for this blouse; see Appendix J for comments about the detailed work in these panels.

from a Kuna man speaking to him on behalf of a Kuna chief, that the Kuna world was made of eight layers:

“The two people, man and woman, stand on the earth plane. Above this there is heaven with its eight invisible layers. Round [sic] heaven the sun moves and goes down even under the earth, where there are the eight underworld layers. In the fourth one of these are the evil spirits’ chiefs and there one learns the best medicines. Beneath the eighth layer there is still another world” (Nordenskiöld, 1979 [1938]: 357).

I have found no research linking this concept of layers to the layers of a mola¹¹⁹. In Part 2, I have suggested that the way the mola layering technique developed is based on the manipulation of fabric to creatively transform it. The concept of pairs, especially of men and women to create balance and harmony in the universe, may explain why mola panels are sewn and worn in pairs. Salvador (2003: 71) was informed by Kuna women that this duality applied to molas.

The work of Salvador (1976a, 1978, 1997, 2003) is the basis of the following summary of Kuna mola aesthetic principles, with the addition of more recent research, and informed by my observations of molas and experience visiting the San Blas islands. Salvador’s research, initially carried out as part of fieldwork for her dissertation (1976), is based on interviews with Kuna women on a number of San Blas islands. She summarises her findings in these words: “the Kuna aesthetic system is based on the skillful [sic] manipulation of the technical process and the amount of work involved, together with design considerations, which include filled space, repetition with subtle variation, subtle asymmetry, visibility, complexity, and interesting subject matter” (Salvador, 2003: 60).

Table 10, which summarises Kuna mola aesthetic principles, is below.

¹¹⁹ Perrin refers to the possibility thus: “Might the technique implicitly allude to the layers of the world? Although no explicit statement or direct proof supports this hypothesis, some Kunas find it plausible” (1999: 33).

Table 10. Summary of Kuna mola aesthetic principles.

| principle | summary |
|--------------------------------|---|
| arrangement of design elements | <p>The first design arrangement relates to the layering of a mola panel. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Kuna have named different layering techniques, with a simple two layer mola described as morguinnagat; a three layer panel when the top two layers are cut together and swapped between a pair of panels is described as obogalet; a mormamaralet mola has three full layers; and a morgonikat mola has many layers, many colours and inserted pieces of fabric between layers and possibly appliqué on top as well.</p> <p>Most molas have mirror symmetry, i.e. vertical bilateral symmetry, with some small differences between sides and between pairs of molas.</p> <p>Filling of all space with repeated patterns, each with specific names which are described in Appendix B, include tas-tas, gwini-gwini, bisu-bisu. Some panels have an overall design which fills the entire panel, most commonly with two layer panels. I discuss, in Chapter 8, the relationship between the concept of filling all the mola panel, leaving no empty space, with the concept, developed by Margiotti (2010), of the saturation of Kuna village life.</p> <p>Filling the entire space is also a characteristic of folk art, and molas may be considered folk art, for example Parker and Neal's book is entitled <i>Molas: Folk Art of the Cuna Indians</i> (1977). McKendry (1983: 29-30) characterises folk art as typically filling all empty spaces and describes folk art as naïve art with the flat depiction of narrative, each in a separate part of the surface (1983: 114), similar to molas with a narrative motif; and also the lack of perspective (1983: 205).</p> <p>There is generally a thematic relationship between pairs of mola panels. Many panels are similar but not identical.</p> |
| quality of workmanship | <p>Kuna women rate highly the skill in cutting out and sewing a design to create distinct lines. Thin parallel lines on the top layer, with slightly wider lines on successive layers, are difficult to sew and create well defined shapes within a panel. Small hidden stitches enhance the design.</p> |

| principle | summary |
|----------------------------|---|
| creation of optical impact | <p>By selecting and arranging colours with care, Kuna women are able to create molas which are visible from a great distance, and have clear distinction between colours to allow different shapes within a design to be visible. Enclosed shapes are key in creating identifiable shapes within a panel. Fabric choice is important also to allow sharp folds when the fabric is turned under and hemmed, so that the delineation between colours is clear.</p> <p>Colour choices have changed over time, though there is a consistent use of colours which are highly saturated and can be seen from a distance. The harsh glare of the sun in the tropics tends to wash out colours and washing of the fabrics also fade them, so the choice of bright colours would prolong their visibility.</p> |
| design motif | <p>Kuna women select from a wide range of motifs. Some are considered ancestral designs, based on stylised objects which are part of Kuna life, as discussed in Chapter 5. The Kuna women have, from the earliest molas incorporated Western objects and images into their mola designs. Salvador notes that: “these outside elements are integrated into ‘Kuna ways’. Women select the design elements they like and add to or rearrange the original composition” (Salvador, 2003: 64). In addition to the incorporation of an outside component, many molas include aspects of Kuna life in a mola. Many molas communicate a message reflecting the strong Kuna sense of humour or a political viewpoint.</p> |

6.4 Identifying mola characteristics to examine

A literature review, together with examination of over one thousand molas informed the identification of characteristics of mola blouses to assess when examining the “reference collection” in the museum setting.¹²⁰ The study of molas was grouped into four areas: measurements, materials, design and workmanship¹²¹. A high level of detailed information was collected, with the objective of developing a

¹²⁰ Molas were examined in museums in the US, UK, Germany and Japan and in private collections of molas in the US, Germany, Japan and Australia between 2007 and 2011 and during fieldwork in Panama City and the San Blas islands in 2010.

¹²¹ As a research student, some procedures were not possible in the six museums. For example, due to the delicate nature of some molas, or because of specific museum policies, it was not possible to handle some molas; due to the large size of some molas, photographing overall mola blouses was difficult without specialised equipment; it was not possible to do fibre or dye analysis.

methodology to identify, and subsequently contextualise, the way molas have evolved. It is recognised that whilst some characteristics will remain the same across all time periods, new characteristics will appear, disappear and possibly later re-appear. A variety of styles may be worn at a given time, possibly on different islands or by different age groups.

The literature review included examination of photographs of molas in museum database catalogues and exhibition catalogues, scholarly research and firsthand accounts of living with the Kuna people. A number of books contain detailed illustrations of molas, including Parker and Neal (1977), Hartmann (1980), Patera (1984), Salvador (1997), and Perrin (1999).

Since it was hypothesised, from the photographic material sighted, that small changes over time were likely to characterise this evolution, detailed photographs and measurements were taken of each mola in the “reference collection”. Appendix D contains information about the level of detail of the information collected. In assessing specific characteristics in each of the four areas of measurements, materials, design and workmanship, the objective was to build up profiles of characteristics which relate to specific time periods. These individual characteristics were grouped together to assess whether specific groupings of characteristics will enable reliable predictions of age should sufficient factors be found from the resultant grouping. This work is ongoing; a tentative predictive model has been developed and will be refined and validated by enlarging the “reference collection” database.

6.5 Capturing and interpreting the information from museum research

At each of the museums the information about molas was recorded on data sheets. Photographs were taken of each mola, including detailed photographs of sewing techniques, embroidery stitches and any unusual features. Over four thousand photographs were taken to be used as reference materials when analysing the data and to delve into when characterising specific decades. This characterisation process is considered a very important part of the research into the evolution of the mola blouse and mola panel. This information was compiled and analysed using the software program “Statistical Package for Social Sciences” PAWS Statistics version 18.

As mentioned above, ongoing research will develop a tool for museum curators to assess the provenance of their mola collections. Discriminant analysis¹²² will assist in determining which groups or clusters of characteristics can identify the time period from which a mola originates.

It will be clear that not all data obtained has been reported upon. This related to insufficient or inconclusive information from a particular time period or a level of detail too high for the particular trend analysis carried out. Future work (i.e. not this dissertation) will use this “reference collection”

¹²² Discriminant analysis is a statistical technique used to evaluate characteristics pertaining to a group. By nominating specified characteristics it is possible to test the likelihood of each characteristic applying to a group. In my research the group will be a time period.

data to report further. In particular, future developments in understanding Kuna iconography may inform later work. Work by participant-observer anthropologists, especially native Kuna researchers, would be useful. I am interested in carrying out further research to identify Western images of popular culture portrayed in mola panels, as well as relating to the portrayal of candidates for Panamanian elections portrayed in mola panels in the context of Kuna society.¹²³

6.6 Mapping changing design using the reference collection

The changes to the mola blouse over the last one hundred years may be summarised by considering the overall dimensions of the blouse, the style of sleeves, the treatment of the neck section, the materials used for the yoke and sleeves, the commercial and hand-sewn trimmings used for decoration of the yoke and sleeves, and the techniques used to assemble the blouse from its component parts. Mola panels are considered separately, particularly because many museum collections contain mainly mola panels removed from blouses. The considerations for mola panels include the dimensions, the materials used for the layers, the quality of workmanship and the sewing techniques used. The final consideration relates to the design of the panels including evidence of symmetry, differences between mola panels in a pair, and the iconography.

In this chapter a few discoveries only will be mentioned. The purpose is to provide sufficient information in order to be able to compare molas, especially complete mola blouses from provenanced collections in the “reference collection”, with archival photographs in the next chapter, Chapter 7, when I carry out a visual analysis of Kuna women’s dress.

The following comments are based on observations and assessments of the sample of mola blouses and mola panels in the “reference collection”:

Morsana (yoke and sleeves)

- The style of sleeves relates to the position which it intersects with the mola panel (See Appendix B for illustrations). Not all blouses prior to 1920 had sleeves sewn above the panel.
- The sleeves of mola blouses have increased markedly in size and shape. The early molas all had narrow sleeves or moderate sleeves. The narrow sleeves were often so tiny that it would seem difficult for a Kuna woman to fit her arms into the sleeves.
- The first puff sleeve appeared on a mola blouse in the early 1950s and the puff sleeve predominated in the mid-1960s. Sleeves have been increasing in size since.

¹²³ I presented a paper at the 3rd Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand on 29 June 2012, titled *Representations of Popular Culture in Kuna Molos*.

- Prior to 2000, the channel neckline, with or without the presence of a drawstring, predominated.
- From the earliest blouses, the fabric included plains, geometric prints, small scale calicoes, stripes, checks, small floral and self-woven patterns. There appears to have been a wide variety of available of fabric.
- The first braid was observed on a blouse, on the band above the mola panel, in 1925. The first rick rack was found on a panel band in 1952.
- There is evidence of early use of a sewing machine. One early (1918) mola blouse, from an inland area, was completely sewn by machine, including the mola panels and the resultant workmanship was average. One other blouse before 1920 had some machine sewing and five blouses in the 1920s were part machined.

Mola panels

- The panels in blouses were measured seam to seam and individual panels were measured between visible stitch lines, to estimate where the panel was sewn into a blouse to enable consistent comparisons. The width decreased steadily over the past one hundred years. There is a strong linear correlation in the decrease of mola panel widths over time, which is most likely to be statistically significant.
- The area of panels has considerably reduced over time. Contemporary panels are roughly half the size of panels from the early 20th century. There is evidence that more recent smaller panels were most likely *made for trade*.
- The majority of the mola panels were comprised of layers of cotton fabric only; the remainder had one or more man-made layers. Patterned and plain fabric was used for the small pieces of fabric inserted between layers. Use of man-made fabric for layers was first found in the 1940s but did not become popular until the 1980s. From 2000, half the panels had a man-made layer.
- Otomana fabric is frequently used as a base layer to give strength to the top layers and to make it easier to sew appliqué. There is some evidence that the use of otomana fabric may have influenced the reduction in panel widths in the 1950s.
- Most mola panels comprised three or four full layers. Molas with five, six or seven layers molas were from earlier than 1924 and all were true layers. There are two six layer molas in the sample, from 1906 and from 1917 and one seven layer mola from 1924. The incidence of false layers was mainly on mola panels with two or three full layers.
- Red was the predominant colour of the top layer until 1970s; from the 1980s maroon has been the predominant colour of the top layer. Many mola panels prior to 1940 had

patterned base fabric. The frequency of each coloured layer over time revealed time specific incidence.

- Close examination of the colour of early molas found that, whilst the mola panels tended to appear of muted pastel colours, the original colours, as found in seam allowances, gave evidence of bright clear colours, such as red, yellow, orange and black.
- In any time period there will be variations in the quality of the molas produced. It is probable that the molas in museum collections will have a bias towards excellent quality work, since curators frequently are able to select molas from a donor's collection and would be inclined to select the highest quality work, even if not knowledgeable about the artefacts, though some donors may present a museum with a complete collection.
- Concerns about the impact of *made for trade* molas on the quality of mola production, in terms of workmanship of molas, do not appear founded.
- Excellent, outstanding workmanship first appeared in the early 1920s. In the 1960s half of the mola panels were rated as outstanding – perhaps the “Golden Age” of mola quality, or perhaps a reflection of the aesthetic preferences of the collectors of this time.
- Whilst there is a wide range of stitch counts in every time period, there is a strong linear correlation in the increase of the number of stitches sewn per inch over time.
- In early molas there was empty space frequently on mola panels.
- Embroidery was found in panels collected in the 1920s. The first very good embroidery was found in the 1940s and from the 1950s embroidery improved. During the 1960s the first panels with excellent embroidery are found. There were examples in most decades of poor and average embroidery, as well as very good and excellent embroidery.
- Surface or applied appliqué has been found on molas from the early days.
- Nearly 70% of the molas have some symmetry, whether it is on the vertical axis, both the horizontal and the vertical axis, the horizontal axis alone or on the diagonal axis. Mirror symmetry is the primary form.
- For this sample, 162 of the pairs were in blouses and 13 in panels. Panels in half the pairs were nearly the same; nearly 10% were counterchange and the remaining panels in pairs were different.
- Molas were allocated to one of eight design categories based on previous research (Kapp, 1972; Parker & Neal, 1977; Perrin, 1999) as follows: labyrinth all over; geometric; appears print based; appears to be a brand name or trademark; appears to be political; Kuna animal or plant life; Kuna life or myth; appears to be Christian imagery; or unknown. The two largest categories found were animal and plant life and Kuna life and myth across the time period studied, these two categories comprising half the sample.

It is stressed that the sample will reflect the biases of each of the individuals who developed the collections, including the original collectors and the museum curators. The curators would have been influenced by museum collection policies and their own individual preferences. The sample also reflects the criteria developed for this doctoral research – specifically to include a representative sample from the last century of molas with known collection dates, with a preference for complete mola blouses. As a result, this sample may not be representative of the output of all the Kuna women sewing molas over this time period.

6.7 Developing an understanding of mola making

A persuasive argument is mounted by Gordon for learning the sewing techniques in order to reproduce replicas of textiles being studied, in her paper at the 2003 Textile Society of America Symposium, *The Hand of the Maker: The Importance of Understanding Textiles from the 'Inside Out'*. Her position can be summarised as follows:

“The experience of making a textile is an important component of understanding it”

“Understanding the way a textile is made is not secondary information. If we have this understanding, we know the inner logic of the textile – we understand it from the ‘inside out’, and realize [sic] why it looks and behaves as it does.”

“When we understand from the inside out, we recognize [sic] which designs are difficult to achieve and which aren’t.”

“Understanding the way a textile is made is a kind of literacy, and we must be literate to properly ‘read’ our artifacts [sic]” (Gordon, 2003: 1-9).

I developed a detailed understanding of mola blouse construction by initially learning to sew the mola panels and then by deconstructing and constructing mola blouses. To inform my understanding of the level of skill and the amount of time needed to sew mola panels I had lessons, initially, over a period of a month, from a woman in Japan who had learnt to sew authentic molas from Kuna women whilst living in Panama in the 1970s and 1980s (October to November 2009); and later in Panama City from two Kuna women over a three week period (February to March 2010). I gained basic skills and learnt about the difficulty of reverse appliqué and surface appliqué, the complexity of the layering, the need for careful planning of the placement of different fabric colours, and the method of sewing without the use of pins, ruler or tape measure.¹²⁴ I learnt which techniques were more difficult to cut and sew; which sections of designs presented more difficulties. I also experienced the tactile qualities of the fabric as it

¹²⁴ For a demonstration of the previsualisation and subsequent sewing of the layers of mola panels, with five examples using different techniques, see Charlotte Patera’s website <http://www.charlottepatera.com/html/Molas%20How%20Made>, accessed 20 April 2009. This material is also included in the Appendix of Crouch (2011:231-246).

was held; the rhythm of sewing and the sense of time passing slowly as I sewed both alone and in a group.

These mola making lessons have informed my appreciation of the quality of workmanship achieved by Kuna women, the immense time and patience required in creating the best of the designs, the demands on eyesight for the small stitches, including the miniscule size of many of the embroidery stitches used. I found delight in the gradual process of cutting through a layer to reveal the colours underneath, a continual process during the sewing. I continued to sew molas on my return home. This experience underpins the comments I make in this dissertation, about techniques used to sew molas and the dedication of Kuna women in sewing using these techniques.

The process of assembling a mola blouse, from the five rectangular components, has been described in Chapter 4. As the fashion changed and sleeves became larger, no doubt reflecting the availability of wider loom widths, more tucks were made in the sleeves. The fabric layout and yardage requirements were also discussed in Chapter 4 for a typical early mola. Detailed measurements were taken of the “reference collection” blouses collected between 1906 and 2006, and patterns for were made for representative blouses for each of the pieces of the blouse. Mock-ups of blouses were then sewn. Using these patterns, it was possible to speculate about both the layout of the fabric and calculate the consumption of fabric (see Appendix G).

From this information it is possible to hypothesise the probable width of the fabrics used at the time and confirm that the fabric yardage was maximised for all time periods, with very little wastage. Loom widths¹²⁵ for cotton fabrics, the main fabric used for mola blouse yokes, up until the 1960s ranged from 21-24 inches (53 – 61 cm) to 36 inches (91 cm) (Trestain, 2005: 9; Gridley, Kiplinger, & McClure, 2006: 133-135). Many mola yokes appear to have been cut from 23 – 29 inch fabric. Calculations in Appendix G indicate that half a yard of fabric was used for the mola blouse morsana for F09 (<1917) and A39 (1940-41); ¾ yard for N19 (1931-32) and D09 (1952) and one yard for F22 (1998) and F56 (2003). These two most recent examples indicate the relationship between the increased fabric width and the size of the sleeves. Mola panels from the 1930s and 1940s appear to maximise fabric width, with panels frequently measuring around 60 cm (23½”) based on the “reference collection” sample.

The act of sewing a replica blouse, which is explained in Chapter 7, confirmed that assembling a mola blouse is simple, requiring only straight stitching, and is not time consuming. The most difficult area to sew in the early blouses is around the small gusset inserted under the sleeve seam to provide some movement in a sleeve which is very narrow under the arm. Evidence of this difficulty is found in the uneven result on many blouses, where the sleeves meet the side seams at different positions on either side. A number of blouses in the sample had loose or missing stitches in the sleeve seams. Later blouses which have much more fabric used for the sleeves were better made, though the workmanship on the assembly of the blouse generally was not of the high quality of the mola panels or the trim on the yoke.

¹²⁵ The selvedge to selvedge measurement, from which yardage is cut.

6.8 Summary: The examination of Kuna molas as artefacts

The experience of examining molas was considered important in order to assess their visual and tactile qualities and to be able to assess their design complexity. Molas are designed to be viewed at a distance of around 1- 2 metres (Kapp, 1972: 43). Salvador found that Kuna women stressed the importance of visibility; in essence “designs must stand out – they must be seen” (1978: 41), hence the importance of visual assessment of actual molas. It was found that the visual impact of the molas is not replicated by photographs; many characteristics are not visible from photographs, even with the high quality digital imaging now available. Conversely, molas which appeared striking in photographs did not appear so when examined.

Careful examination of the layers of fabric and the arrangement of fabrics, as well as detailed examination of stitching in a large sample of mola panels, revealed a very high level of complexity in design and workmanship. It is much easier to assess the details of embroidery when viewed on artefacts than from photographs. Without access to collections of molas it would not be possible to be able to assess the evolution of mola blouses since the beginning of the 20th century.

Ongoing analysis of data collected during museum research and further museum-based research to add to the “reference collection” database, aims to validate a predictive model which has been developed to assist museum professionals and private collectors in assessing the age and quality of the molas in their collections. The outcomes of this research will assist museum curators, conservators, collectors and researchers to better understand the development of molas and the era from which items in their collections may originate.

Detailed observations were made for the “reference collection” molas, which comprised taking measurements, recording and photographing designs and assessing workmanship against criteria which was developed based on previous research about molas, material culture and clothing. In Chapter 7, I will compare some of these museum molas with archival photographs of Kuna women wearing molas for the same periods, to study their evolution in more detail. Most available photographs until the 1960s were in black and white, hence the ability to refer to artefacts is necessary, since colour is a key component of mola aesthetics.

CHAPTER 7 MOLAS AS WORN: A VISUAL ASSESSMENT

In this, the second chapter in Part 3, I compare molas in museum collections with contemporaneous photographs as the basis of my visual analysis. This yields questions about fit, body image, consistency of dress ensemble over time and the important realisation that a large part of the mola panel has been obscured by other components of Kuna dress since the earliest mola blouses.¹²⁶ Whilst the dimensions of the mola panel and mola blouses have changed in the last ten decades, and the amount of the mola panel which appears to be covered up by the wrap skirt appears to have reduced, the fact remains that the complete mola panel is not visible.¹²⁷ This issue is considered further in Chapters 8 and 9.

I consider in this chapter the Kuna mola in terms of its role as part of a dress ensemble, in which the components have changed, whilst reflecting Kuna aesthetics and fashion trends. My museum “reference collection” analysis found significant changes in the shape and size of mola blouses, as discussed in Chapter 6.

7.1 Objective of visual analysis

Visual analysis requires the availability of good quality photographs, with known provenance, most importantly the year taken, to be able to relate to provenanced Kuna collections in museums. Kuna mola blouses found in museum collections were compared to contemporaneous photographs showing the complete dress ensemble of the Kuna women, of which the blouse is only one of a number of components. In order to interpret the dress of Kuna women from a cultural perspective, it is important to be able to view the complete dress ensemble whilst being worn, to appreciate the detailed arrangement of components, as well as how these components relate to the body.

In outlining photographic approaches to the visual analysis of dress, Taylor (2002: 150-192) notes that photographs of non-Western dress were taken as part of their professional lives by ethnographers, missionaries and colonial employees and this extended in later years to documentary films. Whilst noting that “photographs and film footage seem obvious sources for dress history research” Taylor (2002: 150) expresses concern about manipulated and staged images, which is of relevance when evaluating images of Kuna Indians. Photographs taken in the early years of the 20th century generally appear to be posed and formal in composition, though the dress worn by Kuna Indian women, men and children is confirmed by the consistency of dress shown, in images sourced from different archives taken by a number of different photographers.

¹²⁶ This chapter and parts of Chapter 6 are based on a paper entitled *Fashioning Kuna Molas: Using Visual Analysis to Re-Evaluate Molas in Museum Collections* which I presented at the “Developments in Dress History” conference, December 8-10, 2011, at the University of Brighton, UK.

¹²⁷ The exception is the early mola blouses which were worn over a short wrap skirt or alone, possibly primarily by young girls.

7.2 Photographic record

The earliest photographs found showing Kuna women wearing a dress ensemble are in a scholarly anthropological article from 1911 (Prince, 1912) and show that their dress covers their bodies from head to foot, in a distinctive arrangement, together with body modifications and body supplements.

Figure 31. Early black and white photograph of Kuna Indians.



Source: Prince, 1912, Plate 8. Photograph attributed to “Mr I N De Long of Cristobal in the American Zone”, taken on San Blas island of San Jose de Nargana, at the end of 1911. Original caption: “San Blas group. The men dress in European style, but the women retain the native costume. Note the albino woman on the right.” Enlargement of this photograph in Appendix I.

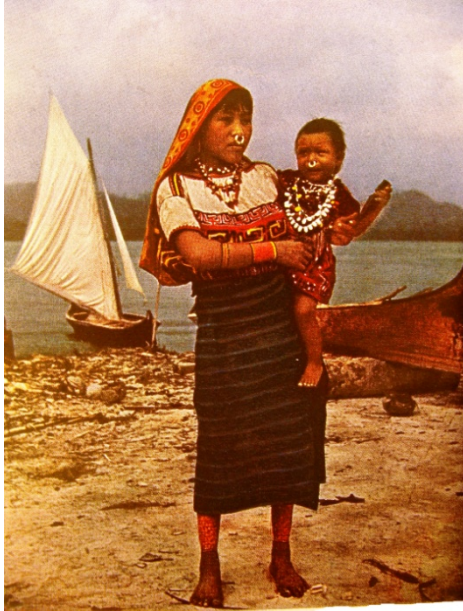
The first coloured photographs of Kuna dress found during this research are in the February 1941 edition of the *National Geographic* magazine (Feeney, 1941); there was a second article on Panama in this magazine in November 1941 which also contains coloured photographs of Kuna women (Marden, 1941)¹²⁸. This year was the beginning of colour photographs appearing in the *National Geographic* magazine in large numbers¹²⁹. Figure 32 provides an example of the early colour photographs in the *National Geographic* magazine.

¹²⁸ Not all the photographs in these articles were in colour.

¹²⁹ There were few coloured photographs prior to 1938 when the first Kodachrome photographs were published in *National Geographic*. Source: http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Autochromes_National_Geographic_01/2/0/0/ accessed 16 August 2011.

The availability of many fabrics for skirts and headscarves is demonstrated by the number of patterns and designs shown in photographs. It is rare to see the same skirt design being worn by more than one woman in a group photograph.

Figure 32. Early colour photograph of a Kuna Indian woman and child.



Source: Feeney (Feb. 1941), National Geographic Magazine. Photographer: Lieutenant Dayton Seiler, U.S.N. (Kodachrome). Original caption: "Gold Nose Rings Are Feminine Beauty 'Musts'".

It is important to mention here the body shape of the Kuna Indians, because it is not immediately apparent from photographs. The Kuna Indians are short of stature. Harris, a geneticist who studied the incidence of albinism in the San Blas Kuna found that the average Kuna woman measured 140.4 cm (4' 7") and the average Kuna adult man measured 149.9 cm (4' 11") (Harris, 1926: 42). Their torsos appear bulky in relation to their height. There is no evidence in the photographs that the shape of Kuna women has changed over time. For example, their shape is most likely unrelated to the recent impact of Western food on their diet.

The mola blouse is the most recognised component of the Kuna women's dress. Viewed in a museum archive, on a flat surface, mola blouses collected in the early 20th century appear to be composed of a large rectangle with sleeves and a small yoke attached. The rectangular panel has high visual impact due to the colours used; the yoke and sleeves may have little impact¹³⁰. In order to compare the way the mola blouse is worn with a museum mola blouse I have created a replica of a 1920s mola blouse and discuss this later in this chapter.

¹³⁰ See photographs of mola blouses from the "reference collection" in Appendix I.

The geometry of the rectilinear construction of the blouse contributes to this perception of two-dimensionality and it is difficult to envisage the garment being worn without consulting photographs, especially for the early blouses which have very small flat sleeves. Older *molás*, with flat sleeves or puffed sleeves can only be viewed in one position. Conversely, *mola* blouses with large voluminous sleeves, which became popular from the 1980s are more difficult to assess in a museum, since the sleeve fabric must be manipulated into a position to easily understand the way the sleeves fall. Sleeves increased in size again during the 1990s and post-2000 and the fabric became more flowing, which drapes well when worn, but is difficult to place into position on a flat surface, for example to photograph in a museum archive. Also, museum display tends to be on a flat surface, either horizontal in a cabinet or vertical on a wall. *Molás* displayed on mannequins would give a realistic idea of the blouse as worn.

I have analysed Kuna dress in terms of the definition and classification of dress advocated by Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1997: 8-23), outlined in Chapter 1. In this chapter I investigate the photographic record and analyse changes. Photographs in this chapter and in Appendix I show Kuna women wearing their dress ensemble over the last one hundred years. The photographs I have used were sourced from scholarly and non-scholarly journals, books and museum archives. I have also used photographs I took during a trip to the San Blas in 2010.

I have recorded my assessment of the dress ensemble of Kuna women and girls in Appendix H, under these headings:

- 1 body modification
 - skin painting
 - hair length
- 2 body supplements
 - nose rings
 - necklaces
 - arm & leg beads
 - [*wini*]
 - footwear
- 3 cloth components¹³¹
 - headscarf [*muswe*]
 - mola* blouse
 - wrap skirt [*sabured*]

Note: Kuna words in italics

¹³¹ Whilst recognising that cloth components of dress are part of body supplements, as defined by Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1997), I have discussed these separately to highlight their importance in the dress of Kuna women.

The tables in Appendix H cover these periods:

| | |
|---------|-------------|
| Table A | 1911 – 1920 |
| Table B | 1922 – 1924 |
| Table C | 1931 – 1938 |
| Table D | 1941 |
| Table E | 1950 – 1960 |
| Table F | 1963 – 1967 |
| Table G | 1970 – 1974 |
| Table H | 1984 – 1986 |
| Table I | 1991 – 1997 |
| Table J | 2003 – 2010 |

Appendix I contains some key photographs for each of the Tables A – J, in Appendix H. A summary of this lengthy assessment is in the section below. It is recognised that there will be variation in dress on different San Blas islands, due to the extent of outside influences, for example the presence of missionaries. There will also be personal preferences and economic considerations. The visual assessment below is derived from the available photographic record. Appendix I provides some examples of the photographs used for my assessment, though many more photographs were consulted.

7.3 Changes to the components of the dress of Kuna women

7.3.1 Body modifications

Surface designs are added to the nose and cheeks by application of plant-based pigments which are temporary, being water soluble, so need frequent re-application. A thin dark brown line may be painted on the centre of the Kuna woman's nose from the top of the nose to where it ends above the top lip. Red pigment may be applied to both cheeks in large circular shapes. Prior to 1920 painting nose lines was common for women and girls. The photographic record did not provide evidence of this in the 1920s or 1930s. There was visible nose painting in 1940s, 1950s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s on some women. Reddened cheeks were visible on some women in the 1960s, 1970s, 1990s.

Kuna women do not modify their hair, apart from haircutting. Sound would emanate from a Kuna woman as she moves due to her jewellery jangling and also the air moving through the headscarf and skirt. It has been reported that Kuna women are attracted to scent and apply oils derived from plants.

Figure 33. Kuna woman sewing a mola.



San Blas island, 1966. Photographer: Sam Hilu. Source: National Anthropological Archives – Smithsonian Institution.

Body supplements include a medium sized nose ring and smaller wini than more recent years. Natural red pigment has been applied to the cheeks.

7.3.2 Body supplements

Beads are strung and wound to create various patterns on the arms and legs and these beads are called wini. The shape and structure of a Kuna woman's arms and legs are modified by this binding with narrow ropes of beads wound around the forearms and on the lower legs. These bindings restrict the size of the muscles and cause the muscles between the bindings to enlarge, deforming the arms and legs, thus wini could also be considered to be a form of body modification.

Prior to 1920 wini were visible on both lower arms and lower legs and comprised only a few rows of beads. Their size increased in the 1920s and again in the 1930s. During the 1940s and 1950s large wini were visible (see Figure 32). By the 1960s and 1970s wini covered large parts of the lower arms and lower legs with intricate designs and this continued (see Figure 33). By 2000 wini covered nearly from the knee to the ankle and from the wrist to the elbow of those Kuna women who wore them (see Figure 34).

Figure 34. Contemporary Kuna women's dress.



Left: Panama City, 2010. Right: Wichubuala Island, 2010.

Extensive wini on arms and legs. Tiny nose rings worn, difficult to see.

A nose ring is seen as a permanent attachment to the nose, through a piecing of the septum. Early in the 20th century, small girls were given a small nose ring which was replaced as she grew. Adult nose rings in the early part of the 20th century extended over the mouth of the women, beyond the lower lip (see Figure 31 and Figure 35).

In the 1920s nose rings were not visible on young girls; older girls wore medium sized nose rings and women continued to wear large nose rings. During the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, young girls wore small nose rings, young adults medium nose rings. During the 1930s women wore nose rings extending to the centre of the lips and during the 1950s extending to above the top lip. During the 1960s girls and women all wear small nose rings; in the 1970s only some girls wear small nose rings and women wore small nose rings, with older women wearing larger nose rings. From the 1980s some women are shown wearing very small nose rings, often difficult to see unless very close.

The nose ring is less popular with contemporary Kuna women, though it is still worn by many women, and often it is very small.

Figure 35. Kuna woman wearing nose ring.



Left: A Kuna woman, named Alice Perry, wearing a large nose ring, some time before 1926. Source: National Anthropological Archives – Smithsonian Institution. UNSM 042852. Right: Side view of same woman showing length of nose ring. See Appendix I for complete photographs.

Necklaces made of animal and fish bones, seeds and man-made material such as glass and plastic beads were worn from the 1920s until the 1970s. Multiple strands are frequently worn. Gold and silver necklaces are also worn, more generally on special occasions. Flat pieces of gold are fashioned into necklaces and some gold jewellery is very elaborate in design. The beads used appear to be more colourful in the 1960s.

Silver jewellery, made from coins joined together, was worn throughout the century until the 1980s and would be very heavy to wear. During the 1990s some women are shown wearing necklaces made of gold shapes and from 2000 some women are wearing gold pendants also. Earrings are sometimes worn, attached to the body though ear piercing and may be large flat round discs of gold.

7.3.3 Cloth components

The three cloth articles as part of Kuna women's dress are: a headscarf, called a *muswe*; a wrap skirt, called a *sabured*; and the blouse. The word *mola* refers to both the complete blouse and the rectangular panels which are sewn on the back and front of the blouse.

[i] Headscarf

The headscarf is a rectangular piece of fabric, seen with a bright red and yellow colour combination since 1921. Worn originally in a similar manner to a Spanish mantilla, suspended over the head symmetrically, it is of sufficient weight to rest easily on a woman's head and over her shoulders, covering her arms. From the 1990s the headscarf has also been folded, tied and wrapped around the head in a variety of ways.

The typical border pattern on headscarves was first seen in photographs in the 1940s. Prior to the 1920s headscarf colours are not known, though it is reported that they were "bright" colours (Pittier, 1912: 657), and appear to have an "all over" pattern and be larger than later headscarves.

Museum collections of red and yellow headscarves dating from 1921, 1941, 1962, 1966, 1968, 1966-1971, 1968-1974, 1980, 1981 and 1991 show size consistency, measuring 22" - 24" wide x 44" - 46" long¹³². The headscarf measurements and colours remain the same for scarves purchased in Panama City in 2003 and 2010.

It is possible that the style of headscarf fabric was destined to be divided into two small square scarves or cravats, but was sold as one piece of fabric and adopted by the Kuna as a headscarf. The museum headscarves had a bright red background colour with yellow / gold printed patterns within two square border designs; one example only had white also in the printed design.

Headscarves were worn by women and girls at the beginning of the 20th century and during the 1920s; by women only in the 1930s and 1940s; by women and some girls in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s; after 2000 worn by most women and a few girls.

¹³² It seems likely that Imperial measurements have been used in Panama since trade began with foreigners and are still used in textile commerce. Fabric is frequently sold in yard lengths. One yard measures 36 inches which is approximately 91 cm.

Headscarf and wrap skirt measurements were obtained from these museums: NMNH; NMAI; Field Museum; Varldskultur Museet, Gothenburg; Musee du Quai Branly, Paris; Fowler Museum of Cultural History, L.A.

[ii] Wrap skirt

The skirt is a wrapped body enclosure, with the loom width forming the length of the skirt. It is wrapped around the waist, with one end tucked in at the front on either the left or right side. Young girls are shown in early photographs sometimes wearing a short skirt underneath their blouse which is also made of a rectangular piece of wrapped fabric.

The wrap skirt measurements from museum collections dating from 1921, 1941, 1962, 1966, 1966-1971, 1968-1974, 1980, 1981, 1987 and 1991 are mostly within the range 50" - 54" long, with a loom width of 33" - 36". This is consistent with contemporary wrap skirts, purchased in Panama City in 2003 and 2010. From 1921 skirts had mostly a dark blue background colour with generally only one other colour, frequently yellow or green.

Adult women wrap the skirt around their mola blouse, with varying degrees of tightness. This flexibility accommodates different blouses and also changes in girth due to pregnancy.

The loom width of 33" - 36" determines the length of the skirt, even when there are small variations in length, since the selvages would be at the hem and waist. The skirt length may be simply adjusted by rolling the fabric down at the waist or sewing a hem at the lower edge of the fabric. Prior to 1920 skirts extended to the ankles or nearly to the ground. In the 1920s most extended to the ankle, with a few longer; in the 1930s and 1940s the skirts extended to the ankle or a bit shorter; in the 1950s skirts were ankle length or mid-calf length. From the 1960s skirts were consistently shorter, starting with mid-calf length in the 1960s, knee length or a bit longer for girls and mid-calf length for women during the 1970s and 1980s; below the knee during the 1990s; and post-2000, knee length for most women, though some older women wore the skirt slightly longer.

[iii] Mola blouse

The evolution of mola blouses in the "reference collection" has been described in Chapters 6. The photographic record is consistent with the dates of blouses in museum collections, though it is noted that there are few blouses in the "reference collection" from the 1980s and 1990s. It is possible that some of the "reference collection" blouses could be from earlier periods, particularly the ones with provenance which spans a few years, for example 1966-1971, since molas may have been sewn a few years prior to purchase.

The visual analysis confirms that not only has the overall size and the size of the mola panel changed since the beginning of the 20th century, the sleeve shape, size and position has changed; the neck treatment has changed and the materials used for the yoke fabric and trim have changed. The most dramatic changes have occurred since the 1990s, especially after 2000. Appendix H provides more details of the visual analysis. Appendix I illustrates changes in mola style over the last century with key photographs from the "reference collection". Sample photographs are in Figure 36.

Figure 36. Changes to the mola blouse over the last century.



A34 1925



N22 1932



A36 1941



L03 1952



D22 1967



V10 1978



F22 1998



2010

See Appendix I for additional photographs from the “reference collection” and archival photographs.

The style of contemporary mola blouses includes very large sleeves made of synthetic fibre, frequently translucent, with a neckline which differentiates the front and back of the blouse. A variety of sleeve shapes and necklines was found in post-2000 mola blouses. The blouse is now very tight fitting, with popular use of side zippers to allow this. Some older women were seen wearing older style molas, with small sleeves and drawstring necklines during fieldwork in 2010.

Despite the mola panel progressively reducing in both average width and depth, the amount visible when worn ranges from 50% at the beginning of the 20th century to 50-85% at the beginning of the 21st century. An example can be seen in Figure 34, where both the women are wearing blouses which have mola panels with bilateral symmetry. It can be seen in Figure 34, that just over half the panel of the blouse on the left can be seen; and on the right around 80% of the panel can be seen.

The size range in panel widths in the “reference collection” within decades is generally quite small, around 5 cm. Early molas, up to the 1920s had a wider range, perhaps reflecting available fabric widths. More recently collected molas in the “reference collection” had a wider range of sizes most likely due to the inclusion of “made for trade” molas which are often reduced in size to reduce work, and the inclusion of some larger molas sewn at an earlier time. Differences in the amount of the mola panels visible when worn would most likely relate to the shape of the torso of the wearer and how it is positioned on the body. Some women may prefer to have the blouse pushed over the outside of the wrap skirt at the waist which would make more of the panel visible.

Regardless of the amount of mola panel visible, hours of careful sewing are needed to complete the pair of panels in each mola blouse. Estimates of the time needed vary. The time to complete a mola blouse would relate to size, design, number of layers, stitch size and the amount of embroidery, as well as embellishments to the yoke and sleeves, and the hours available each day to sew. A simple mola pair may take at least two weeks to sew; a complex mola pair may take 4-6 weeks minimum.¹³³ What motivates Kuna women to spend hours each day sewing a mola blouse, to then cover up a large part of the detailed work? I will be investigating the motivational factors in the following two chapters.

7.4 Summary of changes to Kuna dress

Photographic evidence and museum collections of wrap skirts and headscarves, indicate consistent colours and sizes, with the style of wrapping the latter being the only change. The skirt is possibly wrapped more tightly and is shorter; the scarf is not worn all the time now and is sometimes folded and tied in various ways. The photographic record shows a wide range of patterns on both the wrap skirts and headscarves.

¹³³ The time commitment required to sew mola blouses is addressed in more detail in Chapter 8.

Nose rings are no longer universal; most are much smaller than in the early part of the 20th century. Heavy gold and silver jewellery is not often shown in recent photographs.

The wini wound around the legs are much more visible, because skirts are slightly shorter exposing the ankles and lower legs and the wini are more extensive. The wini wound around the arms are more visible, partly because they are longer in extent and also because the headscarf is tied closer to the head and does not cover the arms all the time. Until recent times, there was little variation within each of the decades of the style of mola blouse worn. In recent times the sleeve style and neckline have changed considerably. Salvador writes that whilst “the structural design of the clothing is quite rigid, almost like a uniform. . . the designing of the mola blouse offers the women a great deal of freedom of self-expression” (1978: 15) and “the basic elements of the outfit have stayed the same since the early 1900s, but the shape and style of each component have been altered significantly” (Salvador, 2003: 52).

The care taken by Kuna women in assembling their dress ensembles has been confirmed by Margiotti. During her fieldwork in the San Blas she found Kuna women were constantly purchasing new skirt fabric and that many Kuna women “possess more than fifteen blouses, skirts, and headscarves for daily use” (Margiotti, 2010: 241) which are carefully coordinated according to Kuna aesthetics¹³⁴.

There does not appear to be a hierarchy of dress related to social class, though some women appear to be wearing a weight in gold or silver coins which would have a significant cash value. In other regards, Kuna women’s dress appears to be relatively democratic in that most women appear able to individualise the components of their dress, within the conformity of the three main components being worn in a similar size.

There also appears to be little change from young adult women to older adult women. In more recent times, young girls are seen wearing Western style t-shirts and shorts, similar to the clothes worn by young boys.

7.5 Creating a replica mola blouse

A replica blouse was made, based on a blouse in the British Museum collection. The panel is 63 cm wide and 44 cm deep, with a band above the panel 5 cm wide.

The replica yoke, including the band, has been sewn in brown fabric; the replica panel, including the small hem, has been sewn in white fabric, illustrated in Figure 37.

¹³⁴ Margiotti found that the Kuna preferences for assembling mola ensembles were different from her own [Western] preferences (personal communication 19 September 2011).

Figure 37. Replica mola blouse.



British Museum, BM 1924,0619.129



Replica mola based on BM 1924,0619.129, collected 1922. Width of mola panel = 63 cm.

The replica blouse was photographed being worn by a small slender adult, with a height of 153 cm, as a model for a Kuna adult woman, with an average height of 140 cm and similar shoulder width to the model, shown in Figure 38. Note nearly half of the white mola panel is obscured when wrapped by the skirt; most of the mola panel is obscured when the headscarf is worn. The small sleeves were shaped to include a “built in” gusset, comprising a small square on one end of the sleeve, which is turned as the side seams are joined to provide more room under the arm. The sleeves did not constrict movement and there was no difficulty putting on the blouse. The yoke was easy to adjust with the drawstring once it was placed over the head.

Figure 38. Young adult model wearing replica mola blouse.



The same replica blouse was photographed being worn by a young girl with a height of 114 cm, as a model for a Kuna older child or teenager, shown in Figure 39. The sleeves fall lower on the arm. Perhaps a different yoke is sewn for young girls and later replaced as she grows. Panels for children may originally have been made the same size as adult panels, with much simpler designs, and smaller sleeves.

Figure 39. Child model wearing replica mola blouse.



An archival photograph from the same era as the replica blouse is shown in Figure 40. Note that the sleeves of the mola blouse extend to the elbow on the young girl. On the adult woman, the mola blouse is loose fitting and a large part of the lower part of the blouse is covered by the wrap skirt. As seen in Appendix I, in some cases the blouse is extending over the skirt and it appears that these women may be pregnant, indicating that the same size mola blouse may be able to be worn during changes in the girth of a woman, as well as by Kuna girls.

Figure 40. Kuna Indian family group.



Source: NMAI, Photograph N10300. Photographer: A. Hyatt Verrill, San Blas 1924. Note that the young girl is an albino, but neither parent nor brother are albinos.

7.6 Influences on colour choices

Colour preferences for Kuna molas were perhaps originally influenced by the naturally obtained colours used for body painting, which were mainly red, yellow and blue. Popular colours in the early molas were red, orange, yellow, blues and black.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Kuna aesthetic preference is for colours which are highly visible, most likely saturated colours. This may be influenced by the fact that the glare from the sun in the tropical climate tends to wash out colours on the body and the sun tends to fade fabric. Washing and wearing clothes in the tropical climate of the San Blas islands would tend to make fabric deteriorate quickly, including a reduction in colour strength.

Kuna women are known to be fastidious about their dress and cleanliness, bathing frequently each day and changing their mola blouses (Salvador, 1978: 14). Frequent washing and exposure to the harsh glare of the tropical sun would escalate fading of coloured fabrics, which may influence colour choice.

Future researchers may wish to explore the fact that the colours used in headscarves, red and yellow reflect the colours of the sun especially at sunset and sunrise; and that the colours in wrap skirts, navy and green and other colours, may reflect the colours of the water and waves.

An attempt was made to gain a better understanding of which colours have been favoured by Kuna women and to thus gain a better understanding of the evolution of molas. Previous studies by Salvador (1976a, 1978) and Jennings-Rentenaar (2005) refer to the use of saturated colours in molas, but do not analyse the colours in a scientific, measurable manner. Preliminary analysis, carried out in January 2010, of mola panel colours using Munsell colour charts has revealed that red, a colour which is prevalent in many molas from the last fifty years, has the highest chroma of all colours, nearly double the strength of blue-green. It was also found that many colours used in molas are pure hues and that a limited colour palette, in terms of Munsell's charts, is used. An objective analysis of colours used in molas from different periods could be achieved by using a colour spectroradiometer¹³⁵. The fabric in many molas in museum collections has faded though it is generally possible to find sections of blouses, often in the seam allowance, where the original colours can be determined.

¹³⁵ An initial attempt to evaluate colours using the Munsell colour chips at the University of NSW Library was compared to the results using a spectroradiometer in the Optics and Radiometry Laboratory at this university. It was found that this method was sufficiently reliable. The Munsell system is inherently subjective but the results were acceptable. A spectroradiometer is also able to differentiate between colours which appear identical to the human eye, but have been achieved by different dyeing methods. Later researchers may wish to pursue this colour research.

7.7 The relationship between the dress and body of a Kuna woman

Fan, Yu and Hunter (2004) describe the interaction between clothing and the body as “a perception of the viewer (whether of the wearers themselves or others) in a social and climatic context . . . the appearance is a complex function of body, clothing and environment (including social, cultural and other norms)” (2004: 9). They refer to DeLong’s work (1998) in showing that with clothing appearance, a Gestalt effect is found where the combination of items creates a visual effect where “the whole is more than the sum of its parts”(Fan, et al., 2004: 10). This is a major consideration when viewing the complete dress ensemble of Kuna women and will be discussed below, as well as the “illusion created by dress” (Fan, et al., 2004: 11) where visual size can be modified by placement of horizontal and vertical lines and the subdivision of dress into separate visual areas.

DeLong (1998) proposes a framework to describe the way dress and the body relate to each other as “the apparel – body – construct” defined as “a visual form that results from the interaction of apparel on the human body; a concept of this physical object based on sensory data” (1998: 339). She outlines the types of visual structuring, surface structuring and light and shadow structuring which relate to the visual impact of dress. She refers to the way different parts of a dress ensemble are organised and the viewing path an observer follows when examining a dressed person. DeLong’s work provides a useful language to describe the arrangement of dress on a body and the visual impact provided by dress.

Developed for the analysis of Western fashion, DeLong’s “apparel – body – construct” model has been used by Michelman and Erekosima who take six characteristics from DeLong’s model and use them to describe the dress of the Kalabari people in Nigeria (1997: 175-178).¹³⁶ Each of these characteristics is considered in respect of the three cloth components of Kuna women’s dress:

¹³⁶ In summary, these six characteristics, which I suggest can be denoted with single words (in italics), are described by Michelman and Erekosima (1997: 176) as:

Silhouette – may be a ‘closed’ silhouette, when the clothing creates a boundary or ‘open’ when the clothing blends into the viewing background;

Integration – may be ‘whole’ when the clothing is perceived as one unit or ‘part’ when there is separation between components of the dress;

Distinction – it may be possible to ‘separate’ the dress from the background or it may be ‘integrated’ and appear as part of the background;

Dimensionality – the dress may appear ‘flat’ as a two-dimensional form or ‘rounded’ as a three-dimensional form;

Surface – the dress may be ‘indeterminate’ whereby there is ambiguity with the surface and background or ‘determinate’ with highly defined surfaces, which will lack texture and appear flat;

Orientation – a vertical orientation will appear as a column on a human body; a horizontal orientation will direct the viewer across the body, often at more than one section of the body.

- Silhouette – the Kuna ensemble has a closed silhouette with distinct edges; this effect is strengthened by the saturated colours of the dress. The Kuna have mid - dark brown skin tone which also contrasts strongly with their surrounds. In discussing the Kalabari, Michelman and Erekosima (1997 :178) note that “Dark skin color [sic] against a light background also tends to give an impression of separateness from the surrounding environment”.
- Integration – the Kuna ensemble consists of separate pieces, with distinct parts.
- Distinction – the Kuna ensemble is visually separate from the background.
- Dimensionality – the folds in the headscarf give an indication of depth and shape where draped over the upper body; the mola blouse appears to be two-dimensional. The wrapped skirts, depending on the printed design, can appear to be three-dimensional. In the second half of the 20th century when blouses became more fitted, a more rounded, three-dimensionality is apparent.
- Surface – the headscarf and wrap skirt are always made of flat pieces of printed cloth, with many varieties of designs appearing in the photographs and museum artefacts. The photographs attest to the large variety of skirt fabrics available at a given time period. The yoke and sleeves of each of the blouses are made of one layer of fabric, frequently patterned, though generally of a much smaller scale than the patterns on the headscarf or skirts. The rectangular panels comprising the lower part of the blouse are made of two or more layers of fabric, intricately stitched using techniques of reverse appliqué, surface appliqué and sometimes embroidery. The texture created by these sewing methods increases the visual interest of the blouse.
- Orientation – there is a horizontal orientation to the dress, created by divisions in the dress between components, which direct the eye across the body. This horizontal movement is compounded by the distinct colour differences between the headscarf, blouse and wrap skirt. Similar to the Kalabari women’s dress, this segmentation accentuates the proportions of the body and the Kuna women, who are of small stature, appear to have bulky torsos. This may also be due to the skirts which extend nearly to the ground and create a long tubular effect.

For the adult Kuna women, in the early part of the 20th century, very little skin was exposed; whilst the blouses have short sleeves, the headscarves are often draped to cover most of the arm. This is interesting because the women are wearing strings of beads wrapped around their arms from beneath the elbow to the wrists, and from the mid-calf to above the ankles, which would not have been seen except in movement.

A large part of the mola panel is not seen, being covered by the skirt. Blouses in museum collections sometimes indicate fading on the upper part of a mola panel, but none on the lower part. Scaling from

photographs confirms that part of the mola panel is hidden; up to half of the panel may be beneath the skirt.

Michelman and Erekosima describe the dress of the Kalabari women as follows:

“The silhouette of the woman is viewed part to whole. Each part of the costume is viewed independently. Sections of the body are segmented by distinct pattern and color [sic] differences. The wrappers and blouse are distinguished from each other by pattern and color. The coral necklaces and bracelets segment the body, as contrast is made with her skin color. She appears as multiple segments before she is perceived visually as a whole. Part to whole viewing accentuates the display of horizontal, rounded aspects of the body, particularly the torso” (Michelman & Erekosima, 1997: 178).

The Kuna women are viewed in a similar manner. Their bodies are enclosed by their clothing; very little skin is exposed though this has increased in the last three decades, as shown in the illustrations in this chapter and in Appendix I. The visual impact of their dress is very high due to the highly saturated colours in each of the three cloth components, as well as the brightly coloured wound arm and leg beads and the addition of shiny gold ornaments particularly nose rings and sometimes earrings and necklaces. Colourful necklaces of beads, seeds and bones may also be worn.¹³⁷

The analysis of photographs does not show significant differences in dress as women age. It is apparent that younger women tend to adapt newer “fashion” earlier, such as changes to neck-line shaping and changes to hem length, but in other respects the components are the same.

7.8 Body image

The illusion created by the Kuna women’s dress accentuates their short stature and accentuates their girth. On skirts with horizontal stripes this is further emphasised. The separateness created by the different coloured components of the predominantly red headscarf, the predominantly navy blue wrap skirt and the mola blouse of more than two colours, results in an overall non-coherent dress ensemble. The blouse may have a multi-coloured yoke also and the mola panels, predominantly red, may contain many other colours.

Kuna women are covering their bodies, not accentuating particular parts, except sometimes the nose, as a result of the nose ring and painted central line, which elongates it. They are concealing the curves of their body, either intentionally or as a result of sewing techniques which provide little individualised

¹³⁷ The first footwear found in a photograph, where a Kuna woman is wearing plastic thongs (flip flops), was dated 1963. Footwear adds very little to the impact of the dress, usually comprising thongs (flip flops), inserted on the foot between the first and second toes, or slip on sandals, both made of plastic in colours which blend with the skin tones.

shaping. The blouse measurements appear to have been determined by the economic use of fabric based on the available fabric loom widths. The headscarf and wrap skirt are simply cut lengths of fabric. I have demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 6 that the rectilinear design of the mola blouse leaves little wasted fabric. The width of early mola panels also appear to be based on available loom widths, attested by visible selvages on many panels, often with seams so small that the selvages have become exposed during wear.

As discussed in Chapter 4 and 5, Kuna women's cloth coverings may have originated as a result of the ideas of dress which Kuna men discovered on their interactions with foreigners or may be as a result of the influence of missionaries, with Christian ideas of the need for covering the body for modesty. Certainly, there is no "obvious sexuality" (Lewis, 2007: 311) in the dress in terms of the dress revealing or emphasising the female form. There are no "functional foundations" obvious in photographs to allow the "shape of the women's body to be manipulated, both conspicuously and artificially" (Lewis, 2007: 313) until post-2000.

The Kuna women do not appear to have a need to portray the shape of their body, rather the emphasis is on a display of cloth and colour, with strong individuation in assembling the components each time an ensemble is worn. Kuna women each have a variety of skirts and mola blouses. The climate is tropical, hot and humid throughout the year. As mentioned above, it is known that Kuna women frequently bathe, because they are particular about cleanliness and wear more than one ensemble each day. Mola blouses are changed frequently and different blouses are worn when carrying out everyday household activities such as agriculture, laundry and cooking. Mola panels are sewn with different levels of workmanship and with more simple designs for everyday use.

Sizing and clothing aesthetics are discussed in the context of body image by Lewis (2007). He refers to the haptic qualities of clothing and personal preferences as well as societal norms related to the "fittedness" or "looseness" of clothing (Lewis, 2007: 309). When clothing touches the body the wearer is able to feel the texture of the fabric – which may also restrict movement if very close fitting and the fabric has no flexibility in its composition. The shape of the body is more evident when clothing is tight fitting; this may be considered undesirable due to societal beliefs, including religious affiliations.

There does not appear to be a functional role for the weight and coverage of the Kuna woman's dress ensemble, which does not have particular characteristics suited to the tropical climate, though loose clothing would allow more air to circulate. It has been reported in Chapter 4, that when the Kuna migrated from the inland areas of Panama to the San Blas archipelago during the second half of the 19th century, the experience of the harsh rain and winds on the islands influenced the coverage of more of the body.

7.9 Contemporary Kuna fashion

The contemporary dress of Kuna women has been recorded in two documentary films about the life and culture of the Kuna Indians: *Molakana: Coudre le monde . . . [Molakana: Sewing the world . . .]* (2003) produced by a French anthropologist, Michel Perrin; and *Molas in Transition: Art of the Kuna Woman* (2009) produced by an American textile scholar and artist, Kathryn Lipke Vigesaa. Both documentaries are filmed on islands of the San Blas archipelago and show Kuna people carrying out everyday activities. Figure 41 and Figure 42 provide examples of single frames (a snapshot) captured from these two documentary DVDs.

The headscarf remains the same bright red and yellow colour combination; scarves are sometimes folded or tied in a more compact manner and worn over the shoulders. Whilst the worn length of skirts now ranges between knee length and mid-calf, the fabric width between selvages remains at between 84.5 cm - 90 cm (33" - 36"). Navy remains the predominant base colour of the skirts, though there are other options, with a single colour added as the printed pattern, such as yellow, white or green. A wide variety of designs can be seen in Figure 41.

The mola blouse is now much closer fitting to the upper body between the underarm area and the waist and the skirt is wrapped more tightly around the waist. The blouse sleeves are larger, though still constructed from a piece of rectangular fabric. Not all sleeve styles are identical – some end just above the elbow and some below the elbow. The fabric used for the yokes is flowing and sometimes translucent. Museum molas from 2006 show a big variety of necklines, with round necks, V necks and teardrop necks and some blouses have side zippers which allow very close fitting blouses to be worn. Salvador's discussions with Kuna women in the late 20th century, when very large sleeves became popular on mola blouses, found that these changes were considered aesthetically pleasing because they directed "attention to the face" (1997a: 158). This seems to indicate that directing attention to the *mola panel* was not a major consideration when the blouse was being worn.

It is possible to see the extensive strings of wound leg beads and a variety of coloured beads and patterns is evident. Arm beads also appear more detailed and cover the arm from the wrist to the elbow in many cases. Many Kuna women wear necklaces of plastic or glass beads, and some wear small gold pendants.

From a distance a group of Kuna women appear to be dressed in a uniform manner, for example Photograph A in Figure 42, however when observed closely it is apparent that individualisation is achieved by the different combinations of molas and skirts, and by the choice of yoke fabric and lastly by the design sewn on the mola panels. This can be seen in Photograph B in Figure 42. Whilst not all the panel is visible when worn, it is visible to others during the sewing process and during washing and storage. I discuss in the next section possible explanations for the wearing of the mola panels around the torso of a Kuna woman.

Figure 41. Snapshots from documentaries about the Kuna Indians.



Source: Snapshot from Perrin (2003). Whilst it is unusual to see the same fabric used for blouse yokes, sometimes groups of women sew blouses with the same yokes for a celebration.



Source: Snapshot from Lipke Vigesaa (2009). The dress in motion. The flowing yoke fabric is particularly noticeable on the sleeves.

Figure 42. Group of Kuna Indian women from different perspectives.



Photograph A. Source: Snapshot from Perrin (2003). Preparing bananas for cooking. Viewed from a distance the dress appears similar due to colour dynamics.



Photograph B. Source: Snapshot from Perrin (2003). Closer viewing of the same scene as previous photograph shows the individualisation of dress.

7.10 The position of the mola on the body

The mola blouse is a highly visible component of Kuna women's dress, nevertheless the mola panels are partially obscured when worn, limiting a full appreciation of the design. This could be detrimental if the mola panel is communicating a message. A number of questions are raised. Firstly, why spend hours sewing a pair of mola panels and then not reveal the details of the work? What is the importance of the mola panel? Is the covering of part of the panel intentional? Is the meaning important to the wearer and hence obscured from general view?

A possible explanation for wearing the mola panel close to the abdomen is suggested by Margiotti:

“As clothing, it is important to note that the designed panels of a mola blouse cover a precise part of the female body: the ventral area. Understandings of conception that Kuna people discuss, recognise the womb as a moulding organ that gives shape to the foetus. A foetus is wrapped in the amniotic sac, conceptualized [sic] as its designed clothing. Therefore, a mola blouse covers the ventral area inside of which there is a moulding organ and the designed cloth enveloping the foetus. If the house is a metaphor for the pregnant belly, we might suggest that the mola curtains covering its walls are like a designed amniotic sack” (Margiotti, 2010: 245).¹³⁸

This work has been extended by Fortis in his research into “The Birth of Design: a Kuna Theory of Body and Personhood”(2010)¹³⁹. He is suggesting that the process is perhaps more important than the completed mola. He supports this idea, based on his fieldwork, which found that:

“Kuna women and men devote a great deal of their time to their material culture, an important part of which consists of producing ‘designs’ (narmakkalet). Designs in the Kuna lived world are created using three different techniques: women’s blouses (molakana, sing. mola), beadwork (wini), and baskets (sile). . . . Women also spend time realizing [sic] the other designed component of their attire, in the form of beadwork (wini), for coiling around forearms and calves. . . . Mola-making, beadworks, basketry, and woodcarving are highly valued in everyday life, and Kuna people consider these essential to the reproduction of their lived world” (Fortis, 2010: 484).

¹³⁸ Fortis refers to the designs on mola blouses as “related to women’s fertility and the control over their bodily fluids” (2008 :107), though this does not relate to specific designs, only the actual making of designs. A baby is seen to emerge at birth covered in designs (Fortis, 2010: 486) and in the Kuna language the fur or the skin of animals is also referred to by the word mola (Fortis, 2008: 101).

¹³⁹ See also *Kuna Art and Shamanism: An Ethnographic Approach* (Fortis, in press). Margiotti and Fortis carried out part of their fieldwork concurrently during 2003-2004 in the village of Okopsukun on the San Blas island of Ustupo.

He further extends this idea by reporting his observation that:

“Kuna women are [considered] beautiful when they wear mola and beadwork that they make themselves. Kuna people are described by what they do, and the social perception of a person is intimately linked to what the person is known to do best in everyday life. Preparing plant medicines, cooking food, carving canoes, weaving baskets, performing ritual and mythic chants, fishing, gardening, sewing molakana, are all highly valued praxis within the Kuna lived world and are intimately related to one’s own kurkin¹⁴⁰.”

There is therefore a logical connection between the Kuna concept of design, grounded in an open and relational conception of the body, and that of praxis, as the manifestation of one’s transformed relationship with alterity. For this reason, Kuna people think of different forms of design (mola, beadwork, and baskets) as different manifestations of the same principle, which puts emphasis on rendering visible one’s personal identity and capacities” (Fortis, 2010: 492).

Thus sewing molas becomes a very important part of a Kuna woman’s identity. In the next two chapters, I discuss the motivation to sew molas and the reinforcement Kuna women receive for this. The role of the mola in maintaining identity for all the Kuna people is specifically addressed in Chapter 9.

Future research, by anthropologists carrying out long term fieldwork in the San Blas, may explore further the link between creating mola panels and its position on the body when worn, as part of further work on Kuna design and personhood.

7.11 Summary: Mola development as non-Western fashion

In this chapter I have described how the dress worn by Kuna women for the last century is comprised of carefully assembled components, which have changed in size and shape over this time, especially the mola blouse. During all decades there is evidence found in photographs that, within the confines of the headscarf, blouse and wrap skirt components, there was a large variety of combinations of pattern in skirt and headscarf to allow individualisation of dress. There is general conformity within the three cloth components in shape, proportion and size within each decade, and sometimes consistency for concurrent decades. The mola blouses, with a large variety of yoke fabrics used and many available fabric panel colours, are consequently individualised and whilst some iconography may be similar it is

¹⁴⁰ *Kurkin* is a Kuna word variously translated to refer to intelligence; skill; individuality; a “special gift”. The literal translation is hat. It is spelt as *gurgin* in the 2011 dictionary (Orán & Wagua, 2011).

rare for blouses to be close to identical.¹⁴¹ Viewed from a distance the women's dress appears similar. It is visually distinctive and able to be distinguished from long distances, due to the highly saturated colours used.

There is a consistency of colours used for the mola panels and this varies for each decade in the century to some degree. The size of mola panels and the style of sleeves also have changed significantly over the last one hundred years.

The Kuna women's dress appears to have little functional role apart from providing some protection from wind and rain. It has not been specifically designed to accommodate the hot humid climate experienced in the San Blas archipelago. The blouse with multiple layers of fabric in the panels and frequent use of synthetic fabric in the yoke would appear to retain heat. Sun protection does not seem a priority, though coverage of the skin, particularly in the early part of the 20th century was nearly complete. The original motivation may be related to the Western concept of modesty, promulgated by Christian visitors and missionaries.

The interpretation of the imbedded designs on the mola panels has been addressed by a number of scholars, together with the analysis of the ethno-aesthetics of the designs (Salvador, 1976a, 1978, 1997; Fortis, 2008, 2010; Margiotti, 2010). The visual analysis of Kuna dress from photographs and documentary films has found that it is not possible to fully appreciate the mola iconography, which takes significant amounts of time to sew on the mola panels on the back and front of the mola blouses, when the blouses are worn. The mola blouse is partly hidden by the wrap skirt and sometimes by the headscarf falling over parts of it. In more recent times it has been possible to sometimes see a larger proportion of the mola panels, though not the complete panels.

Museum collections of molas, which consist mainly of individual mola panels, have a resultant emphasis on the iconography and workmanship of these panels, and the impact when viewing the artefacts is overwhelmingly aesthetic. Separated from the overall dress ensemble of the Kuna women, mola panels have high appeal as examples of textile art. In order to interpret molas as part of a material culture analysis, consideration of them as a component of Kuna dress is deemed constructive, as a starting point in assessing how molas are valued within Kuna society and culture.

Whilst early museum collections of molas were gathered primarily by anthropologists, ethnographers and scientific expeditions, later collections have been frequently donated by tourists to the area, most likely selected for their value as high quality textile art rather than as cultural artefacts.¹⁴² There is thus

¹⁴¹ It is not possible to make identical mola panels due to the detailed handwork involved, though it is known that Kuna women do copy designs

¹⁴² There may be collector bias in the "reference collection" since I was focused on provenanced collections, which mostly originated from museum collectors and other researchers and people associated with them.

a disconnect between the mola as dress and the mola as textile art in museum collections and this can be challenging in assessing the role of the mola in Kuna society.

I have established, in the first two chapters of this Part, the fact that the mola blouse has continually evolved: size, workmanship and materials have changed over the last one hundred years and the way the complete dress ensemble of Kuna women is worn has also changed and can thus be considered subject to changing fashion. An important outcome of this research is that the mola panels, executed with care and hours of work, are obscured when worn, raising questions of the motivation to both sew and wear molas.

In the next two chapters I consider the core issue of the motivation to continue the time consuming process of sewing molas. In the next chapter I address the factors which may influence individual Kuna women to continue to sew molas and in the final chapter of this Part, I address the community expectations.

CHAPTER 8 MOTIVATION: THE PROCESS OF MOLA MAKING

This is the third chapter in Part 3, Cultural Preservation. In the first chapter of this Part, Chapter 6, I reported on an analysis of mola blouses and mola panels in museum collections and described the changes in size, workmanship, techniques, styles, designs and iconography over the last one hundred years. In Chapter 7, I compared molas in the “reference collection” with archival photographs and analysed the way the mola was worn, demonstrating through a detailed visual analysis, that mola panels are obscured when worn.

The amount of detailed work in a pair of mola panels requires many days of sewing time. Whilst the mola blouse is an integral component of a Kuna woman’s dress ensemble, the mola panels are not displayed as part of dress, and thus the prime motivation for sewing mola panels is a conundrum. In this chapter I investigate the factors which motivate Kuna women to continue to sew mola panels.

This is a long chapter, as a result of the various explanations required to address the factors influencing the motivation of Kuna women to devote time to sewing mola blouses. I consider this to be a key chapter and discuss in-depth the evidence to support the argument that Kuna women are intrinsically rewarded as a result of sewing molas.

The total time to complete a mola relates to the size of the panel, the number of layers and the additional pieces of fabric applied between and on top of layers, the amount of embroidery and the size of the stitches. What motivates Kuna women to make these molas? Is there an obligation for all the women to sew molas? Consideration is given to the social setting for sewing; the gendered and generational division of labour; the wearing of molas as the promulgation of Kuna identity; the role of Kuna leaders and men in promoting molas; and the commercial incentives to sew molas. I will investigate both the process of sewing molas and the sense of achievement on completion of a mola blouse from the viewpoint of individual Kuna women.

My search for an explanation led me to explore the applicability of the concepts of serious leisure, well-being, flow and engagement to mola making. I draw together recent research from positive psychology, studies of the relationship between well-being and textile activities, and studies of Kuna society and culture to examine the non-financial benefits and rewards Kuna women gain intrinsically from sewing molas. I focus particularly on the process of sewing molas.

The next chapter (Chapter 9) discusses the role of the mola blouse in creating and maintaining a distinct Kuna identity, both within Kuna society and as a symbol of distinctiveness for the outside non-Kuna world. The role of the entire Kuna community in the support of mola making and wearing of molas is analysed. In both Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, I will address the concept of well-being, as defined by Seligman (2011), as an extension of his earlier work on positive psychology and the pursuit of happiness. One of the key components of well-being is defined as “engagement” which encompasses the concept of flow, which is discussed in this chapter as a potential motivator for mola making.

Many Kuna women continue to sew molas everyday and continue to expand the number of mola blouses in their possession. It is posited that to maintain their identity one or two blouses would be sufficient; to be willing to devote hours each day to sewing for themselves and their daughters must derive from some additional motivating factors which are explored in this chapter.

I mentioned in Chapter 4 that Kuna men have been wearing a form of Western clothing for centuries; more recently Kuna men have been wearing commercially made shirts, t-shirts and pants. Kuna women on some islands rarely wear the mola, opting for readily available inexpensive Western-style clothing. Kuna women on most of the San Blas islands continue to wear the mola blouse for the majority of the time. Perhaps a parallel situation could be the continued popularity of sewing quilts by American women, when inexpensive commercial quilts could be purchased to serve the same utilitarian function as a bedcover¹⁴³. Cerny, Eicher, and DeLong (1993) interviewed quilters to develop an understanding of the meaning of the process of quilting and found that:

“Meaning is a complex, dynamic phenomenon that is shaped by the historic and contemporary experiences of a community. The meaning that underlies individual perceptions of behavior [sic] is acquired through participation in the collective activities. . . . social interaction and discourse empowers individual behavior [sic] and expression that values family and social relatedness” (Cerny, et al., 1993: 25).

The continuation of forms of handcraft could be considered in terms of pre-industrial craft traditions (which could also be termed non-industrial traditions), persisting in a post-industrial economy for a variety of purposes, including self-fulfilment, commercial sale, to maintain cultural identity, and for utility (Riley, 2008: 64). An investigation of non-industrial textile activities by Blood (2006) is referred to later in this chapter in the section on well-being.

I commence this chapter by looking closely at examples of detailed sections of mola panels from the last one hundred years. The purpose is to focus on the high level of detailed work involved in sewing a mola panel, which requires skill, concentration and commitment.

8.1 Time intensity in sewing a mola panel

8.1.1 The process of sewing a mola panel

Design is a separate initial step and requires conceptualising the finished mola or pair of molas, since molas are sewn as a pair (Margiotti, 2010: 247). This would require good spatial perception skills to visualise the interaction of a number of layers. Not all Kuna women would have this previsualisation skill and those who do are highly valued. Margiotti (2011: 247) found that good designers were asked to assist others with their designs.

¹⁴³ I consider further the parallels with quilt making and mola making in the context of serious leisure and the relationship of social identification with the act of making later in this chapter.

Once a design is determined, the fabric arranged and the layers cut, the work involved in sewing a mola blouse relates to the reverse appliqué, the surface appliqué and the embroidery sewn on the pair of mola panels. Most blouses also have some decoration on the band joining the panels to the yoke and some also have appliqué, embroidery or commercial braid sewn on the sleeves, shoulders and neckline.

Salvador¹⁴⁴ describes the time intensive reverse appliqué process thus:

“The basic sequence is to draw, baste, cut, and sew. To make a mola, the woman draws the design onto the top layer. Next she bastes carefully along the line and cuts about one-eighth of an inch on both sides of the basted line. She then folds under about one-sixteenth of an inch along the cut edge of the top layer and sews the folded edge to the base layer with fine, hidden stitches using matching thread. For a mola with more overall layers, the process is repeated” (2003: 55).

She continues by describing other sewing on the mola:

“Molas with lots of colours, and complicated filler motifs require additional steps, including appliqué, embroidery, and a wide range of finishing touches” (2003: 55).

Careful precise work on a mola takes longer to sew. It also requires a high level of skill acquired by experience. It is recognised that high quality workmanship alone will not result in a visually striking mola – design is important, especially colour placement and may compensate for mediocre stitching. Kuna aesthetic preferences are for molas with high visibility, generally achieved by placing contrasting colours adjacent to each other, which enables the design to be distinguished from far away.

Figure 43 illustrates the process of sewing a mola panel and the conditions under which molas are sewn.

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Kuna ethnoaesthetics (Salvador, 1976a, 1976b, 1978, 1997, 2003).

Figure 43. Illustrations of the process of sewing a mola.

Some of these illustrations are unedited frames captured from one of three film documentaries about the Kuna Indians living in the San Blas archipelago (Huber & Huber, 1975; Perrin, 2003; Lipke Vigesaa, 2009).

A. Preparation



Left: Tearing fabric to size for a mola panel; from Huber and Huber (1975). Right: Arranging layers of fabric on a board ready to baste together; from Lipke Vigesaa (2009).



The mola panel on the left of this photograph is finished; the one on the right shows the pieces of fabric basted ready for the maroon layer to be applied on top, which will be cut away to leave a border of the small pieces underneath to replicate the mola on the left; from Perrin (2003).

B. Stitching the mola



Left: The green fabric is surface appliqué. Note the role of the thumb in holding the fabric as it is stitched with the other hand. Right: A foot operated treadle sewing machine, frequently used to assemble a blouse; both illustrations from Perrin (2003).

Continued next page

Continued from previous page. Illustrations of the process of sewing a mola.

C. Copying a mola panel



Sewing a pair of mola panels, copied from a completed mola blouse, on the island of Wichubuala, February 2010.

D. Posture when sewing a mola panel



Left: Close-up of Kuna woman sitting in a hammock sewing. Right: Wide view inside a hut, sewing in a hammock; both illustrations from Perrin (2003). The women are swinging the hammock as they sew.



Left: Sitting in a hammock sewing; from Lipke Vigesaa (2009). Right: Sewing molas, in 2003-2004; from Margiotti (2010: 251). Kuna women sew molas alone and in groups.

8.1.2 Examining small sections of a mola panel

The purpose of focusing in this section on the detailed work in a mola panel is to provide evidence of the care, quality of workmanship, intricacy of design, the previsualisation required, and the amount of time devoted to sewing mola panels.

I devised a method to demonstrate the level of detailed work involved in sewing a mola, which is based on carefully examining a small section of a mola panel. Photographs were taken through a two-inch square template and information recorded about the number of layers, techniques used and stitching¹⁴⁵. A close examination of a small section of a mola panel serves as a surrogate measure of the “time to sew” a mola.

Using these photographs enables comparisons between the level of detailed work in the sewing, between panels during the same time period and to compare across time. This assessment provides an indication of the quality of care taken in sewing, including the attention to detail and thus the dedication to providing a high quality result. More complex designs take longer to sew, particularly if many layers are used. Constant changes in the direction of sewing require a higher level of skill. The assessment of difficulty is based on my experience learning to sew molas, outlined in Chapter 6, and watching experienced Kuna and non-Kuna women sewing molas in 2009 and 2010¹⁴⁶.

Examples from the reference collection are shown in Figure 44 and more detailed information is contained in Appendix J. These illustrations are reproduced as closely as possible to represent the actual size, which is 2 inches by 2 inches. The original colour choices which may have increased the impact or visibility of a mola panel may not be obvious in these photographs, due to fabric fading as a result of washing, or sun damage during wear, or due to museum storage conditions.

The caption beneath each detail (in Figure 44 and Appendix J) is the date of collection and the “reference collection” ID number. The date of collection may have been many years after the mola was

¹⁴⁵ Imperial measurements are used for this analysis since the fabric was sold to the Kuna women in Imperial yardage and stitch count is often calculated as stitches per linear inch. I used a linen counter, which has a one inch square viewfinder, in my museum research to calculate stitch count.

¹⁴⁶ For example, to create sharp points for triangular dientes requires the sewer to crease accurately each side of the triangle and hold it down prior to sewing. The create parallel lines of reverse appliqué, especially around curves, is difficult. Sewing around a concave curve is easier than sewing around a convex curve due to the nature of fabric pliability. One thin line parallel to another is much simpler to sew than wider parallel lines, since a single thin line is created by creasing the fabric against the original reverse appliqué edge with a thumbnail, and cutting directly on this crease before turning it under. Counterchange panels (see Appendix B for definitions) are more difficult to sew than individual panels because large areas of fabric are swapped between panels. In general, reverse appliqué is easier to sew than surface appliqué, when a piece of fabric is cut out and then stitched on top of another layer. Fine embroidery with tiny stitches is very time intensive and requires excellent eyesight, since Kuna women are sewing by natural light and have poor sources of light at night. No Kuna woman was seen using a magnifier to sew, though some wear spectacles.

sewn or it may have been recently completed. This may explain some of the variation in mola qualities in museums of molas collected in the same time period, though it would be expected that during each time period the quality of workmanship will vary depending on the skill of the Kuna woman sewing the mola and its intended purpose. Some molas may have been made by Kuna girls learning to sew; others may have been made by older women with failing eyesight.¹⁴⁷

In Appendix J, for each example, or set of examples, comments are made about the quality and difficulty of the work involved in the sewing of the reverse appliqué, surface appliqué and the embroidery. This assessment relates only to workmanship; it does not specifically consider the design of the panel or the materials used¹⁴⁸. Design elements are considered when relevant to a sewing technique. Where relevant, comment is made about the original fabric colour choices. Figure 44 shows some examples from Appendix J. A summary of the comments follows.

Figure 44. Examples of details from mola panels.

Photographs are close to actual size, if printed at 2" x 2". (2" ≈ 5 cm.)



1906 N01



1922 A15

continued over page

¹⁴⁷ Variations in the quality of museum collections may have other explanations: mola panels sewn for children may be of simpler designs and perhaps exhibit a lesser quality of workmanship, reflecting the expected short life of the blouse; molas sewn for everyday activities may not have as much fine work as a mola blouse sewn especially for a celebration. Some mola collectors will have attempted to obtain molas with exemplary workmanship; other collectors may have focused on obtaining a cross-section of molas available at the time, or favour particular iconography.

¹⁴⁸ An assessment of workmanship alone is not sufficient to understand the evolution of Kuna molas, which requires a detailed investigation of the fabric used in each layer of the mola; the dimensions; and the design characteristics of each mola panel. A preliminary assessment has been carried out for the mola panels and mola blouses in the "reference collection" and is summarised in Chapter 6. This work is ongoing.

Figure 44. Examples of sewing details of a section from a mola panel. *Continued from previous page.*



1932 N28



1941 A36



1965 D19



1971 N39



1995 F26



2006 F74

Photographs of the full mola panel for the details in Figure 44 may be found as follows:

| Year and detail | Location of photograph of full panel |
|------------------------|---|
| 1906 N01 | Chapter 6 |
| 1922 A15 | Figure 45 in this chapter |
| 1932 N28 | Appendix I, Table C |
| 1941 A36 | Appendix J Appendix I, Table D |
| 1965 D19 | Appendix I, Table F |
| 1971 N39 | Appendix I, Table G |
| 1995 F26 | Appendix I, Table I |
| 2006 F74 | Appendix I, Table J |

It can be seen from the “detail” photographs in Figure 44 that the amount of work in a mola panel, typified by these “detail” photographs, has increased significantly over the last century. Whilst the width of mola panels has progressively decreased over this time, the amount of work involved appears to have increased to a far greater extent¹⁴⁹. A typical panel in a mola blouse in the 1920s measured over 24 inches wide and over 16 inches deep. A pair of mola panels from this era would require the sewing of over 200 squares the size of the template, 2 inches by 2 inches. Examples from this era include A15 in Figure 44 and Figure 45. Appendix J contains examples and comments on A6, A15, A28, A29, A33, N03, N05, N08.

A typical panel in a mola blouse in 2006 measures at least 17 inches wide and 14 inches deep. A pair of mola panels from this era would require the sewing of over 120 squares the size of the template, 2 inches by 2 inches. Examples from this era include F74 in Figure 44 and Appendix J contains examples and comments on F22, F51, F62, F74.

¹⁴⁹ The area of mola panels has decreased significantly over the same time period. The panel width, in the “reference collection” decreased in a linear fashion and this is considered to be statistically significant. See Chapter 6. It is not possible to quantify this level of detailed work in a mola since there is considerable variation in the quality of mola sewing.

An indication of the scale of work may be seen in Figure 45. (The initial pages of Appendix J include five other complete mola panels with details from N05 1921; N22 1932; A36 1941; F15 1955; and V36 1984).

Figure 45. Example of the relationship of the details to the whole mola panel.

The pair of panels on this blouse would require the sewing of over 200 squares the size of the “detail”.



Embroidery, originally used for functional purposes to hold fabric layers together in the 1920s, began to be used to delineate facial features of people and animals, and has developed to become an integral part of many panels with tiny stitches and complicated designs, though the main stitch used is simple chain stitch. In the last two decades some mola panels have been sewn for tourists, in which the main feature is very decorative embroidery, with little reverse appliqué and predominantly surface appliqué. These techniques allow a mola to be completed in less time than traditional techniques, and these molas are generally smaller in size than mola panels sewn in the same time period, to be used for mola blouses.

As discussed in Chapter 6, it is difficult to convey the intricacies of the workmanship on a mola panel without physically holding a panel. Photographs do not adequately convey the layering or the stitching.

Appendix J contains a discussion of details taken from 41 mola panels from 1906 – 2006 from the “reference collection”. The assessment below is based on this Appendix.

8.1.3 Assessment of detailed work

An examination of the complexity of sewing work on mola panels over time, based on a representative sample of mola panels, is summarised below¹⁵⁰:

- Prior to 1920 mola panels were all sewn using only the reverse appliqué technique and had no embroidery. Most had 3 - 4 layers; “reference collection” molas for the same time period ranged from 2 - 6 layers.
- During the 1920s the first surface appliqué appeared; all panels were sewn with reverse appliqué; few molas had any embroidery and the use of small pieces of fabric inserted between layers, referred to as inserts, appeared. Most had 3, 4 or 5 layers; similar to the “reference collection”.
- In the 1930s mola panels were sewn using reverse appliqué; many also included surface appliqué; there was little or no embroidery. Most had 3 - 4 layers; similar to the “reference collection”.
- In the 1940s all panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué; some included embroidery. Most had 3 - 4 layers; similar to the “reference collection”.
- In the 1950s all panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué; some included embroidery; some included inserts. Most were 3 layers; the “reference collection” molas ranged from 3 - 5 layers.
- In the 1960s, same as for the 1950s, all panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué; some included embroidery; some included inserts. Some excellent embroidery was first seen on mola panels. Most were 3 - 4 layers; the “reference collection” molas ranged from 2 - 4 layers.
- In the 1970s all panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué; all included embroidery; most included inserts. Most were 2 or 4 layers; the “reference collection” molas included 2, 3 and 4 layers.
- In the 1980s molas first emerged which appear to have been specifically “made for trade” in museum collections. This may reflect collector bias – older “made for trade” molas, if produced, may not have been considered valuable for museum collections. Most panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué. One “made for trade” panel had no reverse appliqué, generally a defining characteristic of a mola panel. Most panels had inserts and all were sewn with embroidery. Most were 2 - 3 layers; the “reference collection” molas included 2, 3 and 4 layers.
- In the 1990s and after 2000 most panels were sewn with reverse appliqué and surface appliqué; most included embroidery; some included inserts. Decorative embroidery is introduced, which may be sparse or compact, perhaps covering large areas of a mola panel. Most were 3 layers; the “reference collection” molas included 2, 3 and 4 layers.

¹⁵⁰ The analysis of the “reference collection” data is ongoing; the findings to date differ from previous assumptions in terms of the prevalence of surface appliqué, embroidery, layers and iconography. This will be addressed in future work.

In the early years of the mola, the reverse appliqué technique predominated and more layers were common. Reverse appliqué and surface appliqué were included in most molas by the 1940s, with some embroidery. During the 1950s and 1960s fewer layers were used but there were more inserts of fabric between layers. This continued during the 1980s, when more embroidery began to be used, and techniques which took less time to cover a mola panels became prevalent. This includes more extensive surface appliqué and larger areas covered by decorative embroidery. The traditional Kuna mola technique of reverse appliqué was found to be absent in some “made for trade” molas after 1990.

Since the first molas were collected by museums at the beginning of the 20th century, molas of exceptional quality of workmanship can be found. Some are individual panels and some are in blouses¹⁵¹. Predictions that the quality of molas would decline, due to the impact of “made for trade” commercial molas, were overly pessimistic. Many high quality molas were found in the most recent museum collections (1990s and >2000) and for sale during fieldwork in Panama City and the San Blas islands in 2010. Some molas, which are made as Kuna dress, are sold later in times of financial need, and some high quality molas are made specifically for sale.

In many cases the workmanship may be considered rough, meaning that the stitches are uneven or large, the cutting of shapes is uneven, the lines delineating outlines of design elements are jagged or uneven. Regardless, some of these panels with average quality workmanship result in exceptional panels, due to the colour arrangement of the layers in the panel or the positioning of inserts or pieces of surface appliqué. Workmanship is not the sole determinant of a high quality mola panel, in terms of the resultant aesthetic qualities of the mola. For Kuna women, the impact of colour is particularly important in assessing the visual impact of a mola¹⁵². Kuna colour preferences and Western colour preferences may not be identical; for the Kuna the visibility of a mola is of prime importance and the outline of figures and shapes in a mola panel is defined by contrasting colours, which enhances visibility from a distance.

This section has focused on gaining an understanding of the level of detailed work involved in sewing a mola panel. It is encouraging that the amount of work has not declined, with the exception of some “made for trade” molas, and that the techniques have been refined over time. The filler elements have become smaller and it is difficult to imagine that further decreases in the size of tas-tas, dientes, gwini, or surface appliqué would be possible using the currently available needles, thread and fabric. In some excellent molas collected in the last two decades, the stitches are so close together, that there is no fabric visible between stitches.

¹⁵¹ In general, exceptional mola panels are found in blouses with exceptional trim, though some excellent panels are in blouses where little care has been taken with the assembly of the blouse and the blouse decoration. Jennings-Rentenaar (2005) found that mola blouses in one museum, collected in the 1950s - 1970s, with very good or exceptional mola panels had been sewn into blouses with excellent workmanship, particularly the trimming to sleeves and yoke.

¹⁵² Kuna ethnoaesthetic criteria are discussed in Chapter 6.

A significant amount of time is required to complete a pair of mola panels of high quality. Whilst the area of a panel has almost halved, the amount of work has increased in the last one hundred years, as demonstrated in this detailed assessment of two inch square sections of panels. By focusing in this section on the level of detailed work in sewing mola panels, I have highlighted both the amount of time involved and the level of technical difficulty of the sewing. I have also provided evidence that the quality of workmanship, based on the “reference collection” examples, has not deteriorated and that mola making continues to be based on sewing layers of fabric with forms of appliqué and embroidery.

8.2 Diversity of mola blouses

The remainder of this chapter examines the motivation of Kuna women to continue to sew molas. I consider the importance of mola making to the well-being of Kuna women. I commence in this section by describing the situations in which the mola blouse is worn, in order to provide background to the integral part the blouse plays in a Kuna woman’s life.

Different mola blouses are worn for appropriate activities: at home women wear old molas or molas with simple designs which take less time to sew. Women will choose simple molas or old molas for trips to the mainland, to harvest crops or collect natural materials used for weaving, medicines and household objects. For social visits, more elaborate molas will be worn and for some ritual ceremonies, such as the important puberty celebrations. Molas may be made specifically for the event (Hirschfeld, 1977a: 73-76). Sometimes, the Kuna leaders will suggest a theme for the design or a colour scheme, and often a kinship group of women will sew similar molas for such an event (Fortis 2008: 107; Margiotti 2010: 245).

Inside the house, Margiotti (2010: 238) found that Kuna women may wear t-shirts, but outside the houses molas are considered the only blouse to wear for married women. They are ashamed to wear t-shirts outside the home if married and pregnant, explaining one of the reasons why pregnant women stay inside for most of the day. Fortis (2008: 125) found that pregnant Kuna women wish to remain invisible to protect the baby and avoid contact outside their house; and thus stop wearing *molas* and *wini* which draw attention to their bodies.¹⁵³ Molas draw attention to a Kuna woman, and Kuna men consider the women to be beautiful, when they wear mola blouses and the complete ensemble with wrap skirt and headscarf (Fortis 2008: 106). Kuna women frequently owned more than 15 mola blouses, and continually sewed mola panels and acquired new wrap skirts and headscarves, to be able to create new dress combinations (Margiotti 2010: 241).¹⁵⁴ ¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ As referred to in Chapter 7, the mola panel covers a part of the woman’s body which needs to be protected, namely the womb (Margiotti 2010: 245-246).

¹⁵⁴ For married Kuna women who wore only the mola blouse and ensemble outside the house, not Western clothing, a short style haircut was adopted. Those women who sometimes wore t-shirts outside the house generally had longer hair, perhaps reflecting Western fashion. Gifts of clothing and jewellery between relatives are frequent, especially between husband and wife, for baby girls and other female relatives, and women as wedding gifts by the husband’s family (Margiotti 2010: 242).

¹⁵⁵ The position the mola is worn on the body has been discussed in Chapter 7.

8.3 Negotiating time to sew molas – the structure of Kuna society

The production of a mola blouse is very time intensive, often requiring more than four weeks of sewing, for many hours each day¹⁵⁶. The organisation of traditional Kuna society, including the control Kuna women are able to exert over their lives, has enabled them to negotiate sufficient time to produce high quality molas, initially to be worn by the women and girls of their own families; when this has been achieved molas are made to be sold.¹⁵⁷ The availability of ample time to sew molas relies on the organisation of domestic responsibility in Kuna society.

The gender specific responsibilities of the San Blas Kuna people is described by Salvador, who spent considerable time with Kuna women in the late 1960s, as a type of duality: “In the Kuna cosmos, everything in the world, whether natural, cultural, or spiritual, is divided by gender, and almost every specific kind of verbal or visual art belongs either to males or females, but not to both” (Salvador, 2003: 47)¹⁵⁸. The generations of women living together in the matrilineal Kuna houses have specific roles described thus:

“The oldest women take care of most of the heavy work, including cooking, a smoky and time-consuming job. Younger women spend some time taking care of the children, hauling water, washing clothes, and hulling rice. Women of this age may also take turns working in small stores. Young girls assume much of the responsibility for the care of the younger children in the household. This arrangement – the combination of matrilineality and the division of responsibilities by age – enables women from their late teenage years through middle age to spend many hours each day making molas” (Salvador, 2003: 49).

¹⁵⁶ The time to sew molas is mentioned also in Chapter 7. Hirschfeld carried out fieldwork on a small San Blas island in 1974. He estimated that a two colour mola panel could take 20-40 hours to sew; a complex mola from 40-80 hours up to 60-120 hours. It is not clear from his paper if this estimate includes the pair of mola panels and sewing all the pieces together to make a blouse (Hirschfeld, 1977a: 159). He suggests an average of 30 hours (Hirschfeld, 1977b: 121), which I think is an underestimate for a pair of mola panels regardless of complexity. Tice, based on her fieldwork, 1981-1984, estimates “a solid week of work, sewing most of the day and well into the evening, to complete one *mola* panel (a *mola* blouse requires two panels)” (Tice, 1995: 79). Based on this measure, I estimate 112 hours to sew a pair of panels, plus an extra day to sew the panels and the yoke together, giving an estimate of 120 hours minimum to sew a mola blouse. Price (2011: 196) also found that Kuna women take many weeks to complete a mola blouse.

¹⁵⁷ It is important to note that Kuna women do not sew molas for other Kuna women, apart from their children. Hirschfeld, who researched the Kuna political economy in 1974, writes that “there is no internal Cuna [sic] trade or sale of *molos*” (Hirschfeld, 1977b: 107). This appears to have changed. Price (2011: 196) reports that in 2008 some Kuna women living in Panama City who did not have time to sew molas, but did have money, paid other Kuna women to sew a mola blouse for them. This is the first research I have found relating this circumstance.

¹⁵⁸ Salvador, who lived in Panama City, 1967-69 as a US Peace Corps volunteer, helped establish one of the early Kuna operated mola cooperatives during this time (Salvador, 1976a: 120-121; 2003: 69-70). Fieldwork for her doctoral research was conducted during the summer of 1974.

She notes that whilst women obtain cash by selling molas, it is considered the role of a husband to work to provide all the food and clothing of his wife and family. Stout found, during his fieldwork in 1940-1941, that married Kuna men spent most of their cash earnings on dress items for their wife and daughters, including cloth and high value gold and silver jewellery (Stout, 1947: 25).

This sharing of household chores has been confirmed by other researchers, who have conducted fieldwork in the San Blas, including Hirschfeld's fieldwork in 1974 (Hirschfeld, 1977b: 111-113); fieldwork in 1981 and 1984 by Tice¹⁵⁹; and as described above in 2003-2004 by Fortis (2008) and 2002 - 2004 by Margiotti (2010). In her fieldwork on the island of Ustupu, Margiotti (2010: 254-254) found that men had progressively taken over horticultural activities, previously the responsibility of women, and that the women spent most of their time at home and in the village. The availability of piped water allows women to wash clothes, bath and prepare food at home.

The different stages in a Kuna woman's life are reflected in the amount of time available for sewing molas. Fortis (2008: 106-107) and Margiotti (2010: 243) describe the intergenerational sharing of domestic duties, which enables young Kuna women many hours each day to sew molas. In summary, from puberty young girls learn how to sew mola blouses from older relatives, in preparation for marriage and motherhood. During their 30s and 40s, Kuna women spend significant time daily sewing molas – during daylight and evening hours. The next generation of older women do most of the domestic work, including food preparation and child minding, and sew some simple molas for children and themselves. The eyesight of older women generally deteriorates, due to the hours spent sewing when they were younger; they are no longer able to sew at night and sew less during the day also as they age.

Kuna girls begin sewing molas at an early age, and this is considered to be meaningful activity. In contrast, Kuna men were found by Hirschfeld to not fully participate in contributing to Kuna society until marriage (Hirschfeld, 1977b: 113). He maintains that mola sewing is “the only labour intensive activity in San Blas” (Hirschfeld, 1977b: 113) and that women have been spending the majority of their time sewing molas since the beginning of the 20th century.

Photographs of Kuna women provide evidence that Kuna women in their 30s and 40s spend hours each day sewing molas. This sedentary lifestyle tends to result in them becoming “well rounded” due to this lack of physical activity. Young Kuna women are sitting for many hours each day sewing, limiting

¹⁵⁹ Tice (1995), based on fieldwork in three San Blas islands during 1984, considers the development of mola commercialisation is directly related to the transfer to Kuna men of some of the agricultural responsibilities previously undertaken by Kuna women, and also the piping of water to some of the San Blas islands from the 1970s, removing the labour intensive daily journeys to the mainland to stock up on fresh water (Tice, 1995: 38, 52, 124-126, 145-147, 165-167). She reports that the division of labour by gender in these communities was not identical: there were variations depending on access to piped water and women's involvement in agriculture. Since at least the 1950s molas have been sold to foreign tourists, though mola commercialisation did not become important until the late 1960s due to the coconut blight (Tice, 1995: 63) which reduced significantly the income from this source, so that cash from mola sales became important for household food supplies (Tice, 1995: 63-64).

incidental exercise. Later, as they age, older women take on more domestic activities and in photographs they appear leaner. The method of sewing molas, with the need to hold small sections of fabric with the thumb of one hand, and sew a few stitches at a time with the other hand, and then move each hand, requires a relatively fixed postural position. (See the photographs in Figure 43). Margiotti describes the process:

“Making mola blouses is governed by an elaborate set of procedures related to reduced mobility. These procedures imply the strong control of movements, with women sitting and bending their heads and shoulders slightly to cut, fold and sew layers of coloured fabric, revealing progressively a graphic form, among the layers. The fine work of mola making is an intense labour activity . . . done at home and alternating with other everyday activities” (Margiotti 2010: 249).

A situation has been created where young Kuna women are able to devote many hours each day to sewing molas. The remainder of this chapter addresses the environment within which the Kuna women sew molas and the factors which influence their motivation to make molas.

8.4 Understanding motivating factors and well-being

Psychologists sometimes approach factors of motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Whilst it is not proposed to pursue this in detail here, understanding the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is helpful. Intrinsic motivation relates to personal interest and enjoyment gained, whilst carrying out a task; and extrinsic motivation relates to factors from outside the individual, from another individual or from society. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors can be understood to reinforce an individual’s behaviour.

There is strong encouragement by Kuna leaders for the continuation of the mola blouse, wrap skirt and headscarf to be worn, as part of the Kuna women’s dress ensemble, and this is discussed in the next chapter. The structuring of Kuna society, to provide hours of time each day for sewing molas, has the support of the whole Kuna society. This can be considered as a major motivating factor, together with the sale of molas, which makes a significant contribution to the Kuna economy and the satisfaction Kuna women gain from sewing molas. This satisfaction factor may be considered an intangible benefit and will be explored further later in this chapter, when I will be linking this to the concept of serious leisure and the achievement of a “flow state”, based on recent advances in the scholarly study of leisure.

The encouragement and support of the whole Kuna society, for the sewing of molas, may be considered to be an extrinsic motivator; the satisfaction Kuna women gain from sewing molas could be considered an intrinsic motivator; and the sale of used molas or molas sewn specifically for trade, could be considered to be both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This is the case because Kuna society encourages the commercialisation of molas, to reinforce the association of molas with the perception

of Kuna identity by outsiders; and intrinsically by the women to enhance their self-sufficiency, autonomy and to benefit their families directly, especially if there is no male household head.

The extrinsic motivation is addressed further in Chapter 9 when considering Kuna cultural survival, in which the strategic development of social control and social cohesion by Kuna leaders is discussed. It will be argued that the strong encouragement given to Kuna women to sew and wear molas is an important element of this strategy. In this chapter, I am addressing primarily the intrinsic motivators and the societal context within which molas are sewn, to gain an understanding of how mola making contributes to the well-being of Kuna women.

The achievement of well-being is now considered by Seligman (2011) to be more important than the achievement of happiness. His earlier work on achieving *happiness*, had as its mission to “increase life satisfaction”; he now proposes that a better goal is to achieve *well-being* in order for individuals and society to “increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment” (Seligman, 2011: 12) leading to a fulfilling life.¹⁶⁰ Seligman’s expanded definition of well-being includes the three elements of his original “authentic happiness” theory: positive emotion, engagement and meaning, with the addition of two other elements, namely accomplishment and positive relationships. These five elements are independent and measurable. He appears to be suggesting that the concept of well-being reflects reality more than his original theory of happiness.

The five factors contributing to well-being, as defined by Seligman (2011: 16-24) can be summarised:

1. Positive emotion – a subjective state, experienced in the present, which is characterised by pleasure or ecstasy;
2. Engagement – a subjective state experienced retrospectively, similar to positive emotion, often referred to as being engrossed in an activity, or being in a flow state (further described below);
3. Meaning – “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self”;
4. Accomplishment – alternatively could be considered as achievement of a goal – activities people choose to do; could be “the pursuit of wealth”; winning a game;
5. Positive relationships – interacting with other people and providing emotional support within groups of people.

In the next section, I consider the component of accomplishment as part of an examination of serious leisure and in the following section the component of engagement, specifically the achievement of flow. Later in this chapter, I discuss research specifically linking the psychological benefits of textile activities to the women who are involved in sewing.

¹⁶⁰ Seligman (2011) also mentions the assessment of the well-being of nations and this is considered for the Kuna nation in Chapter 9.

8.5 The study of serious leisure

The development of the concept of serious leisure originates with the work of Stebbins in the 1970s and after 30 years of research¹⁶¹ the term has been refined and studied extensively (Stebbins, 2006, 2009). Three definitions, related to the different types of leisure, provide an understanding of Stebbins' approach:

- *“Serious leisure: systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, the participant finds a career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience.*
- *Casual leisure: immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.*
- *Project-based leisure: short-term, reasonably complicated, one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time, or time free of disagreeable obligation” (Stebbins 2006: 3).*

Stebbins defines leisure as an “uncoerced activity that people want to do” (2006: 3). He affirms that if the activity is uncoerced, whether the participant is obliged or not obliged to do it, then an activity can be considered to be a leisure activity (Stebbins 2005: 17). Stebbins addresses the issue of non-Western leisure and acknowledges that “the issue of serious leisure outside the First World has, to my knowledge, never been raised in the literature, that is, it has not yet emerged as a matter of debate among researchers” (Stebbins, 2005: 18). I am introducing this concept to the study of the process of sewing molas by Kuna women, and in this way contributing to the extension of the concept of serious leisure within a non-Western environment. I will be outlining the personal motivation and rewards which individual Kuna women derive from the process, which I believe can be considered within the definition of serious leisure.

Serious leisure can be characterised as a *passion* which a person develops and pursues for lengthy periods of time. Seligman's definition of accomplishment would encompass serious leisure activities. The adjective “serious” is used to stress the strength of attachment a person has to a particular leisure pursuit, and to contrast it with other forms of leisure. Whilst casual leisure is generally of short duration and project-based leisure is limited in time duration, serious leisure activities are carried out on a regular basis, generally on most days of the week and for several hours at a time.

The six qualities of serious leisure, which appear to be applicable to Kuna mola making, have been suggested by Gould, Moore, McGuire and Stebbins (2008: 48-51) and are summarised below:

¹⁶¹ For a history of the study of serious leisure see Stebbins, R. (2009). The Serious Leisure Perspective. Retrieved 7 December 2009, from www.socio.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure/.

1. Perseverance – often through a slow learning curve to acquire skills, as well as other obstacles.
2. Development of a “career” in the adopted leisure pursuit, with progressive stages related to skills, knowledge and abilities.
3. Significant effort to acquire skills, knowledge and abilities.
4. Durable outcomes which may include “enrichment, self-actualization [sic], self-expression, enhanced self-image, self-gratification, re-creation and in some cases, financial return” (Gould, et al., 2008: 49). These may be considered personal outcomes. Not all of these will be applicable – only some personal benefits may be obtained. Three group outcomes are also suggested: group attraction; group accomplishments; and group maintenance. Serious leisure activities provide a setting in which the social aspects are as important as other qualities. Pursuing an activity together can build friendships, a sense of belonging and develop a cohesive group.
5. Unique ethos – meaning the “ideals, values, sentiments, or guiding beliefs that are shared by members of a serious leisure social world” (Gould, et al., 2008: 51).
6. Identification with the chosen pursuit – it becomes a passion.

Some of these qualities of serious leisure result in personal outcomes and some result in social outcomes. Gould (2005) likens the durable benefits of these qualities as rewards of serious leisure and suggests that whilst not all rewards may have been anticipated, they become in turn the motivation for continuation of a serious leisure pursuit (2005: 26).

A division into personal and group rewards can be made. Personal rewards include personal enrichment, self-actualisation, self-expression, enhanced self-image, self-gratification, re-creation and financial return. Not all personal rewards will be applicable, though there tends to be a logical progression between the first few listed. Social rewards include group attraction, group accomplishments, and group maintenance (derived from Gould (2005: 26-30)).

The three social rewards can create a “social world” (Gould 2005: 30) where participants enjoy a sense of belonging and is most prevalent where participants meet on a regular basis, have a strong bind to its continuation and identify strongly with the serious leisure activity. This would reflect the commitment of Kuna women to mola sewing.

A redefinition of serious leisure, based on social identification, has been proposed by Jones (2006). His argument is that most of the qualities of serious leisure may be “consequences of, or reciprocally related to, identification with the activity, rather than discrete characteristics of the activity itself” (Jones, 2006: 50). He maintains that by making the characteristic of social identification as the prime characteristic of serious leisure, the other five characteristics can become explanations for the phenomenon.

Underlying his assertion is that both social identification and serious leisure “require a need for the activity to require personal effort and a need for perseverance” (Jones, 2006: 52). Jones views the creation of a unique ethos as a result of social identification with the serious leisure activity. The need for perseverance relates to social identification also, since “then they are likely to show greater commitment to remain with those colleagues” (Jones 2006: 53).

The personal benefits of serious leisure, mentioned above, include two which are relevant to social identification: positive self-image and self-esteem, where the individuals in a group identify with the achievements of the group. The sixth quality of serious leisure, the creation of a “career” from an activity, may be subsequent to the creation of a group identity, since it may take years to develop the required skills and abilities, and in fact relates to the length of commitment to an activity. Jones proposes to redefine serious leisure as “any leisure activity that is able to provide the participant with a valued social identity” (Jones 2006: 57), specifically to enable the concept to be more categorically explained, particularly regarding the benefits derived from it. His redefinition thus

“provides a framework with which to understand the relationships between serious leisure participation and other spheres of an individual’s life by acknowledging that individuals will have a number of inter-related identities. Serious leisure does not take place ‘outside’ the individual’s other activities. Instead, individuals have multiple identities, such as work, or family, each of which are salient at different times. By adopting a social identity framework, the interrelationships between these identities can be explored, thus acknowledging the complex relationships between leisure participation and the other aspects of life” (Jones 2006: 57-58).

Certainly, the work of Stalp (2006a, 2006b, 2007), who carried out in-depth qualitative research with American quilters, found that the women identified strongly as “quilters”, regardless of the quality of their quilting skills, once they adopted it as a form of serious leisure.

Sewing molas by Kuna women is a time intensive activity. Considerable time is expended each day, by women at certain stages in their lives, in sewing molas. The entire process, from concept to completion of a mola blouse may be considered a serious leisure activity. Kuna women appear committed to sewing molas for themselves and as a secondary objective, sew molas for sale. Salvador (Salvador, 1976a: 131; 1978: 22; 2003: 50) found that Kuna women gained prestige from sewing good molas, that they were proud of their achievements and that mola making was an outlet for artistic expression, with much discussion between Kuna women about the decision of what design to sew and how to achieve it. Thus, Kuna women find mola making a fulfilling activity.

In order to gain a better understanding of the factors underlying this high level of satisfaction, I considered a similar textile art form, that of contemporary American quilting. Quilting is one of the leisure activities which have been the subject of scholarly study under the serious leisure concept, which I outline below. Stalp has written extensively on quilting as a manifestation of a serious leisure activity with a strong inclination of American quilters to develop a “subjective career” in quilting (Stalp, 2006b, 2006a, 2007). In studying non-professional American quilters, Stalp found that many quilters gained a sense of calmness and peace, as well as time for reflexive thinking, whilst they sewed quilts

(Stalp, 2006a: 203); and likens this to the “flow state” discussed by Csikszentmihalyi, which I will refer to later, as a reward derived from many serious leisure activities.

Stalp refers to “the supportive and understanding community that embraces women’s non-economic cultural production” (2007: 128) and discusses how quilting may be similar to other activities undertaken by women, such as knitting and weaving (2007: 134). I am suggesting this would also include mola making, since it is quite similar to quilt making, albeit on a smaller scale. Stalp looks at the differences between quilting and other leisure activities such as exercise and sport and movie-watching and comments that quilting is different because it “is both a process and a product . . . [it] produces a product for others to enjoy . . . So, in addition to being a relaxing process and producing a product for others’ enjoyment, the quilting process produces an enduring product” (2007: 134-135). This is similar to a woman sewing a mola, which in many ways is a small version of a quilt.

Stalp found the motivation for sewing quilts was multi-stranded:

“Women primarily produced quilts for personal non-economic reasons, such as creative expression or stress relief. . . . to fulfill [sic] personal, emotional, and artistic needs. The creative activity provided them the peace that they were seeking, and acted as a haven from the rest of their everyday lives. For some, part of the benefit of quilting was the opportunity to spend time with other women, exchanging not only information about quilting, but also thoughts about a variety of issues relevant to contemporary women’s lives. After engaging in quilting and escaping from their life stressors, they were better able to engage with the complex and trying systems in which they already existed, mainly within the family and the economy. For quilters, their intimate, connected quilting communities are supportive to their creative selves in ways that their families, non-quilting friends, and paid-work lives are not.

Thus, quilting is an essential part of these women’s identities, and for many women becomes a subjective career. They self-identify as quilters, and state that quilting encourages self-expression, provides a way to establish a conscious legacy of themselves, as well as fulfilling other society-level needs” (Stalp, 2007: 136-137).

Many of the benefits mentioned here by Stalp can be related to the components of well-being, as defined by Seligman (2011), and are elaborated on later in this chapter.

Those Kuna women living in the San Blas archipelago who wear molas as everyday dress and those who wear it generally only for specific cultural occasions, identify and define themselves as “Kuna” by wearing the mola. Kuna women sew mola panels for themselves and their children or grandchildren, so women would be wearing molas they had made themselves¹⁶². Sometimes the piecing together of the blouse is sewn by others. Even women who are no longer able to spend hours each day sewing molas

¹⁶² See Footnote 157.

would have sufficient time to sew some molas each year, thus identifying as mola makers as well as wearing molas. It is posited that Kuna women would identify themselves as makers of molas, perhaps from a young age, when being taught to sew molas by their mother or grandmother.

8.6 Achieving the optimal flow state – a reward for Kuna women

There is a link between the rewards gained by participants in a *serious leisure* activity and the concept of *flow* or more specifically an *optimal flow experience*, a psychological state which results from engaging in an activity with the characteristics of serious leisure.

The theoretical framework developed around the concept of flow was developed by Csikszentmihalyi in the mid-1970s and is considered to be a process, not a fixed state:

“people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 53).

Csikszentmihalyi is a leading researcher in the field of positive psychology, and his work links the achievement of the flow state to happiness.¹⁶³ The dynamics of flow were found to change over time – as more challenges are tackled, the skills increase in response to this. Challenges are sought to avoid both boredom and anxiety. Flow will be experienced when a person is involved in a serious leisure activity at a level complex enough to avoid boredom, but not too complex for the level of skills to create anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1992: 75-76). Seligman (2011) includes engagement or flow as a key component of his theory of well-being.

The flow concept has been substantially developed, with these eight components being considered prerequisites to experiencing a flow state:

1. *“sense of competence in executing the activity*
2. *requirement of concentration*
3. *clarity of goals of the activity*
4. *immediate feedback from the activity*
5. *sense of deep, focused involvement in the activity*
6. *sense of control in completing the activity*
7. *loss of self-consciousness during the activity*
8. *altered sense of time”* (Elkington, 2008: 136-137).

¹⁶³ The titles of his books reveal his breadth of study and include: *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991), *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness* (1996), *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996), *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (with R. Robinson, 1990).

Elkington reviews the flow literature and comments that “the presence of flow within leisure-related activities characterises some of the most intensely enjoyable experiences for participants” (Elkington, 2008: 137). His own research focuses on pre-and post-flow experiences for serious leisure participants and assists in refining the actual flow experience. He supports a nexus between serious leisure and the flow experience where “activities requiring commitment, discipline, and effort are more likely to provide the conditions for flow experiences” (2008: 143). It is hypothesised here that the process of sewing molas exhibits most of these prerequisites, and that Kuna women experience a flow state. This is explored in the next section.

Elkington’s research with serious leisure participants (Elkington, 2008, 2010, 2011) confirms Csikszentmihalyi’s flow characteristics and reinforces the “distinctive transcendental nature” of flow (Elkington, 2008: 156). Elkington links further the relationship between the outcomes of serious leisure and flow, and shows the self-reinforcing nature of the relationship:

“the more an individual invests in the activities in which they choose to participate, the more serious these activities will become and the more likely they are to create ways of experiencing and maintaining flow therein” (Elkington 2011: 271).

The benefits of serious leisure increase, and the rewards compound, the longer the serious leisure activity is pursued so that:

“Continued involvement in flow-producing serious leisure activities has been found to lead to the accrual of certain personal and social benefits, including the enhancement of self-concept, self-actualisation, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self-esteem and social interaction” (Elkington 2011: 272).

Understanding the flow experience assists in understanding long term commitment to serious leisure activities. This may be one of the intrinsic reasons Kuna women are strongly committed to sewing molas. Certainly, there will be multiple motivating factors associated with sewing molas, since without the support of the entire community and the women themselves, the continuation of such a time intensive activity would be unlikely.

It is known that Kuna women derive satisfaction from sewing molas and there is no evidence that the sewing is considered a burden or that the time expended is resented in any way. Kuna women, even those not sewing molas specifically for commercial purposes, continually sew new molas. They enjoy wearing new molas for special events and continually seek new design inspiration. It is evident that the Kuna women gain intrinsic rewards from the process of sewing molas also, and it is posited that since mola making has the characteristics of serious leisure as espoused by Stebbins, that this activity also provides Kuna women with a sense of flow, as described here. Recent research which has definitively established links between sewing and well-being is examined below.

Csikszentmihalyi asserts that there is a definitive link between flow experience and happiness, and that this appears to be consistent across cultures (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 46). Based on their own research

and a review of the research of others in Japan, Australia, Korea, Thailand, North America and Europe and a large international study, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1992) believe there is evidence for the universality of the flow experience:

“Men and women, people high and low in socioeconomic class describe the same phenomenological state. What people do to enter the flow state varies by culture, gender, age, class, and personal inclination, but the structure of the experience appears to be remarkably similar” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1992: 59).

The experience of flow was found to be necessary for a person’s enjoyment and quality of life, in fact the pre-conditions which create happiness. My research in this chapter, based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out by others, outlined below, supports the applicability of the concept of flow to the lives of the Kuna Indians.

8.7 The environment for mola sewing

There are possibly two pathways to achieving an optimal flow state by Kuna women, related to the different environments under which they are known to sew molas. In the morning when they sew alone or in groups of women in their own homes in an environment considered by them to be tranquil – a quiet time, with the men away fishing and working the plantations on the mainland, the children at school, a time free of other chores and distractions; and at night on an irregular basis in the gathering house, where the whole village meets to listen to the chiefs’ chant.¹⁶⁴ At night a completely different environment prevails – noisy, dark, crowded, full of other stimulation from smells, sounds, and vibration.¹⁶⁵

It is possible that a sense of flow is experienced at these evening gathering house meetings for reasons not related to the sewing of molas, rather related to the cultural meaning of the messages and the chanting. In the next chapter, I will investigate the extrinsic factors influencing Kuna women to sew molas, including the ways “a culture can build flow into its lifestyle” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 80). I will look at how aspects of Kuna society, including rituals, whether religious or cultural, can be a source of enjoyment for a cultural or ethnic group, and how this can lead to a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 76).

A quiet, silent and tranquil environment was found to be a prerequisite for sewing molas (Margiotti, 2010: 248-9). The absence of this situation was commented upon by Kuna women who lived in Panama City, who articulated the fact that it was not possible to sew molas there, because a suitable environment was not available. Kuna villages are described as quiet in the mornings, with little conversation, and the men away working in agriculture or fishing. Margiotti (2010), who lived on the

¹⁶⁴ See Footnote 168.

¹⁶⁵ Other sensory characteristics, including touch are mentioned as part of the contribution of textile activities to well-being later in this chapter. Gordon (2010) refers to the “sensual pleasure of handling the thread or yarn” and the fact that “cloth-making creates the ‘relaxation response’, a measurable state where brain waves change and heart rate, muscle tension and blood pressure decrease and a feeling of serenity ensues” (Gordon, 2010: 9).

San Blas island of Ustupu for over a year between 2003 and 2004, provides insight into the conditions which prevailed for the Kuna women to sew molas:

“In the frame of everyday time in Okopsukkun [the name of a Kuna village], the morning epitomizes tranquillity. This is the time for conducting gendered productive activities at home and in the forest or the sea, where men produce food for their wife, children, and by extension for their in-laws. In the morning, when men leave their houses, the village is silent and still, and everything seems almost motionless. Women are at home, and the village pathways are quite deserted, with children at school, or taking naps between feeds. Practically and conceptually, quietness recalls that the flawlessness of everyday activities is in motion, and nothing disrupts this flow. Men, as generators of food abundance, undertake food production activities outside the village space, and in the house, these activities are paralleled with female tasks of the preparation of homemade drinks, laundry, meal preparation, and mola making. For adult women, tranquillity is linked to the execution of mola, and to their corporeal behaviour to realize blouses. Tranquillity, as a distinctive feature of mola making, has curiously received little ethnographic attention, but it is the essential pre-condition for the minute tactile and visual activity at work in the realization of mola” (Margiotti 2010: 249).

Women sew alone and in groups. Young girls learn to sew molas at home by observation and by demonstration of difficult techniques by older women. Earlier in this chapter, I described the high level of detailed sewing work involved in completing mola panels.

Kuna women also sew molas at night in the gathering house¹⁶⁶. Sherzer describes the relationship of the gathering house to the village:

“The ‘gathering house’ is located in or near the center [sic] of every Kuna village. With its bamboo walls and thatched roof, it has the same structure as all traditional Kuna houses except that it is much larger than family dwellings. It stands out because of its size, especially in the largest villages, in which it has the capacity for more than one thousand persons. In the center [sic] are strung hammocks in which ‘chiefs’ sit or lie. At both ends of these hammocks are long benches with backs, for the arkarkana (chief’s spokesmen). Long backless benches throughout the ‘gathering house’ are used by both men and women” (Sherzer, J., [1983] 2001: 72).

Howe explains the role of the gathering house as:

“ the heart of a Kuna community, the place where it organizes [sic] village labor [sic], makes decisions, resolves disputes, teaches Kuna values, deals with the outside world, and assembles before its God. . . .

¹⁶⁶ In Kuna the phrase is *onmakket nega*. The two words mean literally “to gather” and “house”.

Kuna villages organize [sic] events in the gathering house on different patterns and schedules, but all of them ‘hear issues’ (igal itoe) that affect community life, and all of them ‘call to Father’ (babse golle). Traditionally, sacred gatherings occur several nights a week, bringing all the members of the community together to hear a chief sing. Many villages also hold occasional singing gatherings in the morning just for women, and today on some islands, as populations have outgrown their gathering houses, men and women meet separately.

In the late afternoon of the day that a singing gathering is scheduled, a line of village constables [policemen] called ‘masters of the staffs’ (suar ibgana) file through the streets, calling out to announce the gathering. At sunset, men and women enter the gathering house and take their seats, women throughout the hall, ordinary men on the benches around the outside. Village leaders sit on benches on the open space in the center [sic], or in the case of two or three chiefs, lie in hammocks in their midst. As night falls and the hall fills, two of the chiefs sit up, shake hands, and then almost inaudibly begin to sing.

The chant is a dialog, a sung conversation between the two men. One of the pair, the lead performer for the evening, sings a long line of verse, and when he stops to take a breath, the other man answers with ‘Yes’, ‘Thus it is’, or a hummed tone, holding the note until the first man is ready to begin again. They continue in this way for several hundred verses, slowing building volume and speed; depending on the endurance, knowledge, and ambition of the lead singer and how he assesses his audience’s patience, his chant may last anywhere from forty-five minutes to well over an hour.¹⁶⁷

The audience sits quietly throughout, except for a few murmured conversations and scattered games of marbles and other amusements played by young boys, who are mostly ignored by the adults. Women sew molas by the light of small smoky lamps that they bring with them, and a few men weave baskets” (Howe, 1997a: 137-138).¹⁶⁸

Mola panels have depicted meetings in the gathering house, sometimes called a congress hall or council house, since the early 20th century. An example is shown in Figure 46. Women are not invited to all gathering house meetings. When they are, the chief sends a man to cry in the village streets in an imperative voice : *Mormaynamaloe*, which translates as “Go and sew your molas!”, which is a command which may not be disregarded (Sherzer, J., [1983] 2001: 58). The whole community must attend the gathering house meetings to listen to the chanting. The topics covered in the chants include

¹⁶⁷ Sherzer ([1983] 2001: 76) suggests chanting by chiefs of 1-2 hours duration.

¹⁶⁸ Not all meetings are now held at night, relating to the capacity of the gathering house to hold the entire community and for other reasons, some meetings are held in the daytime. Sometimes men and women meet separately.

Kuna traditions, myths and legends, history, and stories of Kuna cultural heroes (Sherzer, J., [1983] 2001: 77-82).

My purpose in explaining the way gathering house meetings are arranged in such detail is to be able to explain the atmosphere at one of these meetings, during which Kuna women sit and sew molas. The atmosphere is replete with sounds, smells, colour, movement and semi-darkness and stillness. This is in strong contrast with the atmosphere experienced when sewing molas in the mornings at home, in quiet tranquillity. Sherzer ([1983] 2001: 72-109) describes the scene before the chief begins to chant. Both men and women bathe and dress in fine clothes, and both frequently apply strong perfume. The women may wear large amounts of jewellery. Smoking of pipes and cigarettes is common by both men and women. Women bring individual kerosene lamps to light the mola they bring to sew during the gathering. Some men bring baskets to weave. The men and women sit separately, usually in the same seats each time. Children sit with their mothers, and often fall asleep on the floor after a time spent playing games quietly. Apart from the women's lamps there is very little other light. The chief who is chanting and the chief who is responding may chant from 45 minutes to up to two hours. The words used by the chiefs may not all be comprehensible to those listening, since the language is not spoken Kuna, though in general it is thought that most people can understand enough to follow the main ideas, perhaps due to frequent retelling of certain stories. Following this the spokesman, who interprets the chief's lessons, may speak for up to one hour.

Figure 46. Gathering House mola blouse.



D08 1951. A similar mola panel is described by Parker and Neal (1977): “This is an exploded view from above the lantern-lit interior of a council house [gathering house] with a typical meeting in session. At these nightly gatherings the men usually keep their hats on, and some men carry ceremonial canes. Also included are women, some with babies, who sit opposite their men. Here an orator is addressing two *saylas*, or headmen, who lounge in hammocks, one smoking a pipe as he swings and judiciously listens” (Parker & Neal, 1977: 63). Kuna men holding canes may be seen at each of the four corners of this mola panel. Also seen is the incense burner between two hammocks on the left. The men, wearing hats, are seated on the left and right and the women in the seats in the centre.

I will focus now on what I consider to be the mesmerising effect of the chanting, by discussing Sherzer’s descriptions of the sound of the chanting which is continuous, with no pauses or break in the sound. Firstly, it is interesting to understand the construction of words in the Kuna language, which is classified as polysynthetic, meaning “a language in which long words are constructed out of many separate forms which have distinct meanings and functions. . . . As a result of this way of combining distinct forms with distinct meanings into large words, the Kuna language is a finely tuned instrument or lens for expressing and focusing attention on details and subtleties of form, shape, motion, position, direction, time, and the way in which things are conceived as occurring” (Sherzer, J., 1997: 131-133). The sound of Kuna words relates to many words ending in a vowel and many words being repeated, or in linguistic terms “reduplicated”, similar to the names used to describe many of the mola sewing techniques, for

example tas-tas, gwini-gwini, bisu-bisu. Sherzer considers that the sounds produced are expressive and “often seem to be poetry in action” (1997: 133). There is thus a musical quality to the sounds.¹⁶⁹

Together with the individual sound of words, the characteristics of Kuna chanting include length: “length is achieved by various poetic devices, including repetition and parallelism” (Sherzer 1997: 112), with long stories, repeated many times. The chanting sounds are described as “assonance, alliteration, and [providing an] overall hauntingly incantatory feel of the performance” (Sherzer 1997: 118), with constant repetition. There is never silence, since one chief takes over from the other, to fill in the sound, until the one telling the story has regained his breath. Many of the sounds are vowels and can be extended in a hum-like manner.

Whilst Sherzer found that many in the audience appeared to fall asleep or at least close their eyes and doze, I would argue that the rhythmic chanting, despite Kuna policemen interspersing loud admonitions at frequent intervals to listen, would create a mesmerising atmosphere. Combined with heightened awareness of other senses, including the smell of perfume, kerosene and tobacco smoke, the restful sound of chanting, perhaps reflecting the rhythm of heartbeats (similar to Baroque music), with frequent repetition of poetic stanzas with a mantra-like quality, and the hazy semi-darkness could all give rise to a sense of peace.

The overall impact would appear to present a case of sensory stimulation overload. Perhaps the equivalent of the tranquil state Margiotti has described in the Kuna houses in the morning, when women sew molas, is created by other means in the gathering house. A “Zen-like” state may be approached through this lengthy exposure to an environment with sensory enhancement and enforced stillness, in order to listen to the chanting. Such an environment could focus the mind on the subject matter or it could result in individuals in the audience “zoning out” or transcending the present, and feeling as if they were in another world.

There appear to be two very different environments under which Kuna women sew molas. Other researchers may wish to pursue this further as part of ethnographic fieldwork, living in a Kuna village. It may be that this is occurring already and that Kuna people themselves are studying this phenomenon and its contribution to the continuity of Kuna society. Based on my interpretation of the literature on serious leisure, I believe that the daytime and night-time conditions under which Kuna women sew molas both enhance the sense of flow, and together with the rhythmic nature of sewing, produce optimal flow experiences for the mola makers.

¹⁶⁹ I have listened to spoken Kuna on three documentaries (Huber & Huber, 1975; Perrin, 2003; Lipke Vigesaa, 2009) and can confirm this musicality in the everyday speech of Kuna people.

8.8 Well-being and textiles

The answer to the question “why do textiles matter?”, is encapsulated by Gordon in the title of each chapter of her book *Textiles: The Whole Story* (2011), as follows:

- *“The very fabric of existence: Textiles in human consciousness;*
- *Living on the earth: Textiles and human survival;*
- *The ties that bind: The social meanings of textiles;*
- *Cloth and temporal power: Money, trade, status, and control;*
- *Cloth as communication: Expressing meaning, messages, and beauty; and*
- *Textiles and the spirit: The sacred, spiritual, and healing significance of cloth.”*

The meaning of textiles, according to Gordon, includes the function of cloth in “milestones across the life span of the people” and the function of cloth in daily life (2010: 2-4). The conceptual framework developed by Gordon (2010) to assess the meanings of textiles used in everyday situations, such as clothing, and for specific rituals, perhaps associated with lifecycle events, comprises seven elements, which she proposes as a construct for evaluating the meaning of textiles within a culture or between cultures. Gordon’s seven ways of considering the meaning of textiles in terms of human needs are:

“Spiritual: connecting to something transcendent; Self-actualization [sic] and personal fulfillment [sic]; Aesthetic: creating and surrounding oneself with beauty, order and a sensually satisfying environment; Cognitive: knowing, understanding, communicating; Social and economic power relationships: individuals and groups wield power and control over others; Social community: belonging to and interacting with a community, being loved; intimacy and memory; [and] Survival needs: food, shelter, bodily comfort, physical protection, psychic safety” (Gordon, 2010: from Figure 1).

Each of these elements can also be related to Seligman’s theory of well-being, reinforcing the applicability of his theory to textiles. This is summarised in Table 11.

Table 11. Application of Seligman’s theory of well-being to Gordon’s framework for assessing meaning of textiles in everyday life.

| components of well-being (from Seligman, 2011) | meaning derived from textiles used for clothing in everyday life (from Gordon, 2010 and 2011) |
|---|---|
| positive emotion | clothing for bodily comfort and physical protection; aesthetically pleasing clothing |
| engagement or flow | self-actualisation and personal fulfilment; satisfying the senses |
| meaning | cognitive and spiritual benefits; communicating messages; use in rituals |
| accomplishment | creation of clothing |
| positive relationships | part of a social community; trade of textiles; social control of groups |

Recent research has established the benefits to the well-being of women of textile handcrafts such as quilting, knitting, weaving and embroidery.¹⁷⁰ The textile activities in these studies encompass the same creative processes as mola making – from the design stage, especially previsualisation of the completed object, through to the process of making in groups and individually, and the acquisition and mastery of skills.

Qualitative research was carried out with quilters in New Zealand (Wanigasekera, 2006), Scottish quilters (Burt & Atkinson, 2012), American quilters (King, 2001), Welsh weavers, spinners and dyers (Riley, 2008), and three studies involving a variety of textile handcrafters in the US (Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Blood, 2006; Collier, 2011)¹⁷¹. Blood (2006) specifically set out to test whether flow theory could

¹⁷⁰ A few of the studies referred to in this section include a very small number of men, and the benefits to well-being were similar.

¹⁷¹ Collier’s participants were involved in knitting, sewing, crocheting, weaving, quilting and embroidery. Johnson’s participants were involved in “needlework” described as hand work such as knitting, crocheting, quilting, embroidery, lace making and tatting, but excluding weaving (Johnson, 2000). Blood (2006) resisted using the word handicrafts to describe the activities she investigated, namely “clothing design and construction, knitting, quilting, weaving, embroidery, and the like” (Blood, 2006: 27) due to the perception by participants in these activities that the term was derogatory and devalued their activities as craft, whereas many considered their work to be art. Blood uses the collective term “non-industrial textile production activities”. In referring to her research and others in this section, I am simplifying this phrase to “textile activities”.

be applied to a range of “non-industrial textile production activities” (as defined in Footnote 171) and was able to confirm that this was the case.¹⁷²

The wide variety of disciplines interested in the motivation behind involvement in textile activities is manifested in the publications from which this scholarly research originates: design and human environment; social science; art therapy; leisure studies; occupational science; clothing and textiles research; and public health – each reflecting awareness of the need for the study of well-being in order to develop ways of promoting it.

Each of these six studies, whilst based on groups of Western women, is considered relevant to Kuna mola makers. I have argued that the concept of serious leisure is relevant to non-Western societies and have demonstrated that mola making may be considered to be a serious leisure activity. Mola making includes technical aspects similar to quilting, albeit at a much smaller scale, and many molas include embroidery stitching. Similar to quilts, mola production relies on Western trade goods.

The social setting for mola making could be considered in some ways to resemble an original pre-industrial European craft guild. Quilters have recreated guilds in the 20th century, with all levels of sewers from novices to expert, with intergenerational learning. Blood’s use of the term “non-industrial textile production activities” is a good description of mola making.

8.9 Summary: Contribution of mola making to well-being

An analysis of the research about textile activities and the achievement of well-being is now considered in terms of the five components of well-being put forward by Seligman (2011) and examined earlier in this chapter. This analysis summarises the impact on well-being of textile activities, including mola making by Kuna women.

8.9.1 Positive emotion

The cognitive, emotional and social benefits of quilting were the focus of the research of Burt and Atkinson (2012) who found that quilting improved the mood of participants. A specific finding was that “Participants identified that the use of bright colours had uplifting effects on mood” (Burt & Atkinson, 2012: 56) and also that once an activity ceased, providing a state of flow had been experienced, the improvement in mood lasted for some time afterwards. This was also supported by Collier (2011), who surveyed women who participated in various textile activities (see Footnote 171) and King (2001) who surveyed quilters.

¹⁷² Blood argues that textile activities are end-product focused, as opposed to many of the other activities studied by Csikszentmihalyi and others investigating the application of flow theory, and that the theory is in need of modification and that the social nature of many textile activities also necessitates consideration as part of the motivation for continued participation (Blood, 2006: 128, 78). I consider some aspects of this in Chapter 9.

Textile activities were found to reverse a negative mood and to have positive benefits in terms of assisting participants through stressful times of their lives, especially those who had a high level of skill. Not only was there a change in mood, but very positive moods were reported as a result of the process of transforming textiles into products. Therapeutic effects of textile activities were found by Blood across a variety of activities:

“This enjoyment, more often than not, was equated to cheap therapy in that the joy and relaxation the non-industrial textile production activity provided the individuals was very worthwhile. Many indicated that they experienced a shifting in their thought processes while participating in the activity allowing them clarity of life problems and concerns. Along the same lines, individuals experienced a great amount of enjoyment just in the thinking about and planning their next projects; this also seemed to produce the same type of therapeutic effect as actually engaging in the activity itself” (Blood, 2006: 126).

Johnson and Wilson (2005) also found therapeutic benefits including an outlet for self-expression, relaxation and “a sense of control and as a coping strategy in daily life” (2005: 120). Participants also describe the calming effect of textile activities (Collier, 2011: 105); and the attraction of the feel of the textile, i.e. its haptic or tactile qualities (Collier, 2011: 110; King, 2001: 27,29; Wanigasekera, 2006: 111).

Kuna women appear to enjoy mola making. In the daytime they enjoy the tranquil environment, and the peacefulness experienced whilst sewing individually or with a group of women. Future researchers may gain an understanding of the influence of the colours favoured by the Kuna women on mood. Western researchers have reported bright colours such as red, which is a highly regarded and popular Kuna mola colour, enhance positive moods.

8.9.2 Engagement and flow

The second of Seligman’s components of well-being is one of the major areas studied in relation to textile activities, and I will consider both engagement with the process of making and the resultant flow experience separately.

As mentioned above, Blood (2006) specifically set out to test whether flow theory could be applied to a range of textile activities and was able to confirm that this was the case. Blood supports the idea that the experience of flow encourages the “repeated efforts to experience it again” (2006:24) and since flow is achieved at the intersection of boredom and anxiety it may be important to increase skill levels to avoid boredom (2006: 24, 114).

The experience of flow, supported by King (2001), Blood (2006), Wanigasekera (2006), Riley (2008), Collier (2011), and Burt and Atkinson (2012), related to textile activities has been characterised as a type of Zen state where the mind and body are in accord (Riley, 2008: 70); a state where “there was a loss of self-consciousness and lack of awareness of things going on around them, which displaced anxieties and facilitated relaxation” (Burt & Atkinson, 2012: 56); as an “altered state” (Wanigasekera, 2006: 117); and as a “meditative state” (Wanigasekera, 2006: 118).

The importance of the process to the maker, as opposed to the end product, to satisfaction levels is stressed by Riley who discussed *doing*, *becoming* and *being* in a process of making, where the actual

“doing” component is the most important part of a “meaningful occupation” (2008: 64). Collier found that part of the attraction of the process was that “women truly enjoyed the sensations of the fiber [sic] making, the repetition, and the rhythm involved” (2011: 110).¹⁷³ The “rhythmic nature of handcraft” is also seen as a positive benefit by Johnson and Wilson (2005: 120).

By considering the position of the flow state in between the minimisation of boredom and the minimisation of anxiety, Blood (2006: 124-128) discusses the strategies textile makers have adopted to achieve this balance, including trialing new techniques, designs and materials; working on more than one piece at a time; and separating repetitive tasks, such as the background filler of a mola panel, from more technically difficult parts of a piece which may require higher levels of concentration. I suggest that the repetitive tasks would more easily lead to a sense of flow.

This research into flow, I am suggesting would support the proposition that Kuna women achieve optimal flow experiences during mola making, and that this is a prime motivation to continue this occupation. There is evidence that both the daytime environment and the evening environment in which Kuna women have been observed sewing molas contribute to this experience, which results from the adoption of mola making as a serious leisure pursuit.

The repetitious nature of many of the tasks creates a rhythm of sewing, which is known to have a calming effect and to contribute to flow experiences. Later field researchers may be able to distinguish whether the more repetitive parts of sewing a mola, perhaps the background filler components, are sewn in night-time gatherings, and the more difficult work such as designing, drawing, cutting, and also work such as sewing a narrow appliquéd border outlining design elements and embroidery, are mainly sewn in the daytime.

8.9.3 Meaning

The meaning to the maker of textile activities may include a sense of individual and collective identity, an expression of creativity, and a directed purposefulness related to the activity.

Wanigasekera found that quilters derive “a sense of ‘connectedness’ and ‘empowerment’ ” (2006: 150) and an improved sense of identity through their textile activities. Textile activity may be an outlet for creativity not able to be expressed elsewhere (Burt & Atkinson, 2012: 58); it is certainly a meaningful

¹⁷³ Wanigasekera (2006) cites Peter Dormer (1994), *The Art of the Maker*, who promoted the idea that “the work of the mind and the work of the hands are *not* separate processes but are interrelated. This fact was demonstrated by the many instances noted by the quiltmakers [sic] where they used the process of *making* as a tool for *thinking*” (2006: 147). Wanigasekera also reports on a study by Lisa Bolton of indigenous textiles in Vanuatu which found that “the actual process of making was of greater importance than was the end product. Her [Bolton’s] research provides a counter to Western ideas of art and object making where the emphasis is frequently on the end product” (2006: 146). Wanigasekera summarises her ideas about New Zealand quilters thus: “For quilters, the process of making is the essence of the quilt. It is *primarily* a ‘made object’ ” (2006: 153). I explore this idea with respect to Kuna women later in this chapter.

activity with an end product, which exhibits a productive use of time (Johnson & Wilson, 2005: 121). The meaning may vary for each maker: Riley suggests that “because meanings are socially, temporally and historically constructed, the meanings of textile-making differ, sometimes subtly, for each individual maker” (2008: 65), however overall a particular form of textile may be linked to a particular culture and thus symbolise its identity.

Personal identity may manifest itself through messages embedded in a textile, including statements about family, politics and religion (King, 2001: 28). Textile activity also “provided the women an opportunity to identify their place in the world” and link women to others (Johnson & Wilson, 2005: 118).

Kuna women appear to gain a useful and meaningful occupation by sewing molas. There are few other activities to fill their time on the San Blas islands after other domestic obligations are completed. A creative outlet is provided by mola making. The mola designs provide an opportunity for Kuna women to communicate their political or religious beliefs; to incorporate visual elements from the natural environment, and from Western culture¹⁷⁴.

Despite the iconography observed, the meaning attributed to Kuna molas by Kuna women does not appear to be related to the meaning of the designs on the pair of mola panels. Fortis (2008) began his doctoral fieldwork in the San Blas islands with the aim of finding out the meaning to Kuna women of the visual representations on mola panels and found that his “obsession with the meaning of designs appeared to be meaningless to Kuna women” (Fortis, 2008: 9), although “creating designs is a very important aspect of the everyday life of Kuna women” (Fortis, 2008: 106)¹⁷⁵. Fortis stresses that the importance is the wearing of the mola since it “is what makes a Kuna woman beautiful (*yer taileke*) to the eyes of everyone else, especially men” (Fortis, 2008: 106).

The process of mola making is important in Kuna society, since identification with an activity defines a person. Fortis (2010) stresses that producing mola designs is integral to the Kuna conception of personhood; making and wearing molas is a sign of *kurkin*, the Kuna concept meaning skill, communication and intelligence, and leads to the creation of a visible individual identity. Sewing molas is considered to be a “highly valued praxis within the Kuna lived world . . . intimately related to one’s own *kurkin*” (Fortis, 2010: 492).¹⁷⁶

In his study of another Latin American indigenous people, the Piro of Eastern Peru, Gow (1999) considered the meaning of the geometric designs, called *yonata*, painted by Piro women onto clothing

¹⁷⁴ “Reference collection” molas include images from Western culture sourced from print material, advertising billboards, logos on purchased food or drink, entertainment and sporting activities, political campaigns, comics, and children’s books.

¹⁷⁵ Fortis (2008) notes that design is not limited to mola blouses, but also includes the wini beadwork and the arrangement of the dress ensemble on the body.

¹⁷⁶ Kuna design is created by men through basketry and woodcarving and by women through sewing molas and stringing wini beads (Fortis, 2010: 484).

and ceramics, used both everyday and in rituals such as those celebrated for puberty and death (Gow, 1999: 243-244)¹⁷⁷. Gow describes the *yonata* designs as “meaningful action” (1999: 237), however each design is without specific meaning: “Piro *yonchi* has none of the ‘meanings’ or ‘functions’ we have been lead to expect by a traditional anthropology of art” (Gow, 1999: 243). “Meaningfulness”, according to Gow, can be understood as a triangulation between the process of making, the visible end product, and an indefinable third “something else” (Gow, 1999: 244) which brings complexity and depth to the understanding in terms of Piro culture. He concludes that “meaningfulness is generated in ways unimagined by the Western aesthetic tradition” (Gow, 1999: 244). I am suggesting that the Kuna people view the *mola* in a similar manner, where the process of sewing is important in terms of its contribution to an individual woman’s well-being, whilst the visible wearing of the *mola* is important to the whole community and that a third component, so far to my knowledge undefined in scholarly literature, may generate more complex meaning within Kuna culture.¹⁷⁸

Another way of viewing the meaning of Kuna *molos* is proposed by Margiotti (2010) who describes the layout of a Kuna village, Kuna social relations and the design of *mola* panels as “saturated”, each reflecting “the Kuna aesthetic of space” (2010: 30). She summarises this relationship as follows:

“A good life is a crowded life. Being settled in a large and densely populated village, people’s quotidian style of life is framed by the multiplication and intensity of ties that unite them. This gives aesthetic pleasure to people, a pleasure similar to that of making and looking at female clothing (mola). This chapter opens with the recalled fragment of conversation with my [Kuna] host about mola. This conversation highlighted saturation as a distinctive quality of places from a Kuna perspective. The process of mola composition elicits, in visual terms, the ongoing character of Kuna sociality, where multiplication and saturation are intrinsic to the mola and are also part of the quotidian life of islanders” (Margiotti, 2010: 62).

The huts in Kuna villages are located very close together, the pathways between are narrow, and the matrilineal nature of Kuna society ensures multi-generational cohabitation. This level of density is also seen on *mola* panels. Kuna ethnoaesthetic research has found that highly regarded *mola* panels have

¹⁷⁷ *Yonata* is the practice of painting with design; *yonchi* is the product.

¹⁷⁸ The complex meaning and symbolism of Kuna *molos* is addressed by Sherzer and Sherzer (1976b: 52) who propose that “the significance of Cuna *molos* does not reside in their internal artistic structure alone. Rather, this significance can only be appreciated by viewing the *mola* in terms of its place in several overlapping semiotic subsystems, subsystems which operate not only within Cuna society but also in the country of Panama as well as in the western world, all contexts in which *molos* are found”. The Sherzers analysed, albeit briefly, five semiotic subsystems: “the *mola* as art object, the *mola* as object of social control, the *mola* as clothing, the *mola* as cultural object, and the *mola* as economic object “ (1976b: 52) and these wider issues are considered in Chapter 9.

Note: The original 1976 article (Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976b) was reprinted unchanged in 2006 in the 30th anniversary edition of the journal *Punto de Contacto/Point of Contact* - there is some confusion about the date of this article. A very similar article by these authors was also published in 1976 (Sherzer, D. & Sherzer, 1976a).

all space filled¹⁷⁹. Margiotti extends this idea by suggesting that not only are the panels filled, but the time expended sewing molas also may be perceived as filling time each day (2010: 247).

Future ethnographic work on Kuna molas may provide more insights into the meaning of the molas within Kuna culture.

8.9.4 Accomplishment

The end product, exhibiting the creativity and skill of the maker, whether a quilt, a mola, or a knitted garment, is a tangible accomplishment. Regardless of whether the use is decorative or utilitarian or a combination, a sense of achievement is obtained.¹⁸⁰ Textile activities result from the transformation of cloth or yarn into something new, an achievement with an end product (Wanigasekera, 2006: 111). Whilst for some participants the process may be of more importance, many textile activities “by nature have a tangible, long lasting end-product at its [sic] core” (Blood, 2006: 128).

Kuna women are admired for their mola blouses by the whole Kuna community. The blouse itself is admired and the Kuna women are admired, when they are dressed in a mola blouse. The sale of molas is consistent with a high regard for contributing to the Kuna economy.

8.9.5 Positive relationships

The majority of the textile activities, discussed in the research referred to in this section, are carried out by women both individually and in a group. The social aspect of the activity is important, allowing new relationships to develop and the sharing of skills. The sharing may be intergenerational, within a family group or within a more formally constituted group, such as a guild. Burt and Atkinson (2012: 58) describe the social support experienced in quilting groups, not just related to quilting but “outside lives” as well. A weaving guild is described as a place where weaving skills and experiences are shared and “this fosters a sense of unity and *belonging*” and also continuity, as skills are passed down (Riley, 2008: 70).

Kuna women sew individually and in groups. Skills acquisition is transferred between generations. Women sew together for parts of the day and at gathering house meetings at night, when the whole Kuna community is together. The women are able to pass on skills, share design ideas, appreciate each other’s workmanship and give encouragement to each other to continue sewing, during their daytime socialising to sew molas. In the evening, conversation would be limited, due to the requirement to listen to the messages the Kuna chief is conveying to the community and the associated sensory overload. The community would gain cohesion at these meetings and this is expanded upon in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I have supported the discovery that the process of mola making by Kuna women may be considered to be a serious leisure activity, as defined by Stebbins (2005; 2006). I have shown that the experience of engagement and flow in the sewing of molas produces an intrinsic

¹⁷⁹ The background to the design on a mola panel is described as “filled” with various repeated small elements, so that only very small areas of the panel are without reverse appliqué, surface appliqué or embroidery. Some designs fill the whole panel due to the iconography, for example geometric arrangements.

¹⁸⁰ Gift giving is a major incentive for some women who undertake textile activities, as well as making for charities. These types of activities are not pursued here.

reward for Kuna women which perpetuates the process. The five factors of well-being espoused by Seligman (2011) have been shown to be applicable to mola making; each contribute to the overall well-being of Kuna women. It is suggested that Kuna women are motivated to continue sewing molas as much by the enjoyment of the process of sewing as by the product, though the product is very important in creating and maintaining Kuna identity.

In the following chapter, Chapter 9, I address various strategies developed by Kuna leaders to maintain the cultural values and way of life of the Kuna people, including factors which contribute to the persistence of the wearing and the making of mola blouses. These strategies will also be considered as part of the components of community well-being, pursued to promote a flourishing Kuna nation.

CHAPTER 9 MOTIVATION: CREATING AND MAINTAINING THE KUNA NATION

In this, the fourth and final chapter of Part 3, Cultural Preservation, I continue to examine the achievement of a sense of well-being amongst the San Blas Kuna people, examined with respect to the role of the mola in Kuna life. I have outlined, in this Part of my dissertation, the way that Kuna culture has incorporated the wearing of a distinctive dress ensemble by Kuna women, which includes the mola blouse. In this chapter, I explore these questions: How important is wearing the mola in Kuna culture? How does Kuna society encourage it? What role does the mola play in Kuna everyday life and rituals? How have Kuna leaders created a society and culture which continually adapts yet maintains its core elements, such as the dress of Kuna women?

I commence this chapter by introducing the concept of the well-being of nations, measured objectively and subjectively, to evaluate the quality of life experienced in communities; and then outline an approach to understanding the factors involved in promoting cultural survival of indigenous groups. Following this, I discuss the central role of ritual in Kuna life, and finally, I address the issue of the role of commercialisation of molas and the implications for Kuna identity.

9.1 Measuring the well-being of nations

There is substantial literature in psychology journals about the measurement of well-being of individuals within nations. Conceicao and Bandura (2008) and Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) provide excellent reviews of this literature. Subjective well-being, often understood as a feeling of happiness, may be assessed by individual survey; and objective well-being by measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), perhaps with adjustments to allow analysis of sub-groups within a society.

The perception of well-being may be impacted by personality and culture. Recent research has investigated subjective well-being across cultures and nations (Diener, et al., 2003; Biswas-Diener, Vitterso, & Diener, 2005; Conceicao & Bandura, 2008; Tay & Diener, 2011). Subjective well-being is one component of assessing the quality of life of a nation; social indicators and economic indicators also need to be considered (Diener, et al., 2003: 405). Diener, et al. (2003) report that “there are differences [in subjective well-being] between nations, and between ethnic groups within nations” (2003: 410), though it is challenging to carry out in-depth research. These authors raise the issue of the validity of measurement parameters developed in Western nations for application in non-Western cultures (Diener, et al., 2003: 414), and note that there are differences between the levels of subjective well-being between cultures.

A sample of 123 countries forms the basis of a review of subjective well-being, conducted by Tay and Diener (2011) based on data collected from 2005-2010. Their analysis highlights the possibility that the well-being of an individual may be dependent on the well-being of the collective group within which an individual is situated (2011: 363). Whilst there were some universal findings, the results from this large

scale analysis suggest that some cultures may value some factors higher than others and this may account for cultural differences (2011: 362).

Variation in well-being in three self-contained communities, the Inughuits of Greenland, the Amish of Illinois in the US, and the Maasai in Kenya is explored by Biswas-Diener, et al. (2005), with specific consideration of collectivist culture and materially simple culture. The findings were similar to industrialised countries: most people were happy with their lives, albeit at a moderately happy level.

The Amish culture is in many ways similar to Kuna culture, described as a group “who consciously reject modern values and technologies” (Biswas-Diener, et al., 2005: 206); who speak their own dialect as well as the language of the surrounding society; are guided spiritually with respect to rituals, values and behaviours; are determined to keep themselves separate from the surrounding society; limit access to resources such as grid electricity; and limit education to some degree. The variation in the factors which influenced subjective well-being of the Amish related to their sense of self, particularly pride¹⁸¹, though overall the Amish respondents in this study reported high levels of satisfaction with their lives.

The Kuna Indians have been classified as an “indigenous-people small nation” (Bodley, 2011: 513), which has, similar to other small nations, successfully negotiated changing circumstances to provide “socioecological sustainability” (2011: 513) and continues to provide its people with an acceptable standard of living. Whilst the San Blas Kuna could be considered a very small, or *nano* sized small nation, forming part of the larger “small nation” of Panama which provides some social services to the Kuna territory, the ethos promoted by the Kuna leaders has supported traditional Kuna ideological values, which appear to place high values on kinship and lower values of material acquisition.

The benefits to positive well-being of living in small nations, especially those influenced by large nations, are outlined by Bodley in the context of expanding some of the characteristics of small nations to solve global problems (2011: 503-541). He explains the success of many small nations in terms of the “Happy Planet Index” and the “Human Development Index” (2011: 538) and links these to ecological sustainability, which is also of concern to the San Blas Kuna where some islands have become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels. The major point expressed by Bodley in favour of small nations, such as the San Blas Kuna nano-nation, is that it is possible to provide a high level of well-being without a high level of material acquisition:

“Small nations are strong evidence that a large economy and high consumption is not the only pathway to personal well-being, but basic needs do need to be satisfied.

The success of small nations with small economies may be understood by the seemingly counterintuitive findings of social psychologists that placing a high value on material acquisition and consumption beyond basic material needs, as in American corporate capitalism, may actually reduce an individual’s subjective and

¹⁸¹ The Amish reported low levels of pride, reflecting the Amish ethos of humility.

actual well-being. To the extent that people in small nations minimize [sic] the ideological, institutional, and behavioral [sic] structures of capitalism that are closely linked with a counterproductive emphasis on materialist values, they may succeed in achieving genuinely sustainable development. Strongly internalized [sic] materialist values and the institutionalization [sic] of advertising, extremely hierarchical wage scales, and excessive pursuit of corporate profit are shown to conflict with values and goals for caring for others, maintaining close personal ties, and feelings of personal well-being, satisfaction, and control over one's life" (Bodley 2011: 519-520)¹⁸².

Bodley provides evidence that small nations are able to provide a situation where the basic necessities of life are provided in a cooperative arrangement which allows for social connectedness, high values of self-worth and satisfaction with life. Fieldwork by Margiotti (2010) confirmed the high value given to kinship networks and close co-location of residences in one Kuna village. Margiotti describes "a life lived in crowdedness" (2010: 17) creating both physical and social closeness, glossing this phenomenon as "saturation" (2010: 27-30), which stimulates the feeling of well-being within the island community she observed.

I begin the following section by considering factors which contribute to cultural survival and then consider the impact of the Kuna Revolution in 1925 on Kuna strategic leadership.

9.2 Kuna strategies for ethnic survival

Strategies important for indigenous ethnic survival have been suggested by Adams (1991: 191-202) and the accommodation of these strategies by the Kuna people are briefly described here. Five of the strategies may be considered to be internally focused: control of language; control of territory; control over community; a control of selected rituals; and biological reproduction and expansion. Four strategies relate to the ethnic group's relationship with the outside world, not just the nation within which they live, and include: economic expansion; third party derivative power; revolutions and rebellions; and social movements.

A further strategy concerns the relationship between the internal and external factors, the overarching approach, which is referred to by Adams as "adaptive accretion" (1991: 199) meaning continual change and adaption. This strategy would appear to be the key to cultural survival and it will be shown that the Kuna leaders have been adept at this strategy, from at least the beginning of the 20th century. This concept of continual adaption is supported by Nagel (1994: 154-162) who asserts that the components of ethnic culture – art, music, dress, religion, beliefs, myths – "are borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted" (1994: 162).¹⁸³

¹⁸² Bodley reinforces his view in his book by providing the following heading to this section: "Small to Nano: Small Nations Maximizing [sic] Well-Being".

¹⁸³ I have discussed the invention of tradition in Chapter 3.

In his explanation of the 'lore and life' of the Kuna, Moore (1983) confirms the conclusions of Holloman (1969) that San Blas Kuna society has developed a system of 'ultrastability', whereby it is able to continually transform itself "in order to stay the same" (Moore, 1983: 104). Apgar (2010) has recently confirmed this continual transformation. This resilience has enabled the Kuna people to respond to perceived threats from both within Kuna society and from outsiders. The strength of attachment to the Kuna sense of community and ritual is exemplified by the re-creation of Kuna "villages" by migrant Kuna groups living in Panama City, despite exposure to a radically different lifestyle.¹⁸⁴

A survey of approaches to ethnic survival taken by various Central America nations, including Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala by Adams (1991), found that "in their dealings with nondominant [sic] ethnicities, states usually favor [sic] one of three rather different strategies of control: encapsulation, assimilation, or extermination"(Adams, 1991: 189). Panama, since it gained independence from Colombia in 1903, has through its government attempted the first two strategies, assimilation and extermination, in relation to the San Blas Kuna Indians. The impact of the 1925 Kuna Revolution, discussed further below, in response to strong resistance by the Kuna to these two strategies, has resulted in the achievement by the Kuna of encapsulation by which Adams means some kind of geographic separation:

"The only mode of integration that permits cultural autonomy [my emphasis] also involves the geographical encapsulation of the ethnicity, or some significant portion of it, by the state. The Comarca system of the Kuna, or the reservations set up in Costa Rica and, apparently less effectively, in Honduras, are of this kind and, whether meeting the approval of outsiders or not, are usually welcomed by the indigenous population as the best of the poor alternatives that exist. The most favored [sic] alternative from the Indian perspective – complete autonomy – is not likely to be allowed under the general conduct of nation-states" (Adams, 1991: 190).

¹⁸⁴ Kuna men and women frequently leave the San Blas area to live on the mainland for the benefit of high school education for their children and in the case of Kuna men especially, to obtain wage labour jobs. However, this migration until recently was not permanent, with a return to the island of origin after some months or maybe years. On the outskirts of Panama City, where larger numbers of Kuna families live, there has been the re-creation of Kuna villages in the last four decades, with 'chapters' based on the island of origin, complete with Kuna leaders and medicine men, sometimes living with them and sometimes visiting frequently from the San Blas island of origin (Sherzer, J., 1994: 904). The Kuna living here have "developed Kuna-structured and Kuna-organized [sic] ways of life" (Sherzer, J., 1994: 903), a strong indication of the high satisfaction level with this way of life developed by Kuna leaders in the San Blas. See also de Gerdes (1997: 315-317).

Note also Price (2011), who lived with a Kuna community in Panama City, found that strong concerns of culture loss there are being countered by bilingual schools (Kuna-Spanish) and also a Kuna language only school. This dissertation relates to San Blas Kuna, and does not address issues related to the Kuna living in urban areas or on the Colombian border or in the Bayano inland region.

In May 2011 the Kuna General Congress (www.congresogeneralkuna.com/, accessed 18 November 2011) announced the publication of the first Guna-Spanish dictionary, officially changing the name of the Kuna people to the Guna people, and the orthography has been adopted to teach in Kuna schools to promote literacy and by the Panama Ministry of Education for school curriculum, especially bilingual education.

The creation by the Panamanian government of an independent Kuna reservation in the San Blas, called a comarca, allows the Kuna to live in a semi-autonomous region¹⁸⁵. The Kuna people, according to Luce (2006) maintain a symbiotic relationship with the rest of Panama, since they need to be able to access economic benefits, through employment and trade, and political benefits, especially social security from the Panamanian national government, but in order to maintain their culture, the Kuna need the independence of their territory. To maintain an independent Kuna state would not be possible without economic independence and the creation of employment within the San Blas area (the comarca) relates to the commercialisation of molas and tourism in the area.¹⁸⁶ The Kuna strategy regarding tourism is discussed later in this chapter.

The Kuna have significant internal self-determination within the Kuna Yala comarca, which includes control of the police and the military, which gives a high level of protection to the Kuna (Luce 2006: 127-128). An agreement with the Panamanian government, the 'Carta Organica' gives the Kuna control of the San Blas – specifically the ownership of all property within the comarca¹⁸⁷. Thus, San Blas Kuna have maintained control of their territory and have been able to continually adapt to internal and external factors which could have destroyed their culture.

Strategic diplomacy exercised by Kuna leaders for the past 500 years, since contact with foreigners (Sherzer, J., 1994) has made it possible for the Kuna to manage “their own republic within the Republic of Panama” (Moore, 1983: 95). A strength of the Kuna negotiation with the outside world, exemplified by the granting of a comarca, is the way that the Kuna have been able to relate the two worlds:

“they have been able to adapt the autonomous agreement to correspond with their traditional political structure. They did not have to rearrange their basic culture to fit within the construct of some other political system. The autonomous agreements were made with the intent to preserve the culture and Kuna way of life” (Luce 2006: 131).

The Kuna spiritual belief system and cultural practices ensure “the cohesive nature of Kuna collective life which continues to be a key feature of Kuna social organisation” (Apgar 2010: 75) and confirms that the Kuna system of internal governance by the chiefs is a “complex adaptive system” (discussed at length by Apgar) which is effective in managing change.

¹⁸⁵ Other comarcas have since been created in inland areas for Kuna and other indigenous peoples.

¹⁸⁶ The expansion of tourism is strongly opposed on the grounds that it would destroy the environment and also impact negatively on Kuna culture (Luce, 2006: 106-107). There is a strong reliance on earnings from outside the San Blas comarca to supplement those living within it. Kuna men especially work outside of the San Blas, in the past particularly for the US military and civilians in the Canal Zone, as well as in agriculture, including banana plantations (Tice, 1995: 46-47). Kuna women have been selling molas to tourists either directly or indirectly since the 1930s and this is discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁸⁷ Chapter 2 outlines the history of the comarca.

9.2.1 Impact of the Kuna Revolution on Kuna identity

An understanding of the importance of the Kuna Revolution in crystallising Kuna identity was discussed in Chapter 5. As noted by Craik the attempt to suppress Kuna women's dress, one of the prime reasons for the Kuna Revolution, was similar in many communities where non-Western countries were colonised:

"In conjunction with conventional techniques of persuasion and acculturation, dress codes were often treated as integral to the process of subjugation. . . . Clothes became a weapon in the struggle between the colonisers and colonised. First, the colonisers used clothes to impose the authority of 'western' ways; later, local people used indigenous clothes to resist that imposition" (Craik, 1993: 26).

The requirement that Kuna men and women attend weekly dances, with Western music, was strongly opposed. Howe (1991: 35-36) believes that the dancing was most likely the fox trot or waltz and folkdances, a style of dancing which would require non-Kuna men to touch Kuna women. This was strongly opposed, related to Kuna ideas of modesty, purity and marrying within the tribe. Kuna women are considered "untouchable".

Another suppression was that of drinking alcohol at the Kuna girls coming of age ceremonies at puberty. The Kuna tradition of making a form of home-brew called chicha and consuming it abundantly, for a few days only, was strongly opposed by missionaries from 1907 and this influenced the Panamanian government directives (Howe 1991: 31). The linking of drinking chicha with the puberty ceremony appears to be a sanctioned activity, which allows a short-lived period of socially acceptable inebriation, with roles given to elders to look after intoxicated relatives and friends.

Each of these disturbances to Kuna accepted cultural practices – the prohibition of the wearing of components of the Kuna women's dress; the forcing of attendance at Western style dances and the prohibition of alcohol at puberty ceremonies, could not have been chosen to have more impact on the Kuna culture. It is unlikely that this was known at the time – each of these appears to have been instigated separately, though as part of a policy of enforced assimilation. This government intervention has been called ethnocide by Howe, who has written extensively on this period of Kuna history, indicating the strength of his reading of the events (See also Chapter 5) (Howe, 1998: 177; 2009: 67-70; 82).

The purity of Kuna women is very important in terms of endogamy which is prevalent in Kuna society; the puberty ceremony is a long standing rite of passage enjoyed by the whole village and would not be considered satisfactory without the supply of chicha; and the Kuna dress ensemble, whilst only around 30 years old at the time of the Kuna Revolution, was a strong identifier of the Kuna people by this time. To suggest wearing the mola blouse was in anyway inappropriate was entirely unacceptable to the majority of the Kuna people. I discuss this also in Chapter 5.

The dress of the Kuna women was one of the major issues which resulted in the Kuna Revolution. Howe discusses the way Markham, the American who presented a sympathetic case to the US government representatives, for the Kuna to be supported against Panamanian suppression of Kuna women's dress. Markham supported the practicality of the Kuna dress - easy to wear in their canoes, easy to remove if it became wet; and also the appearance of the dresses as being modest and attractive (Howe, 2009: 112)¹⁸⁸. Howe notes that Kuna difference from Westerners is highlighted by this embodiment of Kuna identity since "the most obvious sign of that difference, as always, was women's dress" (2009: 111).

From the 1903 creation of Panama as a separate nation from Colombia, until 1915 when the Panamanian government intervened in the San Blas, Kuna leaders governed the Kuna occupied islands of the San Blas, and Howe states that the "Kuna were virtually independent" (1991: 20). In the period between 1915 - 1925 intervention by the Panamanian government, as a form of ethnocide, was resisted strongly and as a result of the Kuna Revolution in 1925, the Kuna re-gained autonomy immediately and over time a State legislated independent territory, called a comarca.

The comarca of San Blas was created under the Panamanian Autonomous Territories Law No.16 of 1953, and gives considerable power to the Kuna Indian chiefs, described thus:

"A comarca is the name given in Panama to a political division of the territory that is subject to the laws of the indigenous tribe that populates it. The maximum authority in a comarca is the Indigenous General Congress, and its rulings and decisions are binding. Its representatives are the caciques generales. In the comarcas, the indigenous law is the law of the land. This law applies to language, education, marriage, and property. Rules pertaining to divorce, property ownership, puberty rites, are also all indigenous laws but with the legal effect of Panamanian laws. Effectively, the indigenous territories are their own little countries protected by the legal framework of the Panamanian state. Non-indigenous people cannot buy, lease, prospect, or set up shops or hotels in the indigenous territories without the permission of the indigenous people" (De Obaldia, 2005: 352).

The independence of the San Blas Kuna is thus enshrined in law and allows Kuna leaders extensive power over the community. This power is balanced by the consensus model of decision-making conducted in the nightly gatherings.

¹⁸⁸ Howe (2009: 215) reports that Ruben Perez Kantule, a Kuna spokesperson, wrote in 1933 that "women wore molas and long skirts because they considered them healthy, beautiful, moral, and a contribution to their physical development."

As a result of the Kuna Revolution, I am suggesting that the Kuna gained more autonomy than existed previously, and this was reinforced over time by government legislation related to territorial rights, education and traditional medicine.¹⁸⁹

The immediate impact of the Kuna Revolution on Kuna women is described by Holloman (1969: 435). Prior to 1920, Kuna women on four islands (Nargana, Corazon de Jesus, Rio Azucar and San Ignacio de Tupile), referred to by Holloman as “progressive” islands, did not wear traditional dress, including mola blouses.¹⁹⁰ Holloman asserts that this changed after 1925, for at least a three year period:

“For a time after the revolution the clock was rolled back in San Blas. All women were required to adopt traditional dress. Adult women on Nargana and the other progressive islands who had never been in mola¹⁹¹ had their noses pierced by force” (Holloman, 1969: 435).

The Kuna leaders on the islands of Ailigandi and Ustupu, between 1925-1930, “embarked upon a period of planned reorganization [sic]” under the leadership of Nele Kantule (Holloman, 1969: 436-461). Nele Kantule also instigated a revitalisation of traditional Kuna knowledge and lore; and codified the village and inter-island decision-making processes to strengthen the autonomy of the San Blas Kuna people.

After the Kuna Revolution, Nele Kantule also influenced the establishment of a number of community operated collective enterprises, named *sociedades*, comprising small groups of villagers, sometimes kinship based (Tice, 1995: 43). These cooperatives organised the sale of molas, agricultural production, and the purchasing of large items such as a boat for a village. Profits were divided in accordance with

¹⁸⁹ Subsequent Panamanian laws confirm the 1953 comarca law (see Appendix K for more details). Some key milestones (De Obaldia, 2005) include:

- 1972 Panama constitution recognised the 1953 comarca components and extended to give political representation in the Legislative Assembly
- 1984 Family Law gives ritual marriages and divorces same status as civil marriages and divorces
- 1998 environmental law gives rights to protect comarcas and for indigenous peoples to remain
- 1995 education law creates bi-lingual and bi-cultural education in comarca
- 1999 traditional medicine resolution recognised traditional medicine
- 1999 protection of indigenous women and promotion of recording of traditions

From 1984 various traditional craft and indigenous Intellectual Property laws – specifically prohibits importation of counterfeit molas. Address issues of protecting Kuna cultural items.

By 2000, the Kuna people had successfully lobbied the Panamanian government to have laws introduced to protect indigenous intellectual property rights, including the protection of molas (De Obaldia, 2005). Despite embedding this protection of the mola in legislation, there is a lack of attention to Kuna material culture in Panamanian museums. See Chapter 10 for discussion.

¹⁹⁰ At the time of her fieldwork in 1967, Holloman reports that on most islands all the Kuna women wore molas. On the four progressive islands the mola was not worn. Holloman “estimated that in 1967 at least 75 per cent [sic] of all the adult women in the region were traditionally dressed (in mola)” (1969: 91).

¹⁹¹ Holloman (1969: 91) describes being “in mola” to include the complete Kuna woman’s dress ensemble – mola blouse, wini, nose ring, headscarf and wrap skirt.

shares held in the cooperative and sometimes this was used as a method to save for large expenditure, such as a chicha puberty celebration. These cooperatives, whilst retaining a Kuna social foundation, introduced a cash economy into trade relations, and were operated also by Kuna living in Panama City (Tice 1995: 47).

Immediately after the Kuna Revolution, Howe believes that the Kuna leaders developed “a conscious, active policy of presenting their people and their culture to the world, either through their own autoethnographic studies or by facilitating the work of others” (2009: 165) and that the success of this policy led to a Kuna cultural item, the mola, becoming a recognised symbol of the Panamanian nation (2009: 190, 201). Sherzer also notes that Kuna leaders agreed for him to document their chants, and translate their stories, for their own reasons – namely to record and thus transmit Kuna tradition (Sherzer, J., 1994: 907). Luce maintains that the Kuna “are one of the most politically mobilized [sic] and active indigenous peoples in Latin America” (2006: 73).

In the next section I show that Kuna leaders were determined to create self-contained, self-governed communities prior to the Kuna Revolution, from the mid-19th century.

9.2.2 The concept of “islamamiento” supporting Kuna autonomy

Coined by Chernela (2011), the term “islamamiento” has a double meaning based on its two word roots. The Spanish word “isla” translates as island, and the word “miento” translates as treatment, however the Spanish word “islamamiento” translates as isolation. Hence “islamamiento” can mean either isolation or ‘to treat as an island’ or ‘island-isation’, which in the case of the Kuna people, living on small San Blas islands is geographically correct. Chernela uses “islamamiento” primarily in the context of understanding Kuna attitudes to limiting tourism incursions into their territory, especially the occupied islands. I will consider the two senses of the word to understand the strategies adopted by the Kuna to promote cultural survival.

The geographical isolation of the San Blas islands from the mainland of Panama, and especially the thick jungle and mountain ranges in the interior of Panama, created a barrier between the Atlantic coast side, where the San Blas archipelago is situated, and the Pacific side of the isthmus, where the national government was located. Until the regular flights from Panama City to various San Blas islands became affordable to Kuna people and to tourists, the time and distance to travel to and from Panama City inhibited large scale travel.

This isolation has assisted the Kuna leaders in their strategies of creating an autonomous community, more correctly a series of island communities. In fact each inhabited Kuna island is a discrete entity, and can create its own sense of community by isolation or separation from other islands.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Whilst on a few of the larger islands there are two distinct villages, this is mainly due to historic reasons related to political differences e.g. Ustupu. Note also that migration occurred between islands – e.g. Kuna fled Nargana in the early 1920s to avoid suppression by Panamanian government officials. See Chapter 5.

The move from the mainland to the San Blas islands “has allowed the Kuna greater cultural and political autonomy than might have otherwise been possible” (Chernela, 2011: 39), and whilst the initial motivation for this move, discussed in Chapter 4, related to the seeking of a healthier environment away from malaria areas, another factor was that once Colombia obtained independence from Spain in the mid-19th century, the Kuna were given internal autonomy and it was safe to move to the islands (Holloman, 1969b: n.p.), so removal to an island, by definition isolated, was intentional¹⁹³. Luce (2006) notes that in the late 19th century and early 20th century the Kuna people:

“Possibly because of their isolation and lack of direct ‘strategic’ importance (their land was not needed for the Panama Canal itself or for the maintenance of military installations), they have achieved more substantive rights than other ethnations. Despite evidence of colonization [sic] and problems with the government, the Comarca system allows the Kuna of San Blas to maintain their traditional identity, culture and lands” (Luce 2006: 86).

This included the distinctive dress of Kuna women, promoted by Kuna leaders as their proper form of adornment.

The success of the strategy of *islamiento* in managing tourism to the San Blas islands, while at the same time both preserving the natural environment and protecting the privacy of the Kuna villagers, has been described by Chernela (2011). Kuna communities, living on islands which preserve their physical isolation, also create distinction between outsiders by the distinctive form of dress worn by Kuna women. Visual distinctiveness is maintained by most women in most Kuna communities. This creation of difference by dress would be a constant reminder to the Kuna people, and to outsiders who come into contact with them.

9.3 The central role of ritual in promoting well-being

Kuna leaders, over many generations, have created a distinct Kuna identity by controlling the language spoken, the territory occupied, the daily tenor of life and lifecycle rituals and the maintenance of endogamy. These internal factors appear to have been established in order to create a situation whereby the Kuna have a high level of satisfaction with their way of life, and thus promotes happiness in the community.

Margiotti describes the way “wellbeing [sic] is created through daily practices and rituals” she observed during fieldwork in 2003-2004 (2010: 1)¹⁹⁴. Ritual dominates many aspects of Kuna life in the San Blas.

¹⁹³ The isolation of the Kuna communities was beneficial following the independence from Colombia in 1903, in keeping the Panamanian government uninvolved until 1915 (Howe, 1991: 20). Many of the Kuna leaders sided with Colombia after 1903, flying Colombian flags and refusing to recognise Panamanian jurisdiction.

¹⁹⁴ A ritual can be defined as an established procedure for a religious or other rite (see The Macquarie Dictionary, 3rd edition, 2009).

Apgar notes that “the central place that ritual plays in all Kuna processes is impossible to ignore” (2010: 9) and that ritual is part of the ongoing adaptation to inside and outside influences which impact Kuna society and culture. The key role of ritual in developing a sense of Kuna “personhood” is highlighted by Apgar (2010: 12).

The role of ritual in creating both individual and group identity is considered by Pelletier (2002)¹⁹⁵ in her study of an American Indian tribe, the Soo Indians, part of the Ojibwa tribe. She maintains that using ritual components as part of a survival strategy can be described as “ritualisation” and she includes newly invented and older ritual traditions in her research, which found ritual to be positive in creating ethnic identity (Pelletier, 2002: 142-150). Similar to Holloman (1969) and Apgar (2010), Pelletier found that the rituals of the Soo American Indian tribe “adjust to changing situations while maintaining an aura of unchanging stability and tradition” (2002: 145). Maney (2001) in reviewing the strength of the Kuna society structures, describes the benefits of one Kuna ritual, “the gathering”¹⁹⁶ thus: “Through rituals, chants and storytelling, the gatherings also provide shared cultural experiences that solidify collective identity. . . . In times of crisis, the gathering unifies the community in the face of external threats.” (2001: 118).¹⁹⁷

Ritual celebrations create a sense of belonging and cultural identity and may be seen as “essential to a culture’s survival” (Smith-Shank, 2002: 59) and it is possible that “people in social groups who do not have ceremonial rituals do not survive as well as those who have them” (Smith-Shank, 2002: 60). The rituals “may be used to enhance the learning of oral traditions” (Haviland, Prins, McBride, & Walrath, 2011: 311) as well as accommodate social and psychological needs, particularly in a pre-industrial culture, to enhance the well-being of a community (Haviland, et al., 2011: 312). A significant role of ritual is to “relieve social tensions and reinforce a group’s collective bonds” (Haviland, et al., 2011: 324); and “participation in rituals and a basic uniformity of beliefs bind people together and reinforce their identification with the group. Rituals are particularly effective for enhancing group solidarity, as the atmosphere is charged with emotion” (Haviland, et al., 2011: 334).

The cultural practices of a society can enhance flow, and hence the happiness of its people (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 71-81,256). Csikszentmihalyi argues that not only do rituals enhance flow, but that “passive visual aesthetic experiences can produce flow” (1991: 256). This is explored further later in this chapter. The continual transformation and adaptation of Kuna society within a framework of “ultrastability” implies high levels of satisfaction by the Kuna communities. This appears to demonstrate and confirm that there are flow experiences provided in the rituals and fabric of daily life, which promote overall happiness of all generations of Kuna. Csikszentmihalyi refers to research into rituals in preliterate societies as “socially sanctioned opportunities to experience flow” (1991: 256).

¹⁹⁵ Fieldwork carried out 1994, 1995, 1996.

¹⁹⁶ Described below and in Chapter 8.

¹⁹⁷ This additional benefit of ritual is supported by Smith-Shank (2002: 60) who refers to work by Dissnayake (1992) extending the benefit of ritual events to providing a way for the community to respond to “adversity and threat”.

The Kuna culture and belief system also include a role for a shaman who is consulted in times of illness:

“The shaman is essentially a religious go-between who acts on behalf of some human client, often to bring about healing or to foretell some future event. . . .

The importance of shamanism in a society should not be underestimated. It promotes, through the drama of performance, a trancelike feeling and a release of tension. And it provides psychological assurance that prevailing upon supernatural powers and spirits otherwise beyond human control can bring about invulnerability from attack, success at love, or the return to health” (Haviland, et al., 2011: 321-323).

Kuna shamans have been the subject of extensive anthropological research, for example Taussig (1993) and Perrin (1999), who report on this phenomenon within a number of South American indigenous groups.

Participation in community celebrations unites a community, creates entertainment, a diversion from daily life, and an opportunity to wear new clothes and look one’s best in front of the whole community. Different types of food and drink may be prepared and shared for different kinds of events. The Kuna have rituals involving all these components. For Kuna women, wearing a mola is an integral part of participating in these rituals. Even those women who wear Western clothing every day, wear molas for ritual celebrations.

Kuna rituals may be divided into everyday, quotidian occurrences and ceremonial events, which relate to lifecycle events or annual events. The most frequently occurring ritual in the Kuna culture is the gathering house meeting (*congreso*) held in all Kuna villages, frequently at night and sometimes during the day time. The atmosphere in a typical evening gathering has been described in Chapter 8, and the purpose of a gathering is described below. The Kuna also celebrate annual events and lifecycle events with rituals based on Kuna cosmology involving all the senses, such as listening to stories, music, singing, dancing, food and drink, and wearing special body adornments.

There are special ceremonies for healing the sick, for childbirth, for death, to celebrate the anniversary of the Kuna Revolution, for marriage and importantly for a girl’s onset of puberty.

9.3.1 Examples of ritual events

Example 1: Molas and gathering house meetings

At the village level, council or congress meetings, or “gatherings”¹⁹⁸, described in Chapter 8, are a major component of Kuna life at which the entire community is able to discuss issues and plan celebrations. The announcement of an evening gathering is spread throughout a village by a representative of the Kuna leader or chief, and as mentioned in Chapter 8, the call word used is frequently “Mormaynamaloe!”, meaning “Go and sew your molas!”. Sherzer comments that “this metonym for the Cuna [sic] ‘congress’ so central to Cuna [sic] social life, shows how important *mola* making is for the Cuna [sic]. And in the ‘congress’ itself a chief often chants about the importance of making *molas*” (1976b: 9)¹⁹⁹.

The gathering house meetings themselves can be seen as a very important part of the creation of the Kuna sense of community. Holloman’s research found that “the relationship between the Cuna [sic] and their chiefs which exists through the town meeting system is a very old trait of Cuna [sic] culture, and that it has served them well as an adaptive mechanism for several centuries” (Holloman, 1969b: n.p.), which would pre-date the mola and would suggest that the meetings were instigated for the whole community as a strategy for gaining consensus and cooperation. Based on his translation and interpretation of Kuna chants in these meetings or gatherings, Sherzer states that:

“The primary and quite explicit purpose of Kuna ‘gatherings’, especially those attended by men and women together, is social control and social cohesion. Social control and social cohesion occur at various levels. At the most immediate and direct level, a chant, such as a ‘counsel’, is aimed at particular persons, perhaps at the community at large, and advocates an appropriate mode of behavior [sic] – concerning, for example, the raising of children, the curing of disease, or the direction of puberty rites. Mythical and historical chants are models of appropriate behavior [sic] in that they provide examples from the past of both proper and improper actions. At the same time they remind and inform the audience of their own historical and religious heritage” (Sherzer, J., [1983] 2001: 89-90).

¹⁹⁸ These three terms are interchangeable. Howe (2009) uses the term “gatherings” rather than congress or council meetings. Various authors cited in this section use one or other of these terms.

¹⁹⁹ Sherzer, D. and Sherzer (1976a: 31) and Sherzer, D. and Sherzer (1976b: 4-13) suggest that the specific direction for Kuna women to sew molas relates to their subjugation by Kuna men, since women are not allowed to wander freely around their village and are encouraged to stay at home. This supposition is not supported by later research by Salvador (1978), Margiotti (2010) or Tice (1995). Tice carried out extensive fieldwork on various San Blas islands and did not comment about the Kuna women being in any way subjugated. Certainly, there is evidence of a gender split in the allocation of domestic and cultural duties and expectations.

It would appear therefore that the lengthy time duration of the chanting and the complete gathering experience, with the requirement for the whole village to attend most of the meetings, is designed for the villagers to be inculcated in the norms of acceptable behaviour, based on traditional beliefs and for the purpose of negotiating solutions for everyday issues requiring resolution. The subject matter in gatherings comprises the mundane and the resolution of disputes, ranging from allocating work tasks to settling disputes about family relationships, theft, or community decisions such as purchasing a boat for the village (Sherzer, J., [1983] 2001: 158).

The consensus model of decision-making at the local level has been questioned by Rawluk and Godber (2011) who carried out research on the San Blas island of Ukupseni (Playon Chico) in 2007 and aimed at involving representation of each segment of the community of 2000 people on this island. The aim was to prepare scenarios for the next 25 years on the island and obtain community feedback. By dividing the participants into six groups – older women, young women with children, young women without children, young men, older men and educated individuals – it was found that if a consensus-based planning approach had been used that “women and youth, the most marginalized [sic] members of the community, had convergent visions that were very different from men whose perspectives and knowledge are more often included in decision making” (Rawluk & Godber, 2011: 1). They note presciently that considering the views of youth and young adults is critical in terms of the future of the village and cultural continuity.

An investigation of contemporary Kuna community processes in two Kuna villages by Apgar (2010), namely Ukupseni (also subject of research by Rawluk and Godber, 2011) and the nearby island of Colebir (Irgandi), examines the capacity of Kuna communities to continue to adapt to change at the local level. My understanding is that Apgar found that the Kuna spiritual belief system and ritual, especially gathering house chanting, were indications of the high capacity of the Kuna to adapt to contemporary situations, and provide the community with resilience (Apgar, 2010: ii, 45, 298).²⁰⁰

Example 2: Molas and a Kuna girl's puberty ceremony

One of the significant lifecycle events in Kuna society relates to a trio of puberty ceremonies for young girls²⁰¹. Sherzer ([1983] 2001: 139-153) and Howe (1997c: 286-291) report on this event in detail. The puberty ceremonies traditionally comprise three ceremonies over a period of a few months²⁰². Mola blouses are specifically sewn for this occasion, for the young girl who is being celebrated, and also her extended kinship group (Tice, 1995: 82-83). Frequently a similar blouse is made for this ceremony by a

²⁰⁰ Apgar refers to the work of Martinez Mauri (2007) which investigated the adaptability of Kuna leaders in negotiating between local and global processes and the strategies the leaders developed.

²⁰¹ Holloman (1969b: n.p.) reports that men's puberty ceremonies were “observed until around 1850”.

²⁰² Howe (1997: 286) found that due to the high cost of village-wide feasting associated with the last two ceremonies, frequently only one is now celebrated. The first ceremony is for the girl only; the second chicha may last only one day; the third chicha may last 3-5 days.

group of women. Perhaps the yoke and sleeve fabric in all the blouses is the same; sometimes the panel design and colours are very similar in each blouse; and sometimes both the panel design and blouse fabric are the same for the group. The wearing of these mola blouses is an integral part of the puberty ceremony. The women in the village make an effort to wear new and different molas each day of the celebration, which may last from 3-5 days. An investment in both time and money is made for this purpose.

Swain describes how “a long exhortation on the importance of mola making in general, and Cuna [sic] women specifically was also delivered by a chief” (Swain, 1978: 124) as part of an inna (puberty) celebration which was incorporated into the 1975 celebration on Ailigandi on the anniversary of the 1925 Kuna Revolution. She also mentions that a young girl celebrating her inna is given new molas to wear and a headscarf and other items of dress; and women often sew new molas for this occasion (Swain, 1978: 122). Apgar describes the celebration but does not mention dress, however the accompanying photographs show women wearing molas (2010: 199).

9.3.2 Creating flow experiences through ritual

A key role of Kuna women was found by Swain (1978) to be the creation of Kuna culture, with mola making the most important component. Her investigation is subtitled, “Continuity and Change in Cuna [sic] Female Identity” and her focus was specifically on the roles of Kuna women. Even Kuna women who do not wear the mola all the time were found to usually sew molas on the island of Ailigandi (Swain, 1978: 151). Mola making is important for maintaining ethnic identity: “women’s dress embodies Cunaness [sic]” (Swain, 1978: 122). Swain emphasises the role of ritual in group maintenance (Swain, 1978: 113-127) and found that Kuna women were “considered to be vital partners in group maintenance and continuity” (Swain, 1978: 8).

The aesthetic experience of viewing the Kuna girls and women would also provide an optimal flow experience. In *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson refer to the aesthetic experience of viewing artwork benefitting both the artist and the viewer. Where meaning can be obtained from the art object it will be a source of flow and the viewer will feel “a heightened state of consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990: 8-9). As discussed in Chapter 8, Kuna rituals may be accompanied by the stimulation of other senses also, including sound, smell and the creation of a mesmerising atmosphere. It is hypothesised that both Kuna men and women viewing Kuna women wearing the mola blouse will gain both a sense of pride in their culture, and also a flow experience. As a result, the wearing of molas, with colours and designs chosen for high visual impact, would be appreciated not only by the Kuna women wearing them, but also by the whole community viewing them.

The participation in rituals is described by Margiotti as contributing to the happiness of the community: “happiness is the emotional hue of festivals” (2010: 120) i.e. ritual celebrations. I would speculate that experiencing flow is a vital component in promoting the well-being of each Kuna community, activities

in which Kuna women are displayed wearing their molas. This is frequently heightened visually by Kuna women wearing mola blouses sewn from similar materials, and with similar designs on the mola panels.²⁰³ The photographs in Figure 47 show examples.

Figure 47. Kuna women and girls wearing similar mola blouses.



Left: A parade in Ailigandi, 1976, to celebrate the Panama Independence Day on 3 November. A group of Kuna girls are wearing mola blouses with floral aqua yokes. The panels appear to all be simple two colour geometric designs. Private collection.

Right: Another parade. A group of Kuna girls wearing mola blouses with white yokes; most with rick rack sewn onto the band and sleeves. The mola panels all have bird themes, many in two colours and the colours are similar in all the blouses. Private collection.



Two black and white photographs taken during a puberty ceremony. The Kuna women are wearing blouses with the same floral fabric used for the yokes and most are wearing a wrap skirt of the same fabric. The designs on the mola panels are different. Photographer James Howe, c.1970. Source: <http://shass.mit.edu/multimedia/video-2011-collaborations-kuna>, accessed 21 April 2012.

²⁰³ The consumption of alcohol during puberty ceremonies and other rituals such as the anniversary of the Kuna Revolution may also contribute to their attractiveness. Swain (1978: 121) notes that alcohol was “usually banned or at least tightly controlled in most communities” except on these socially sanctioned occasions. I suggest that alcohol alone however would not be sufficient to ensure their continuity – experiential flow would be of at least equal importance. Future research by anthropologists may confirm this.

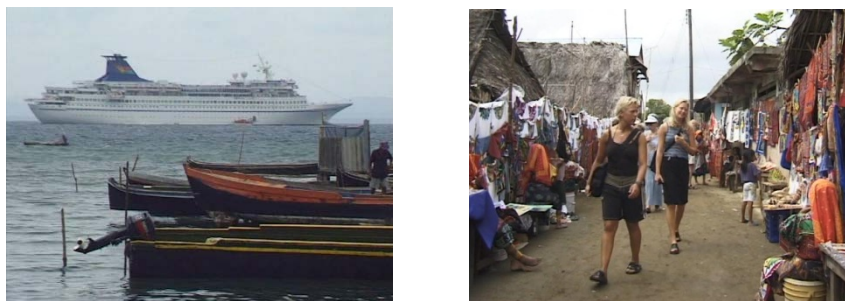
In Chapter 8, I described the process of achieving the optimal flow state and the research by Csikszentmihalyi (1991) linking flow experience to happiness. I also outlined how the goal of happiness has been re-considered by Seligman (2011), who has substituted the achievement of well-being as a more realistic goal, and I have established links between textiles and well-being. Gordon (2010: 1-10) describes the role of textiles in many rituals, especially lifecycle milestones, across many cultures.

The meaning of Kuna rituals to the community, the anticipation and participation in the quotidian and celebratory rituals, and the integral part of ritual in Kuna life, can be considered as positive contributions to the well-being of the community. The promotion and continual invention and re-invention of rituals by Kuna leaders signify the perceived benefits of rituals to the community. The role of Kuna women is integral to many Kuna rituals and I am suggesting that wearing the mola is strongly linked through these rituals to the promotion of cultural survival.

9.4 Molas and tourism reinforce identity

Tourists have been visiting the San Blas islands on cruise ships and purchasing molas from the Kuna Indians since at least the 1930s (Schoen, 2005: 17). Cruise tourism has a long history in this area, focusing on the Western end of the archipelago in the Carti area, with ships of many nations frequenting the area. Stout (1947: 76) refers to Americans buying molas on the San Blas islands during his fieldwork in 1940-1941, presumably arriving by cruise ship²⁰⁴. For tourists arriving on cruise ships, a day trip to a Kuna island and the potential to purchase a mola were a small part of the attraction of the cruise²⁰⁵.

Figure 48. Cruise ships visiting the San Blas archipelago.



A cruise ship anchored near the Western end of the San Blas archipelago (Perrin, 2003); tourists strolling in a Kuna village where Kuna women are seated waiting to sell molas (Lipke Vigesaa, 2009).

²⁰⁴ The islands Stout surveyed were Nargana, Corazon de Jesus, Tigre, Ailigandi and Carti-Sugtup.

²⁰⁵ A recent study of cruise tourism found it had an overall negative impact on the Kuna people in the Carti area, though the sale of molas generated an important source of income for Kuna women (Schoen, 2005). Lower quality molas were made for this purpose.

Later tourists, in the second half of the 20th century, may have been visiting for the express purpose of buying indigenous fashion, in the form of mola blouses. Craik (2012) explores the multiple linkages between tourism and fashion from the late 19th century and includes ethnic fashion as an attraction for Western tourists.²⁰⁶

The commercialisation of molas was investigated in a wide ranging study by Tice (1995), who suggests that the mola commercialisation process began in the 1950s (1995: 63) and during the late 1960s molas were specifically made for trade (1995: 84). Sales to tourists were recognised as a major source of potential income for Kuna women. Tice (1995) mentions the significant role of the US Peace Corps volunteers in establishing a mola co-operative (co-op) from the mid-1960s until the Peace Corps left Panama in 1971²⁰⁷. The primary aim was for Kuna women to gain higher prices for the sale of molas by purchasing materials and selling cooperatively, in Panama City, rather than through intermediaries or directly to tourists.

An established history of Kuna sociedades, mentioned earlier in this chapter, influenced support for the idea of the mola co-op, though women had little previous involvement in running commercial enterprises. The Peace Corps, according to Holloman, also had a number of non-financial goals with the mola co-op project. These goals included:

- To “reintroduce” the sewing of molas on progressive islands
- To encourage a form of Kuna dress which was “relevant” to Kuna culture, easily sewn and more attractive than cheap shop bought clothing
- To extend the goodwill created by groups of Kuna women sewing molas to disseminate information about Western health care, nutrition and child rearing
- To provide some organisational experience for women
- To encourage inter-island cooperation. (Holloman, 1969: 401-402; words in quotation marks from Holloman).

In particular, women were taught to use, and maintain, sewing machines to assemble blouses which facilitated much quicker completion of blouses. It can be seen that these goals were in many ways attempts at social-engineering, to improve Western levels of ‘civilization’ of the indigenous women, albeit mostly appearing to be well-intentioned.

Mola co-ops continued to operate after the Peace Corps left Panama and evolved in many ways. The main outcome was maintaining a high quality of mola workmanship in most molas and pride in the work of molas made by Kuna women to wear. By differentiating between molas made specifically for

²⁰⁶ There are small numbers of private collectors of molas in many countries including the US, UK, Japan and Europe. Some collectors also learn to sew molas in their home country, particularly in Japan. Most collectors focus on contemporary molas, purchased on trips to Panama; others are more interested in older molas; both generally collect mola panels.

²⁰⁷ This was at the request of the Panamanian government, thus for political reasons. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the US Peace Corps involvement in Panama.

wearing (which may later be sold) and molas made for trade, called *turista* molas, different styles and colours could be tailored to the known preferences of Western buyers²⁰⁸. See Figure 49 for examples.

Figure 49. Molas made for trade.



Tourist molas for sale in Panama City (Perrin, 2003).

The Panamanian Institute of Tourism (IPAT) came into existence in 1960 (Guerron-Montero, 2006: 69) and by the mid-1970s IPAT documents state that the Kuna were “one of the principal tourist attractions [of] the country” (Chernela, 2011: 41). By the 1990s tourism to Panama was heavily promoted²⁰⁹ and increased substantially (Guerron-Montero, 2006: 69). In particular, the link between tourism and the sale of molas was reinforced by campaigns of the Panamanian government to increase visitation to the country. In this regard Swain writes that:

“To a large extent, the international marketing of molas is both a cause and effect of tourism in Panama. Besides the physical setting, one of the major attractions to the tourist is the prospect of mola buying. This fact is exploited by both the Panamanian government in their efforts to attract tourists to their country, and the Cuna [sic] themselves.

The mola is manipulated as an ethnic symbol by the national government. The logo of the Panamanian Institute of Tourism is a modified mola design, and their employees wear uniforms with Cuna [sic] mola decoration. . . . Molas are acknowledged in Panama as a highly marketable national asset” (Swain, 1978: 172).

Swain provides evidence that the sale of molas to tourists dates from at least prior to 1951 and that by the 1960s, outsiders were able to stay on islands in the San Blas and as discussed above, purchasing molas was one of the main attractions (Swain, 1978: 164).

²⁰⁸ Qualitative research carried out by Hirschfeld (1977a) in 1974 on Isla del Rio Tigre into Kuna aesthetic preferences, including colours and designs, for their own molas and molas made for trade, suggests that the Kuna women strategically selected different colours and designs for some of the molas produced for Western tourists.

²⁰⁹ This promotion was perhaps due to the swift decline in tourist activity at this time; there was little tourism in Panama in the 1990s due to political issues (Tice, 1995: 68).

The Kuna people also have identified strongly with the mola as a symbol. Not only does the mola represent the Kuna people to themselves and to others in Panama; it has also become a recognised symbol of the whole of Panama internationally:

“The marketing of Cuna [sic] heritage has the potential of being both an economic livelihood and a rallying point for ideological solidarity. In particular, continuing mola production has the potential of being a powerful symbol of ethnic pride to the Cuna [sic], while being a symbol of the Cuna [sic] group to the world at large”
(Swain, 1978: 188).

Tourism to Panama attracts people from many nations with different cultural backgrounds and expectations, a unifying factor appearing to be the acquisition of molas as a souvenir. Molas are small and easily transported; complete mola blouses were rarely purchased²¹⁰. Prices ranged from inexpensive to high value, and were attractive due to their exotic appearance, particularly the designs and colour choices. De Leon (2009) notes that “molos have become not just the archetypal Kuna packaged ethnicity item, but the standard Panamanian souvenir” (2009: 22), which could be purchased while on a cruise, on a visit by small plane to a San Blas island, or from a number of Kuna and non-Kuna operated outlets in Panama City.²¹¹

Figure 50. Promoting the association of the mola blouse with the nation of Panama.



National stamps present an image of a country to both local residents and recipients of letters in other countries. This postage stamp, showing a Kuna woman holding a child, was issued in 1942, well before official tourist promotions linking the Kuna Indians with Panama. This is the only official stamp which appears to have been issued, from Panama’s independence in 1903 until 2003, which depicts a Panamanian indigenous group.²¹²

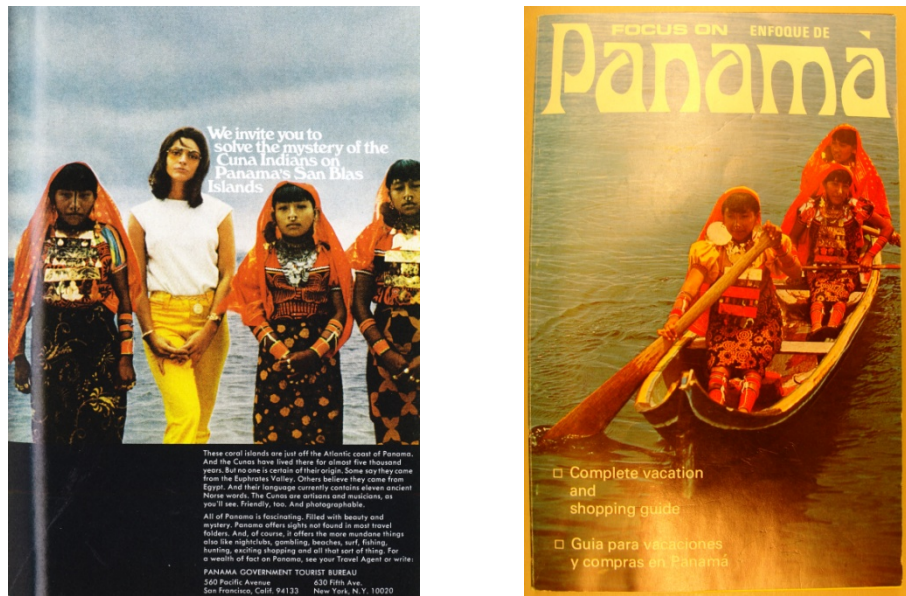
Figure 50 continued next page.

²¹⁰ Mola panels were reportedly removed from blouses by tourists after purchase or resellers prior to sale.

²¹¹ The popularity of the mola as a souvenir has presented challenges in the form of imitation by non-Kuna manufacturers. In response, the intellectual property laws were introduced between 1984 and 2000, to provide some legal protection. See Footnote 189. The impact of these laws is unknown.

²¹² The Stanley Gibbons stamp catalogue *Stamps of the World* (2012), volume 5, includes a series of five stamps from 2003 depicting Kuna women and molas. This catalogue covers 1903-2008 and the 1942 stamp and the 2003 series are the only postage stamps with Kuna images.

Figure 50. Promoting the association of the mola blouse with the nation of Panama. *Continued.*



Left: This image appeared as a full page advertisement in the *New Yorker* on 16 May, 1970 (page 141). Sponsored by the “Panama Government Tourist Bureau”, with offices listed in San Francisco and New York, the text promotes the exoticism of the Kuna Indians, and describes them as “friendly” and “photographable”. Right: Cover of *Focus on Panama*, an official Panama tourist guide, vol. 1, no. 3, 1972. Photograph taken on Ailigandi.

9.5 Summary: The role of the mola in Kuna identity and survival

In this chapter, I have outlined how the Kuna people have developed, through generations of astute Kuna leaders promoting internal and external survival strategies, a highly developed ability to maintain their culture and distinct identity. Sherzer summarises this succinctly: “In the 500 years since first European contact, the Kuna have maintained social, cultural, and linguistic independence, while at the same time accommodating to the world around them” (Sherzer, J., 1994: 922).

Holloman characterised Kuna society as “ultrastable” due to its adaptive capacity (1969: 42-64). According to Howe (2009), Holloman records “the first representation of Kuna culture as a continuously changing adaptive mechanism” (Howe, 2009: 202). Apgar (2010) confirms the Kuna process of dynamic adaption continues to occur (2010: 9) and is possibly a key strength for its survival (2010: 310).

Recent research has focused on investigating the ongoing ability of Kuna society to retain its resilience, measured in terms of its ability to adapt to change in response to internal and external challenges (Apgar, 2010; Rawluk & Godber, 2011). The instigation and involvement in this research by the Kuna General Congress is a strong indication of the concern of the Kuna leaders that the cultural survival of

some Kuna island communities is under threat.²¹³ I make the observation that the promotion of distinctive dress, particularly the wearing of the mola blouse, as a visible symbol of cultural identity, may resurface to become an increasingly important component of a strategy adopted by contemporary Kuna leaders as part of their survival strategy.

The mola has been invented and developed as a distinct, highly recognisable symbol of the Kuna people, and extended by willing cooperation of the Panama government to become a symbol of the country of Panama.

In the previous chapter, Chapter 8, I have shown that the process of sewing molas would lead to optimal flow experiences and that this would be enjoyable and a strong motivation to continue sewing mola panels and blouses. I have established in this chapter that Kuna rituals, involving the wearing of the mola, create flow experiences for the whole community. This circumstance contributes to reinforcing the ethnic identity of the community, in turn encouraging further the Kuna women to sew and wear molas as part of their dress ensemble. The cycle of reinforcement, beginning with the contribution of mola making to the well-being of individual Kuna women, explored in Chapter 8, thus extends to the whole community through participation in quotidian and celebratory rituals. My research has extended the work of previous scholars who have linked the mola to the identity of Kuna women and the Kuna people, to the contribution to Kuna communities of the wearing of the mola to the creation of optimal flow experiences and consequently the enhancement of well-being.

Part 4, Reflections, contains the two final chapters in my dissertation: one chapter relates to museums and the other provides a summation of the key findings. I begin my reflections in Chapter 10, by addressing the function of museums as repositories of Kuna material culture, and the role of museum Kuna collections in providing a resource for the Kuna people to become familiar with the evolution of molas. I consider molas within museums as being in environments which may be regarded as “sacred houses” or “keeping places” for Kuna culture.

²¹³ Research into Kuna communities in Panama City, for example work carried out by Price (2010) as part of her investigation of bilingual education of Kuna primary aged children, confirms that the Kuna General Congress is also concerned about cultural identity and survival of Kuna people living away from the San Blas.

Part 4 Reflections

CHAPTER 10 MUSEUMS AS A RESOURCE

Most literature on the role of ethnographic artefacts in museums focuses on the presentation and interpretation of the objects by Western museum visitors²¹⁴. In this chapter my focus is primarily on the benefit to Kuna Indians of existing museum mola collections. Firstly, it is important to record that the San Blas Kuna have no museum which is able to store molas under environmentally stable conditions. Textile objects like molas rapidly deteriorate in the hot humid climate in the San Blas.

In Chapter 6, I discussed the issues with preserving molas and the benefits of Western museums housing collections of Kuna molas for safekeeping. I also referred to the support from Kuna leaders, for collections of molas being stored in museums in a stable environment, to ensure their preservation.²¹⁵ There are currently no museums in Panama with collections of molas and this is addressed in this chapter.

10.1 Benefits of museum collections

Schevill (1993: xii) is strident in her advocacy for researchers and curators to make better use of the artefacts in their collectors and to reconsider assumptions made about them. My museum research in this dissertation demonstrates my support for museum-based research. Part 3, particularly Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, rely heavily on the examination of museum collections. Supplementing museum collections with contemporary examples of artefacts, another suggestion made by Schevill (1993: xiii), enables developments in styles and workmanship to be appreciated.

Contemporary research by Kuna anthropologists will be facilitated by access to collections of Kuna material culture. Howe (2010)²¹⁶ relates that both foreign and Kuna anthropologists studying Kuna culture frequently work cooperatively; there has been a “shift to a collaborative model” in the discipline of anthropology. The two-way benefit of seeking interpretation of native artefacts in museums from the originating cultural group, the Kuna Indians, will also be improved by this collaborative approach. An example of this is discussed below.

Importantly, Kuna cultural historians, including Kuna traditional leaders and Kuna trained as anthropologists and in other disciplines, are increasingly becoming interested in having access to collections of Kuna material culture. The closest substantial collections are located in the US.

²¹⁴ It is noted that recent literature on the role of museums has focused on the ‘New Museology’ including display, contextualisation and bias, as well as the relationship between the museum and the community, and these issues are not addressed here. See also Footnote 225 in this chapter.

²¹⁵ For these reasons, the types of concerns expressed by other indigenous groups advocating the repatriation of items do not appear to be an issue associated with Kuna artefacts. The sharing of digital images of museum artefacts, particularly images of the iconography on early mola panels, may be well supported by Kuna communities.

²¹⁶ Website <http://shass.mit.edu/news>, accessed 22 June 2011.

Another issue is the ability for anthropologists and other scholars to consult museum collections prior to undertaking fieldwork in the San Blas. An understanding of the changes over time in terms of style, workmanship and design of mola blouses allows contextualisation of current mola making.²¹⁷

10.2 Museums in the US

The major sources of mola collections in museums, as outlined in Chapter 6, can be summarised as molas collected during museum sponsored research; museum collectors; amateur explorers; geneticists; US military or civilian employees in the Panama Canal Zone prior to 1999; serving Ministers of religion; academic researchers who carried out fieldwork in the San Blas; tourists; and others with personal connections to Panama. The major museums with mola collections in the US, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), both Smithsonian institutions in Washington DC; the Field Museum in Chicago; and the Denison Museum in Granville, Ohio, each include collections with some of these backgrounds.

The NMAI is the “first national museum in the United States dedicated exclusively to the history and culture of the indigenous peoples of the Americas” (Kreps, 2003: 100) and it includes an extensive Kuna mola collection. This museum was established by Act in 1989 and included the purchase of the former privately owned Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation in New York. Kuna Indians have frequently visited this museum, for example, in preparation for the “Art of Being Kuna exhibition” (1997)²¹⁸. The curator, Mari Lyn Salvador travelled with four Kuna representatives to Washington in 1994 and to New York in 1996 to examine molas in Smithsonian museums and to “learn more about the names, sources, and interpretation of *sergan* (old) designs and to gain an understanding of contemporary Kuna women’s views about the history of the art form” (Salvador, 2003: 59). This is illustrated in Figure 51.

Figure 51. Kuna Indian people discussing molas at the NMAI



Original caption: “Cacique Carlos Lopez, Balbina Denis, and Elvira Torres visit the National Museum of the American Indian.” Photographer: Pam Dewey, 1996. Source: Salvador (1997a: 177).

²¹⁷ I undertook preliminary museum research prior to my visit to the San Blas in 2010 and found it very useful.

²¹⁸ This exhibition, as mentioned in Chapter 4, toured to five US museums. The exhibition drew from collections in the Fowler Museum, L.A.; the Field Museum, Chicago; and the NMAI, Washington.

The NMAI encourages “direct and meaningful participation of Indian People [sic]” in the museum (Kreps, 2003: 102) as part of its purpose to help “sustain the living culture of Native American communities (Kreps, 2003: 104). This cooperative involvement with Native American people who have heritage objects in the NMAI’s collections indicates, according to Kreps (2003: 112), a distinct change in the role of museums: rather than preserving artefacts for their own sake, the emphasis is on encouraging the preservation of various American Indian cultures.

The NMNH also has a large Kuna collection, in its ethnographic collection, which is one of the world’s largest. The NMNH opened in 1910 and includes collections from most countries. Its Kuna collection contains the oldest known mola, collected in 1906, which is in the “reference collection” for my research.

As a national research institution, the NMNH collections were frequently obtained by museum staff during fieldwork. I was unable to ascertain if there has been any collaboration between the NMAI and the NMNH in terms of comparing these two Kuna collections or jointly exhibiting artefacts from their respective Kuna collections, or if the ongoing collection policies of these museums are similar.

Two other excellent collections of Kuna molas are found in the US – the Field Museum in Chicago and the Denison Museum in Granville, Ohio. Examples from both of these museums are in my “reference collection”.

10.3 Museums in Panama

10.3.1 Museums in the San Blas

The Kuna General Congress, according to its website, has “since 2000 been promoting the creation of community museums as a resource to strengthen the culture and identity” of the Kuna people. There are three small Kuna operated museums in the San Blas²¹⁹. The purpose of these community museums, according to Kuna museum coordinator in El Porvenir, Anelio Merry, cited by Sanchez Laws (2009: 155), is to hold workshops for Kuna communities, run educational activities for children, and as a secondary aim to cater for tourists.²²⁰

The major museum is the small Museo de la Nacion Kuna (Museum of the Kuna Nation), located on the island of Gaigirgordup (El Porvenir), established in 2005. The museum contains items of Kuna material culture related to the puberty ceremony, the kitchen, burial, basketry / weaving, musical instruments, fishing, hammocks and historic documents (Sanchez Laws, 2009: 155). There is no mention of items of Kuna women’s dress. Perhaps this is due to the concern that cotton fabric would deteriorate quickly. This museum has a small display demonstrating the process of mola making (see Figure 52).

²¹⁹ Source: <http://www.congresgeneralkuna.com/>, accessed 20 April 2012.

²²⁰ See also *Panamanian Museums and Historical Memory*, Chapter 6 (Sanchez Laws, 2011: 62-69).

As far as has been possible to ascertain, none of the three Kuna community museums contain mola collections.²²¹

Figure 52. Museo de la Nacion Kuna, El Porvenir.



No complete molas appear to be in this museum. The photograph on the left shows stages in sewing a mola panel. Photographer: Sanchez Laws, May 2010.

10.3.2 Museums in Panama City

In her dissertation, Sanchez Laws (2009) considers “the political and economic contexts in which dominant representations of nationhood and identity have formed in museums in Panama” (2009: 5) and identifies “missing stories and gaps in representations of Panamanianness” (2009: 195). She found that indigenous representation, including the material culture of the Kuna Indian people, was missing in the main national museums. I corresponded with her to explore this further and she suggests some possible reasons for this:

“One possible explanation would be that the interplay between the isolationist policies of the Kuna General Congress and the assimilationist policies of the Panamanian Government have made it hard for exchanges between their cultural institutions. This might, however, be contradicted by the fact that the Kuna General Congress (as Anelio Merry told me) has searched for assistance from Panamanian museum officials in the past (when beginning the project of community museums) but the INAC (the National Institute of Culture) has failed to follow up. However, Merry also told me that they did not want to integrate with the museums in Panama city because they felt misrepresented. So here we go back to the idea that there is a tension between two not so compatible goals: Panamanian officials wishing to present anything and everything in Panama as

²²¹ In a wide ranging exploration of ethnic arts “made for trade” Hatcher (2011: 132-147) discusses issues related to indigenous museums.

part of a successful melting pot, and Kuna officials wishing to protect themselves from the influences (and economic interests) from the rest of the country.

Another explanation has to do with discrimination and racism in Panama, especially towards indigenous populations. Guillermina de Gracia, whom I interviewed while researching the MARTA²²², said that in Panama indigenous culture was something that people were not proud of, so it was hard for them to attract national visitors, as their displays were based in Pre-Columbian artifacts [sic]. For her, though, the goal of this museum should be to try to counteract this situation and work to promote knowledge about indigenous cultures in Panama. . . . the new exhibition has totally done away with all Pre-Columbian artifacts [sic] and anything related to indigenous populations.” (Sanchez Laws, personal communication, 16 August 2010).

It would appear that this situation will not change until either indigenous groups mount a campaign to protest about this lack of representation; a Panamanian political party adopts as part of its platform the representation of indigenous peoples in its state-run museums; or as a result of international pressure. For example, local and international visitors to the Biomuseo (Biodiversity Museum), scheduled to open in mid-2013 in Panama City, may generate interest in learning more about the indigenous populations of Panama²²³.

10.3.3 Visiting exhibitions

An exhibition held in the Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá (the Museum of the Inter-Oceanic Canal) in Panama City, from 12 December 2009 – 31 January 2010, was promoted as the first mola exhibition to be held in Panama²²⁴. The exhibition comprised of molas from a private Spanish collection. No catalogue was published though some information was obtained from the museum.

²²² MARTA is the acronym for the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz, the anthropological museum formerly named the Museum of the Panamanian Man, albeit with different artefacts, on a different site and with a different mission (Sanchez Laws 2009: 91-107).

²²³ It is anticipated that the Biodiversity Museum will be a huge drawcard for local Panamanians and particularly international visitors. Designed by Frank Gehry, and located close to Panama City centre, this museum, similar to other museums in other countries designed by this architect, is expected to be a major tourism attractor. It will focus on the theme of biodiversity which may include some aspects of indigenous culture. The Kuna Indians are one of a number of indigenous groups in Panama.

²²⁴ Dr Angeles Ramos, Director of the Museum, quoted in the June 2010 edition of *En Exclusiva* magazine, p. 64. In *La Prensa*, a Panamanian newspaper, in an article on 13 December 2009, about this exhibition, the collector, Llopis is quoted as saying that the molas are “works of art that deserve their own museum in Panama”. Dr Ramos, the director of the museum, is also quoted as saying that the exhibition aims to highlight the molas as works of art. There is no mention in the article that molas are items of dress, though the exhibition included a few complete mola blouses. (<http://mensual.prensa.com>, accessed 21 April 2012). Two hundred molas, collected starting from the 1960s, were exhibited from the collection of Jose Felix Llopis (Arjona, 2009).

This same museum held an exhibition of black and white photographs of a Kuna puberty celebration, most taken in 1970, by one of the pre-eminent Kuna scholars, James Howe, in April 2011. Promoted as a collaboration between a university (MIT) and the Kuna people, this exhibition was endorsed by the General Congress of Kuna Culture and enthusiastically received by the Kuna people. Figure 53 shows Kuna men and women closely examining some of the photographs.

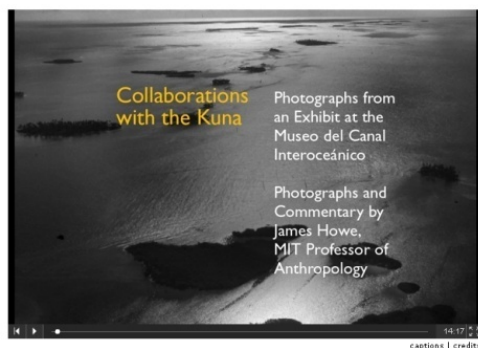
Figure 53. Kuna Indian people at exhibition of Kuna photographs



Kuna men and women viewing the exhibition of photographs of a Kuna puberty celebration. Photographs in this exhibition were taken by James Howe; most photographs are from 1970. Exhibition in Panama City in the Museo del Canal Interoceanico, April 2011. Source of these three photographs: <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/kuna-photos-howe.html>, accessed 29 May 2012. See also Figure 54.

A video slide show of the exhibition, with commentary narrated by James Howe, can be found at <http://shass.mit.edu/multimedia/video-2011-collaborations-kuna> (accessed 21 April 2012). Figure 54 shows the opening slide. The photographs in Figure 53 are from this video.

Figure 54. Video on 'Collaborations with the Kuna'.



Screenshot of first slide of video. This is a 14 minute video with commentary about some of the photographs from the Museo del Canal Interoceanico exhibition in 2011.

10.4 Reflections on museums

In the short term it appears unlikely that Panamanian museums will become major repositories of Kuna material culture. The role of US museums will become increasingly important as a resource for both Kuna and non-Kuna researchers. The Kuna people who wish to study the development of molas, particularly the designs on mola panels, will rely on published materials or visits to Washington, most likely to the National Museum of the American Indian, a 4 ¾ hour flight from Panama City, plus a 30-40 minute flight from a San Blas island.

Other roles of museums, in terms of the “New Museology”²²⁵, including education of the whole community about the different indigenous groups comprising the nation, are currently not popular in Panama, so efforts by separate indigenous groups, such as the Kuna community museum initiatives, may be the only museums in Panama which contain Kuna material culture. For the reasons given above, these museums will be unable to house extensive collections of molas, though photographic records would be informative.

Another trend in museology is to work together with the indigenous groups, from which museum collections originate, to gain a better understanding of the meaning and context of the museum collections. Morphy (2009) discusses the concept of the “relational museum” developed at the Pitt Rivers Museum and notes that “the role that anthropology museums have today in connecting collections to originating communities, research and visiting publics [sic] in an evolving nexus of relationships”. He continues by strongly asserting the role of museums as a resource, the theme of this chapter, and states that:

“The new relevance of anthropology museums has arisen partly serendipitously, but underlying it is the great resource that anthropological collections comprise. Museum collections and archives provide basic data for studies in the history of technology, aesthetics and design that are a means of accessing indigenous systems of knowledge and expression. Museums provide an important resource for studies of social and cultural change and researching the historical relations between people – connecting anthropology to archaeology, history and art history. The history of collections and the categories embedded within them provide a perspective on the history of anthropology and the attitudes of colonial societies. However, they also provide data for challenging preconceptions about the past, often revealing the agency of indigenous peoples in the process of building collections and in self-representation, countering the ‘presentism’ [sic] of much reflexive anthropology” (Morphy, 2009).

²²⁵ The term “The New Museology” originates, according to Sanchez Laws (2009: 95) from 1971 and was popularised in the 1970s. It promoted a social and educative function of museums, particularly a “broader participation of different social sectors” (Sanchez Laws, 2009: 95) including the indigenous groups, and the creation of national identities.

The contemporary museum practice of building connections between collections and the originating community is exemplified by a project of the Field Museum in Chicago. In conjunction with a government grant to photograph artefacts, including all its Kuna collection, the Field Museum received funding to conduct video interviews in 2006 with Kuna people in the San Blas.²²⁶ The following dialogue is the translation, from the Spanish, of a Kuna leader²²⁷ speaking in 2006:

Question: *Could you give a definition of what a mola is?*

Answer: *I am going to tell you a definition of mola. The mola is the identity of the Kuna People. A definition. . . . Because in no other part of the world will you find the mola worn. It is the identity of the Kuna people.*

Interviewer: *So, like this, the Kunas wear their identity?*

Answer: *And this won't end! It is tradition! A healthy culture. Many people feel that the mola is famous around the world. Because a dress like yours is not identified with a (particular) culture."*

(<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mln/cswncsco/proj/fm/index.html>, accessed 24 April 2012).

This interview confirms earlier research about the importance of the mola blouse as part of a strategy for maintaining the Kuna identity. The video recording is one of a series of interviews conducted with Kuna Indians, and places on record the views of the Kuna people in 2006. Together with the Kuna material culture collections at the museum, it provides a resource for Kuna and non-Kuna researchers.

The next chapter, Chapter 11, concludes my dissertation. I draw together insights from my research and reflect on the findings. I also suggest areas which would benefit from further research.

²²⁶ Personal communication, Christopher Philipp, Field Museum, 26 June 2010. The sharing of information collected by museum projects, such as the Field Museum's video project, as part of future collaborations involving both Kuna and non-Kuna anthropologists and other researchers, will strengthen scholarship and enhance understanding of Kuna culture.

²²⁷ The identity of this Kuna man has been confirmed as Efrain Castellero Gonzalez (personal communications with Francisco Herrera, James Howe, Mac Chapin and Jorge Ventocilla, in May 2012) who was trained as a librarian at the University of Panama in the 1950s (Howe, 2009: 183) and performed this role on the island of Ustupu. Kuna librarians are known to become historians also for their islands. Educated Kuna, such as this man, would most likely have been involved in assisting Kuna leaders by becoming a *sikwi* (also spelt *sikkwi*), a person who would translate the leader's words into appropriate speech to communicate with non-Kuna, for example negotiating with the Panamanian government. I would suggest that in such a role, a *sikwi* would be invested with a certain prestige and power and gain through this role a depth of understanding of the strategic importance of the preservation of Kuna culture.

CHAPTER 11 CONCLUSIONS

11.1 Findings

This dissertation has focused on the Kuna Indians living in the San Blas archipelago. My overall research questions, as outlined in Chapter 1, are encapsulated in the dissertation title and have been supported. Each of these questions can be answered in the affirmative:

Is it possible to explain the evolution of the Kuna Indian mola blouse in terms of the process of cultural authentication?

Once the Kuna mola had been developed, is it possible to understand its continuation as a response to the objective of the preservation of Kuna culture?

Is the persistence of the mola, worn as part of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble, part of a strategy for cultural survival?

The research has drawn on and interpreted sources from the fields of anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, history, cultural studies, dress studies, fashion studies, psychology, object-based material culture methodology and tourism studies.

11.1.1 Cultural authentication of mola blouses

I have been able to establish that the concept of cultural authentication is applicable to the development of molas, and that each of the four elements – selection, transformation, characterisation and incorporation – espoused by the originators of the term in relation to non-Western dress, Eicher and Erekosima (1980) can be validated. Rather than view the elements as steps, I have proposed that each step is considered as a component, and that the order of occurrence is not important in achieving the process of authentication.

My application of each of these four components to the development of the mola blouse is summarised:

- Selection

The acquisition by the Kuna Indians of Western trade cloth began in the 17th century, though there appears to be no evidence of selection of cloth for use as part of Kuna women's dress prior to the turn of the 20th century. Highly saturated cloth colours were chosen and large quantities of cloth were used in early mola blouses.

- Transformation

The pair of rectangular mola panels sewn into a mola blouse comprise of layers of fabric which have been structurally altered. Early mola panels were sewn using primarily the reverse appliqué technique, with some surface appliqué and no embroidery. Many early mola panels used more complete layers than later mola panels. Limited resources were needed to sew early mola blouses, which were larger than later molas and required substantial time to sew. A wide variety of cloth was used for early mola yokes; all appear to be made of cotton fibre.

- Characterisation

An historical review of the likely etymology of the word 'mola' indicates an origin dating from the 18th century, when the word meant Kuna women's clothing in a general sense, referring specifically to the blouse some time in the first half of the 19th century, though it remains a polysemic word. Different names are given to different designs on mola panels, though the origin of this is unknown, the names are in most cases descriptive of the design. Kuna names have also been given to layering arrangements and sewing techniques.

- Incorporation

The Kuna people identified with the mola as part of a Kuna woman's dress ensemble prior to 1919, at which time the government began attempts to suppress it, and Kuna resistance to this was one of the prime reasons behind the 1925 Kuna Revolution. Wearing the mola is integral to Kuna ritual and mola sewing is a daily occupation for many Kuna women.

The achievement of each of these components was found to have been completed prior to 1919, though there have been continual developments in techniques, designs and materials used since that time.

11.1.2 Mola blouses and the preservation of Kuna culture

The findings are related to both the preservation of examples of Kuna material culture and the survival of the San Blas Kuna Indians as an indigenous people with a distinct culture. There are four main findings associated with understanding the role of the mola and cultural preservation:

- The value of museum collections

Museum mola collections provide a resource to view developments in the design, materials and workmanship of molas. By sampling mola collections across a number of museums it was possible to establish a "reference collection" with representation across a century of development.

- The benefits of carrying out a visual assessment

By comparing museum mola blouses with contemporaneous archival photographs it was possible to assess how a mola is worn as a component of the Kuna dress ensemble. The two dimensional nature of molas, especially pertinent since most museum collections contain only the mola panels excised from mola blouses, makes an assessment of mola blouses as worn critical to understanding their role as a dress component.

- Individual motivation to make mola blouses

In Part 2 of my dissertation, I established that Kuna women have been sewing molas to wear as part of their dress ensemble since at least the beginning of the 20th century. The impact of the Kuna Revolution in 1925 strengthened this motivation, due to the instruction of the Kuna leaders, and even women who had been wearing a form of Western dress prior to this time were motivated to wear the mola.

I posited that there must be additional intrinsic motivation to continue sewing molas, especially once the needs of an individual wardrobe of molas had been satisfied. I found evidence that the process of sewing satisfied a number of factors, each of which contribute to the well-being of individual Kuna women. I was able to provide evidence of the link between textile making and well-being in a number of situations. The five components of well-being, namely positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment and positive relationships, advocated by Seligman (2011) were each found to be applicable to the process of mola making.

Whilst each of these components of well-being may be considered to be self-reinforcing, I believe that the strongest motivation is the achievement of engagement or a sense of flow. Similar to other handmade textile products, the engagement with the process provides an experience which is repeated during most of the occasions the process of making occurs.

The commercialisation of molas has added a monetary incentive to devoting additional hours each day to sewing molas, with the contribution to family income thus obtained being valued by the whole community. It is acknowledged that not all the Kuna women who make molas continue to wear them every day, though most Kuna women wear molas for celebratory occasions.

- Community based motivation to make and wear mola blouses as part of a strategy of Kuna survival

The link between dress and identity has been established by many scholars, including Kuna scholars such as Salvador (2003), Howe (2009) and Sherzer (1976b). My contribution extends this concept by providing evidence that the well-being of Kuna communities is enhanced by the incorporation of ritual events into the daily life of Kuna communities and in the celebratory events related to lifecycle events and historic events.

The skill of Kuna leaders, over successive generations, in adapting rituals to the events impacting on the daily life of their communities has promoted the well-being of their communities. For women participating in these ritual events, certainly the lifecycle events and historic events, and in most of the islands for the gathering house meetings which occur more than once a week, the wearing of the mola blouse is an integral part of the ritual.

By wearing the mola, and seeing others wearing the mola the women are aware of their identity and the whole community is aware visually of their identity as a group different to outside communities. This creation of difference appears to be a key component of the strategy adopted

by Kuna leaders to promote cultural continuity and hence the preservation and well-being of their communities.

I provide evidence that a sense of engagement and hence flow would be experienced by the whole community during these rituals while observing the wearing of molas by Kuna women, and the well-being of the whole community is thus enhanced. The wearing of mola blouses, as part of everyday dress, and as part of the dress worn for ritual activities, provides a constant reinforcement of this sense of a separate identity.

The motivation for the process of mola making by Kuna women derives from both individual motivation and community motivation, both of which contribute to the well-being of the Kuna communities.

11.2 Reflections on the research

After completing my research I contemplated these issues:

- The visual analysis of mola blouses as worn revealed a conundrum: most of the mola panels, requiring weeks of sewing, were obscured. The explanation for this is unclear. The reasons for the continuation of mola making appear to be related to intrinsic motivation, connected to a sense of engagement. Together with the continual support of Kuna leaders to wear the mola blouse for everyday and celebratory Kuna rituals, the well-being of the whole community is enhanced. Studies of well-being in both Western and non-Western communities are in vogue and studies in the area of well-being across different cultures enhance our understanding of our own society.
- The strategy of incorporating mola making and wearing into Kuna ritual to reinforce identity will be tested in the next decade. Kuna leaders, through the Kuna General Congress, face the impact of global climate change on their small islands, which has already resulted in the flooding of several islands. Increasing migration to urban areas, where around half of all the Kuna population now resides, has been addressed by the re-creation of Kuna rituals, often within kinship groups from the island of origin, in the new environment. Perhaps this response relates to a need to rebut the negative social issues arising from close contact with non-Kuna communities in these urban areas.
- An important additional consideration is related to museology. The importance of indigenous collections being accessible to their communities, whether housed locally or within international museums is being considered by contemporary museum scholars. The importance to the Kuna Indians of museum Kuna collections, particularly in US museums is highlighted, since there are currently no Panamanian institutions holding collections of molas for Kuna people to use as a resource.
- A concern was raised at the dearth of provenanced mola collections and the possibility of improving this situation by establishing a calibrated predictive model, based on provenanced collections, in order to later be able to improve the information available for all museum mola collections. This would supplement available museum archival information and other historical documents.

- Museum collections also provide a resource for scholars, increasingly including scholars who are Kuna Indians. There has to my knowledge been no call from the Kuna communities for the repatriation of Kuna material culture artefacts to Kuna communities. This no doubt is in recognition of the lack of secure storage conditions within the Kuna managed territory and the lack of interest to date from Panamanian museums in housing the material culture of the diverse indigenous groups within the country.
- Mola panels are being incorporated into Western fashion items, such as bags, boots and shoes, available for sale in market stalls, pop-up markets and online, in Europe, US, Japan and Australia. The popularity of hand-made items from non-Western cultures being included in Western fashion items is not new. In Panama the mola has been incorporated into souvenir items for tourists since at least the 1960s; the sale of fashion items incorporating the mola in Europe, US, Japan and Australia appears to be relatively recent.
- The contribution of textile activities to the well-being of women, in both non-Western cultures such as the Kuna Indians of Panama, and in Western cultures, may be undervalued. There is substantial evidence for the enhancement of well-being derived from serious leisure activities such as textile activities. The consideration of these activities as a form of craft for women undervalues their contribution to the quality of life. Quilt making is a significant leisure activity in many Western countries and mola making is similar, though at a smaller scale. The popularity of contemporary quilt making and mola making in Japan, and quilt making in the US, attest to the satisfaction derived from these leisure activities. The establishment and expansion of schools to teach these textile making skills and the large commercial enterprises which supply the materials needed to sew them, indicate the popularity of these activities in highly industrialised nations.

11.3 Future research directions

Possible directions for future research include:

- Validate the model developed to predict the age of molas.

A model has been calibrated based on the mola blouses and mola panels in the museum “reference collection” established for this dissertation. Ideally, this model will be further revised and validated by expanding the database and then will be useful in determining the period from which unprovenanced collections were made. The methodology would be applicable to other artefacts with scant provenance. The extensive Kuna collections in two Smithsonian institutions, the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History, would be a good starting point for this. I will endeavour to continue this research.

- Object-based material culture research

The re-evaluation of indigenous dress collections in museums may be an area of interest to investigate the way items were worn as part of dress ensembles. Future scholars of Kuna culture and society may find it beneficial to become familiar with museum collections prior to fieldwork in the San Blas islands.

- Qualitative assessment – in-depth research with Kuna communities

Anthropologists and other social scientists who carry out extended fieldwork in the San Blas may throw further light on the contribution of mola making to individual and community well-being. This future research may explore the flow experiences achieved during the process of mola making and other motivating factors.

- Studies of indigenous dress in North and South America

Research may extend the cultural authentication concept, validated for the development of Kuna mola blouses, to other textile dress traditions, especially of American Indian indigenous peoples in both North and South America.

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VOLUME OF APPENDICES

for dissertation

The Evolution of the Kuna Mola: From Cultural Authentication to Cultural Survival

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APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A

Definitions of anthropology and dress terms

Cultural anthropology terms

| Term | Definition |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| acculturation | <i>Culture change brought about by contact between peoples with different cultures. Usually refers to the loss of traditional culture when the members of tribal societies adopt cultural element [sic] of commercial-scale societies.</i> |
| assimilation | <i>Ethnocide without genocide; the loss of distinctive cultural identity as a population surrenders its autonomy and is absorbed into a dominant society and culture.</i> |
| commercial scale | <i>Organized [sic] by impersonal market exchanges, commercial enterprises, contracts, and money, and potentially encompassing the entire world.</i> |
| commercialisation /commercialization | <i>The cultural process of producing and maintaining private profit-making business enterprise as a means of accumulating capital, by co-opting the humanization [sic] and politicization [sic] processes.</i> |
| cosmogony | <i>An ideological system that seeks to explain the origin of everything: people, nature, and the universe.</i> |
| cosmology | <i>An ideological system that explains the order and meaning of the universe and people's places within it.</i> |
| culture | <i>What people think, make, and do. Socially transmitted, often symbolic, information that shapes human behavior [sic] and that regulates human society so that people can successfully maintain themselves and reproduce. Culture has mental, behavioral [sic], and material aspects; it is patterned and provides a model for proper behavior [sic].</i> |
| domestic scale | <i>Characterized [sic] by small, kinship-based societies, often with only 500 people, in which households organize [sic] production and distribution.</i> <i>Kuna society is domestic scale.</i> |
| endogamy | <i>Marriage within a specified group.</i> |
| ethnic group | <i>A dependent, culturally distinct population that forms part of a larger state or empire and that was formerly autonomous.</i> |

| Term | Definition |
|----------------------|---|
| ethnocide | <i>The forced destruction of a cultural system.</i> |
| ethnographic method | <i>Reliance on direct participant observation, key informants, and informal interviews as a data-collecting technique.</i> |
| ethnographic present | <i>An arbitrary time period when the process of culture change is ignored in order to describe a given culture as if it were a stable system.</i> |
| genocide | <i>The extermination of a human population.</i> |
| indigenous peoples | <i>The original inhabitants of a territory, who seek to maintain political control over their resources and the [sic] cultural heritage.</i> |
| myth | <i>A narrative that recounts the activities of supernatural beings. Often acted out in ritual, myths encapsulate a culture's cosmology and cosmogony and provide justification for culturally prescribed behavior [sic].</i> |
| nation | <i>A people with a common culture and identity in an international system.</i> Indigenous peoples with their own language, independent territory and culture may be considered a nation. |
| nation-state | <i>A territory in which the government and the nation coincide.</i> |
| political scale | <i>Characterized [sic] by centrally organized [sic] societies with thousands or millions of members and energy-intensive production directed by political rulers.</i> |
| tribe | <i>A politically autonomous, economically self-sufficient, territorially based society that can reproduce a distinct culture and language and form an in-marrying (endogamous) society.</i> The Kuna may be considered to be a tribe. |
| voluntary isolation | <i>Official designation for tribal peoples who have chosen to actively avoid contact with outsiders, thereby maintaining their self-determination and exercising cultural autonomy.</i> Examples given by Bodley (2011) of groups in the Amazon, which the UN human rights agencies are recognising as living in voluntary isolation. The Kuna appear to "actively manage" contact with outsiders on the San Blas islands. |

Source: Bodley, J. (2011). *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System* (5th ed.). Lanham, MA: AltaMira Press. pp. 567-574. Quotations in table are in italics.

Clothing and dress terms

| Term | Definition |
|----------------------|--|
| | <p><i>Dress is a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time. The codes of dress include visual as well as other sensory modifications (taste, smell, sound, and feel) and supplements (garments, jewelry [sic] and accessories) to the body which set off either or both cognitive and affective processes that result in recognition or lack of recognition by the viewer. As a system, dressing the body by modifications and supplements often does facilitate or hinder consequent verbal or other communication.</i>(Eicher, 1995a: 1)</p> <p><i>. . . an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human being . . .</i> (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1997: 15)</p> |
| dress | <p><i>. . . parts of the body that can be modified include hair, skin, nails, muscular-skeletal system, teeth, and breath. Body parts can be described in regard to specific properties of color [sic], volume and proportion, shape and structure, surface design, texture, odor [sic], sound, and taste. Supplements to the body – such as body enclosures, attachments to the body, attachments to the body enclosures, and hand-held accessories – can be cross-classified with the same properties used to describe body modifications.</i> (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1997: 16)</p> <p><i>. . . the definition of the dress of an individual as the assemblage of body modifications; that is, temporary or permanent alterations made to the body, and body supplements, things added to the body, which are together displayed by a person and worn at a particular moment in time.</i> (Eicher, Evenson, & Lutz, 2008: 5-6)</p> |
| ethnic dress | <p>non-western dress and regional dress; dress worn by an ethnic group</p> <p><i>The body modifications and supplements that mark the ethnic identity of an individual are ethnic dress</i> (Eicher, 1995a: 1)</p> |
| fashion | <p><i>changing styles of dress and appearance that are adopted by a group of people at any given time and place</i> (Welters & Lillethun, 2011: xxv)</p> |
| material culture | <p>items of tools, furniture, dress – everyday and ceremonial (Eicher, et al., 2008: 36)</p> |
| non-material culture | <p>beliefs, values, standards and aesthetics; patterns of social interaction (Eicher, et al., 2008: 36-37)</p> |

Quotations in table are in italics.

Sources:

Eicher, J. B. (1995a). Introduction: Dress as an Expression of Ethnic Identity. In Eicher, J. B. (Ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time* (pp. 1-6). Oxford: Berg.

Eicher, J. B., & Roach-Higgins, M. E. (1997). Definition and Classification of Dress. In Barnes, R. & Eicher, J. B. (Eds.), *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (pp. 8-28). Oxford: Berg.

Eicher, J. B., Evenson, S. L., & Lutz, H. A. (2008). *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society* (3rd ed.). New York: Fairchild.

Welters, L., & Lillethun, A. (2011). *The Fashion Reader* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Berg

APPENDIX B

Mola sewing terms and techniques

STITCHES USED IN MOLAS

| Term | Definition |
|------------------|---|
| Blanket stitch | <i>Primarily a border stitch to finish off raw edges, Blanket Stitch can also be used as a decorative feature. The needle goes into the fabric at an even distance from the edge each time, coming out on the edge, and the thread is carried around the point of the needle at each stitch.</i> |
| Chain stitch | <i>One of the basic embroidery stitches, Chain Stitch is commonly used to create lines. A variation of chain stitch is called Fly Stitch and the stitch looks like the letter 'V'.</i> |
| Cross stitch | <i>This basic embroidery stitch is found all over the world and is a simple, geometric X-shape that is useful to fill areas or create geometric designs.</i> |
| Feather stitch | <i>An embroidery stitch that is worked from top to bottom, which creates a wide band that can be used as a border.</i> |
| Reverse appliqué | <i>A type of appliqué in which the design is cut out of the top layer of fabric to reveal a different layer of fabric underneath it.</i> |
| Running stitch | <i>The simplest basic embroidery stitch, which consists of straight, even stitches worked at regular intervals. It is the basis of many more complex stitches, but can also be worked in rows, staggered or used as an outline to give a range of different effects.</i> |
| Stem stitch | <i>One of the basic embroidery stitches, which dates back to ancient times. It is used to outline motifs and to create the stems of leaves and flowers. When worked correctly, there should be a neat row of Backstitch on the reverse. Keep the stitches even and be sure to keep the working thread below the needle.</i> |
| Surface appliqué | <i>A decorative technique in which a shape or motif is cut from one fabric and applied to another. It is used in quilting, and also to decorate garments and household furnishings.</i> |

Source: Clayton, M. (2007). *The Ultimate A to Z Companion to 1,001 Needlecraft Terms: Appliqué, Crochet, Embroidery, Knitting, Quilting, Sewing*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin. Quotations in table are in italics.

MOLA SEWING TECHNIQUES

Mola panels are sewn with layers of fabric, but many layers are not full layers, rather smaller pieces of fabric inserts. The technique has been incorrectly termed “reverse appliqué” when it actually involves both appliqué and cutwork, such as some of the filler techniques discussed below.

A number of different techniques are used as background filler. See also Chapter 5. Chapter 6 contains a summary of Kuna mola aesthetic principles. It is important that there are cuts through different layers to make the mola more flexible, and hence more comfortable to wear and more durable.

The main filler techniques, illustrated at actual size, are:

- *tas-tas*, which are parallel slits, which may be horizontal or vertical or diagonal. The slits in this technique especially allow more movement in the fabric, especially important if a number of layers are used. The slits will be consistent in size for a mola. Slits vary in size and very small *tas-tas* are very difficult to sew.



horizontal and vertical *tas-tas*

N40 1971

- *gwini-gwini* which are small circles or squares, similar to *tas-tas*, but often very small in size



square *gwini*

D16 1957

- *dientes* which is the name for the edging with a zig-zag or saw-tooth pattern



three rows of dientes

F6 1917



dientes in a curve

F44 2001

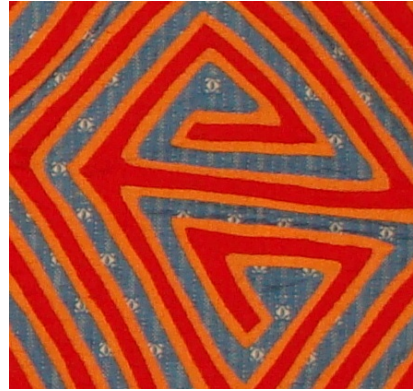
- I have coined the term *crowns* based on the shape, where there are *dientes* on one side only



'crowns'

N35 1968

- *bisu-bisu* which is an overall geometric maze or pattern filling a large part of the mola, with many sharp changes to angles, like large zig zags. Could be referred to as a labyrinth pattern or a snake-like pattern.



A11 1922 This photo not to scale.

- *pilu-pilu* is a Greek key pattern



V22 1984

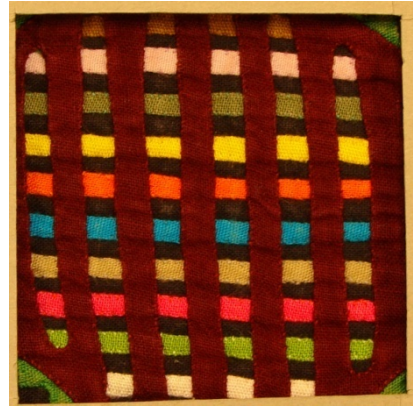
- *nips* which are small triangles, which are cut into the base layer, often black. These inset triangles are called *wawa-naled*.
- *pips* which are the small raised pieces of appliqué placed on top of the nips.



tiny pips on top of black nips

F29 1995

- *cross-hatching* – appliquéd strips underneath; fabric on top cut through with tas-tas to reveal the strips



F62 2006

Other techniques used are:

- *inserts*, the use of small fabric pieces inserted between layers or on the top layer to provide additional colours or patterns to a small section of the mola



Each of the small areas of colour in this mola panel are made up of fabric inserted between layers. Private collection. Panel width approx. 45 cm.

- *embroidery*, which has become more detailed and more accepted as an integral part of mola designs. Originally embroidery was used only for a practical purpose, to prevent layers of fabric separating.

Chain stitch is the most commonly used embroidery stitch. Embroidery using rows of chain stitch to create a leaf on right; embroidery using rows of chain stitch adjoining each other to depict hair on left.



D25 1967



D25 1967

LAYERING TECHNIQUES

The Kuna women have various names for the arrangement of layers in a mola panel, based on the number of layers, the colours of layers, the arrangement of layers between a pair of mola panels, and the techniques used. See Chapter 5. Chapter 6 contains a summary of Kuna mola aesthetic principles.

The counterchange technique involves cutting sections of fabric from two panels which will have been selected to be in contrasting colours, such as red and black, and swapping the fabric between the panels. It is an economical way of using fabric to create complex patterns.

An example of geometric counterchange:



A10 1922 Left panel with red fabric dominant. Right panel with orange fabric dominant.

An example of figurative counterchange:



L2 1953 Left panel with black fabric dominant. Right panel with red fabric dominant.

Frequently the two layers beneath the top layer are swapped between layers, for example the second and third layers of one panel, possibly orange and green, will be swapped in the other panel of a pair to be ordered in the reverse, with the green layer under the top layer, and then the orange layer. This order of layering, similar to the counterchange technique, may be used to confirm individual panels were sewn together as a pair of panels for a blouse though this re-ordering of layers does not provide such a significant contrast between panels as the counterchange technique.

Examples of the design filling the panel, when there is no filler in the background:



N01 1906



N05 1921

Another example of the design filling the space is A10, illustrated above.

This Appendix is continued on the next page.

POSITION OF SLEEVE IN RELATION TO MOLA PANEL



- sleeves above panel

Example of blouse where the sleeve is not attached to the mola panel

Photographs of both sides of this blouse showing counterchange panels are in Chapter 6.

N01 1906 (Source: NMNH online catalogue)



- sleeves below panel

Puff sleeves sewn onto the mola panels at the side seams.

D22 1967



- large sleeves which intersect with panel and also are cut into the panel at the top right and top left corners of the panel

Mola blouse with very large sleeves.

F62 2006.

APPENDIX C

Glossary of Kuna words

The word *mola* has a number of meanings in the Kuna language and this is discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5. In this dissertation, to avoid confusion, I will limit the use of the word *mola* to the *mola blouse* and to the two panels sewn onto a *mola blouse*. I will generally use the pair of words ‘*mola blouse*’ when referring to the complete blouse and generally the single word *mola* to denote the rectangular panel sewn as part of a *mola blouse*. Where required for clarity I will refer to ‘*mola panels*’ specifically. Since the word *mola* is well recognised in the literature I have opted not to italicise it in this dissertation. Other Kuna words have been italicised in the text to alert the reader to the usage of a Kuna word and explanations of the words are given in the context used.

The definitions in this glossary are based on the Glossary in Apgar (2011). The first spelling reflects the most recent orthography (Orán & Wagua, 2011). When the old spelling of a word has become well known in the literature I have added it to the entry in brackets.

The recently released first Kuna language dictionary and grammar book for use in Kuna schools¹ which is based on the development of a standard orthography for the Kuna language, has simplified the spelling of Kuna words to encompass fifteen letters: a, b, d, e, g, i, l, m, n, o, r, s, u, w, y, comprising five vowels a, e, i, o, u and ten consonants b, d, g, l, m, n, r, s, w, y. This alphabet does not include the letter “C” or “K” thus the spelling for the indigenous group of “Cuna” and “Kuna” has now been changed to “Guna”. As explained in Chapter 1, I have retained the use of the spelling as “Kuna”.

Previous transcriptions of the Kuna language had found confusion between b and p; d and t; and g and k. The new orthography has removed the letters p, t and k from the Kuna alphabet.

¹ Orán, R., & Wagua, A. (2011). *Gayamar Sabga - Diccionario Escolar: Gunagaya-Español: Lengua Indígena Panameña, Literatura Indígena*, used as basis for spelling of Kuna terms in this Glossary.

Glossary of Kuna terms adapted from Apgar (2011) with new spelling

| Kuna term | Definition |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Argar | Advisor to chief and village governance system, also referred to as the chief's translator or spokesperson because of their duty in relaying the chief's chants in spoken language |
| Babdummad (Bab/a dummad) | Great Father, the Kuna male deity |
| Babigar (Bab igar) | Father's Way, the name given to the compilation of stories that make up the Kuna collective memory |
| Burba (Purba) | Spirit; all beings have burba in the Kuna worldview |
| Dule (Tule) | Person; also used when referring to themselves as Kuna |
| Dule igar | Literally the Kuna way or path, referring to a traditional practice |
| Gurgin (Gurkin / Kurkin) | Hat; also used to refer to mental capacities children are born with |
| Ibeorgun | Kuna prophet who taught collective organisation and governance. The <i>onmaked nega</i> is also referred to as <i>Ibeorgun nega</i> (Ibeorgun's house). |
| Igar | Path or way, used to refer to a story, a treaty or a practice that is chanted by a <i>sagla</i> (saila) or other ritual specialists; has other meaning in governance such as meeting or decision, among others |
| Inna | A fermented drink made from maize and sugar cane juice that is prepared for the coming of age ceremonies of young women |
| Mergi | Americans or Europeans (who are presumed to be white); other foreigners are called waga (see entry below) |
| Mola | Blouse worn by Kuna women; part of blouse (See explanation at beginning of this Appendix) |
| Morsala / Morsana * | Upper part of a mola blouse – yoke and sleeves. ² |
| Nandummad (Nan Dummad) | Great Mother, the Kuna female deity also known as Mother Earth |
| Nega (Neka) | House |

² Definition of morsala from Holmer's *Ethno-Linguistic Cuna Dictionary* (1952:79). Confirmed also during my fieldwork in 2010; also spelt morsana.

| Kuna term | Definition |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Nele | Seer, able to interact with the spirit world and uses spiritual powers to diagnose disease; traditional doctor; shaman |
| Nuchu * | Wooden dolls / statues / totems used in ritual and curing ceremonies. Life size <i>nuchus</i> are used in some rituals while smaller <i>nuchus</i> are usually kept in houses and when they are given <i>burba</i> , spirit or life by the <i>nele</i> they are able to fend off evil spirits and protect the owner |
| Olodule * | Golden person that is a term used to refer to the Kuna as the chosen ones to protect Mother Nature |
| Onmaked * | Collective gathering for prayer or decision making |
| Onmaked Dummad Namakaled * | The Kuna General Cultural Congress – the cultural and spiritual governance structure of the Kuna |
| Onmaked Dummad Sunmakaled * | The Kuna General Congress – the administrative and political governance structure of the Kuna |
| Onmaked Nega * | Gathering House; large building that is the central point of village and social life and was used as a metaphor by the prophet <i>Ibeorgun</i> when teaching collective organisation |
| Sagla (Saila / Sayla) | Chief; Kuna spiritual and political leaders |
| Sagladummad (Saila dummad) | The Kuna high chief of the Kuna General Congresses |
| Waga (Waka) | Foreigners descended from Latino colonisers, for example Panamanians |

* not found in Kuna 2011 dictionary, Orán & Wagua (2011).

Sources :

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Appendix D

Mola reference collection – background, information collected & identification numbers

This Appendix contains information in tabulated form about the collectors and museums in the “reference collection” (Table 1) and the wide background to the 30 collectors from which the “reference collection” was sourced (Table 2). Dates refer to publications by collectors. Where the donor was not the collector and the collector’s name is known this is the name recorded.

Table 3 contains an explanation of the detailed information collected for each mola blouse and mola panel in the “reference collection”.

An explanation of the identification numbers used in this dissertation for each of the mola blouses and mola panels in the “reference collection” is found in Table 4.

Table 1. Collectors and museums in the “reference collection”.

| Year * | American Indian Museum | Denison Museum | Field Museum | Logan Museum | Natural History Museum | Ethnologisches Museum | No. |
|-----------------|--|---------------------|---|---|--|--------------------------------------|------------|
| <1920 | A Hyatt Verrill | | Major G L Fitz-William | | Mrs Eleanor Yorke Bell William V Cash | | 3 |
| 1920s | A Hyatt Verrill Helen Richardson Strong [could have been collected by husband William Duncan Strong, anthropologist] Jane Davenport Harris De Tomasi [wife of Dr Reginald Harris, geneticist] Lady Richmond Brown & Frederick Mitchell-Hedges | | | | Mrs Ruth Randolph William Markham Gilbert Tower Brig.Gen. Lester Delong Flory | | 10 |
| 1930s | | | | | Dr Matthew W Stirling President Franklin D Roosevelt | | 2 |
| 1940s | Dr David B Stout | Rev Leon S De Smidt | | | | | 2 |
| 1950s | Dr Louise C Agnew | Prof Clyde E Keeler | Miss Hedwig H Mueller | Phil T Sprague | | | 4 |
| 1960s | | Prof Clyde E Keeler | Dr F Louis Hoover | Brother of Martha Luebke [Name Unknown] | Dr William H Crocker Mrs Raymond B Fowler Dr F Louis Hoover | | 5 |
| 1970s | | | | Marianne & Robert Huber | Dr F Louis Hoover | Prof. Dr Gunther Hartmann | 3 |
| 1980s | | | | | Embassy of Panama | Prof. Dr Gunther Hartmann | 2 |
| 1990s | | | Dr Alaka Wali | | | | 2 |
| >2000 | | | Louise Young Louise Young Christopher J Philipp | | | | 2 |
| Totals | | | | | | <i>*5 collected across 2 decades</i> | 30* |

Table 2. Background of collectors in the “reference collection”.

| category | collector |
|--|---|
| collected during museum sponsored research | Dr Mathew Stirling. |
| museum collectors | These people were or continue to be employed by the museum holding the collection: Dr Alaka Wali; Christopher J Philipp; Dr William H Crocker; Prof. Dr. Gunther Hartmann (1980); Prof. Erland Nordenskiold (1979 [1938]); A Hyatt Verrill. |
| amateur explorers | Lady Lilian Mabel Alice Richmond Brown (1924) & Frederick Mitchell-Hedges (1925 [1923]). |
| geneticists | Dr Reginald Harris, from the collection of his wife Jane Davenport Harris De Tomasi, who accompanied him as expedition artist on the Second Marsh-Darien Expedition to the San Blas in 1924-1925; Prof. Clyde E Keeler. Both Harris (1926) and Keeler (1953, 1969) researched albinism amongst the Kuna. |
| employed in Panama Canal Zone – military or civilian | Brig.Gen. Lester Delong Flory; Brother of Martha Luebke [Name Unknown]; Gilbert Tower; Mrs Ruth Randolph; Mrs Eleanor Yorke Bell (1909) ; William Markham; and Major G L Fitz-William who was employed in Panama prior to 1917, most likely in the Canal Zone. |
| serving Minister of religion | Rev Leon S De Smidt (1948), based mainly in the Canal Zone |
| academic researchers who carried out fieldwork in San Blas | Dr David Stout (1947); Dr F Louis Hoover; Dr Louise C Agnew (1956). |
| tourists | Helen Richardson Strong, most likely collected as a tourist, but she later married William Duncan Strong who was a prominent anthropologist. Marianne and Robert Huber (1975) were tourists and primitive art dealers who made a documentary on a Kuna island in 1973. Louise Young, a biologist who frequently visits the San Blas islands, has also lead tour groups there. Hedwig H Mueller visited Panama and was associated with the Field Museum but not as an employee. Phil T Sprague visited Panama and was associated with the Logan Museum as an alumni and university trustee. Mrs Raymond B Fowler visited Panama. William V Cash – unknown relationship to Panama, 1915-1920. |
| other connections to Panama | Embassy of Panama, Washington DC. President Franklin Roosevelt [US President 1933 – 1945] received molas as an official gift and donated them to the Smithsonian as required by law. |

Table 3. An explanation of the detailed information collected for each mola blouse and mola panel in the “reference collection”.

| category | information collected |
|--------------|--|
| Measurements | <p>Detailed measurements were taken to be able to make comparisons for each component of the mola blouse, including the size of mola panels, sleeve designs, yoke and neck designs, the trimmings on the yoke and hems. Measurements were taken of some of the design details within mola panels also.</p> <p>These measurements were in sufficient detail to be able to recreate a replica mola blouse for each decade. It is also possible to test out theories about the rectilinear construction of the overall mola blouse and the economic use of loom width fabrics. It may also be useful in assessing the body “fittedness” of the blouses.</p> <p>Where the artefact only comprised of a mola panel or pair of panels, the measurement of the panel, as it would have been when inserted into a blouse was recorded, with evidence based on visible stitch line holes. The most important measurement to obtain is the width of the mola panel. There are many more mola panels in museums than mola blouses. One of the reasons this “reference collection” focussed on mola blouses was because the blouse shows the width of the mola panel <i>as it was worn</i>, and this is measured between the side seams. Once a mola panel is taken out of a blouse it can be difficult to assess the size of the blouse, because some panels are cut out of blouses rather than separated at the seam stitching, reducing the size of the panel. Some blouses had very narrow seams, less than 1 cm; some seams were up to 2.5 cm wide – and it is suggested that the seam width most likely relates to the loom width of the fabric. The borders of some panels have been trimmed after removal from a blouse to improve the appearance of a panel, possibly to create an even “frame” to the panel. Wherever possible two measurements were recorded for a panel – the maximum width and depth and the width and depth between visible stitch lines, where the panel was joined at the seams of the blouse on either side, and to the morsana at the top and the hem treatment at the base of the panel.</p> <p>When referring to panel widths in my analysis, I refer to the width between the side seams in a blouse or between visible stitch lines for a mola panel. Where there was no evidence an estimation was made, and this also was an indication that a panel had not been worn and was most likely <i>made for trade</i>.</p> <p>Museum databases and exhibition catalogues record the measurements of panels based on their maximum dimensions. It was important to be able to measure between the stitch lines to be able to compare these panel measurements with the measurements of panels within mola blouses in the “reference collection”.</p> |
| Materials | <p>The material component considered both the mola panel and the remainder of the blouse, comprising the yoke and sleeves and the type and dimensions of any commercial trimmings.</p> <p>For the yoke material, the weave, composition, texture, colour and pattern of the fabric were noted. For the mola panel, the colours of each layer were recorded as well as the materials used for appliqué on top and insertion between layers. Use of any patterned fabric was noted and whether the base layer could be seen from the top layer.</p> <p>Where selvedge to selvedge fabric was noted, measurements were taken, to investigate loom widths to assist with fabric identification.</p> |

| category | information collected |
|-------------|--|
| Design | <p>The design characteristics recorded included all trimming, whether handmade or commercial braid on the band joining the mola panel to the yoke and on the sleeve cuffs.</p> <p>The number of layers in a mola panel was recorded and whether the order of the layers was different between a pair of panels. The arrangement of fabric on top of and between layers of fabric was also recorded. The colours and design of the fabric is considered in the material section.</p> <p>An assessment of the design iconography was made based on eight categories, with this interpretation informed by the literature research and museum catalogue information. Where references to the design are able to be found from the literature, particularly about the iconography, these were noted. Where there was no readily understood interpretation this was noted. The major purpose of this research is not about the iconography found in mola panels.</p> <p>Unusual features were noted, such as the inclusion of shapes found in many panels which may relate to Kuna symbols. In a number of molas there were letters of the alphabet on the panel or sewn onto the yoke which sometimes could be read as words in Spanish, English or the Kuna language.</p> <p>Where a design created on optical illusion this was noted.</p> |
| Workmanship | <p>The assessment of the workmanship included recording the construction techniques, which included the type of seaming, the use of a sewing machine, and stitch counts.</p> <p>The style of a blouse was assessed including the neck treatment, such as binding of neck opening and type of neck closure; sleeve style and the way the sleeves were attached to the shoulders and finished at the cuff.</p> <p>Detailed consideration was given to the workmanship of the mola panels. A quality assessment, rating from poor to excellent, was made of the overall panel and the embroidery quality, where present.</p> <p>Note was made of whether the colour of thread used on the mola panel matched the fabric and of the quality of the cutting, in terms of creating even, parallel lines.</p> <p>The use of specific embroidery stitches was recorded, and the purpose of the embroidery, which ranged from decorative to an incidental function to hold fabric layers together.</p> <p>Where filler elements were found in the background of a mola panel design, the type of filler was noted, based on the names given to these fillers by Kuna women, when known.</p> |

Table 4. Key to identification numbers used for the “reference collection”.

The table below provides the key to the short ID number used in this dissertation when referring to molas in the “reference collection”. Included in this table is the catalogue number allocated for each item by the museum from which it originates. This is provided for the assistance of future researchers. The date is the latest date of collection based on available information.

The ID prefix relates to name of the museum as follows:

- A National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)
- D Denison Museum
- F The Field Museum of Natural History
- L Logan Museum of Anthropology
- N National Museum of Natural History (NMNH)
- V Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin

The mola is identified as follows:

- B mola blouse
- PR pair of mola panels (some museums use separate catalogue numbers for each panel in a pair)
- P individual mola panel

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------|------|
| A01 | 1918 | 083627 E | B |
| A02 | 1918 | 083613 E | B |
| A03 | 1924 | 129154 E & 129155 E | PR |
| A04 | 1922 | 166354 E | B |
| A05 | 1922 | 166357 E | B |
| A06 | 1922 | 166358 e | B |
| A07 | 1922 | 166361 E | B |
| A08 | 1922 | 166362 E | B |
| A09 | 1922 | 166363 E | B |
| A10 | 1922 | 166366 E | B |
| A11 | 1922 | 166367 E | B |
| A12 | 1922 | 166368 E | B |
| A13 | 1922 | 166372 E | B |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------|------|
| A14 | 1922 | 166384 E | B |
| A15 | 1922 | 166390 E | B |
| A16 | 1922 | 166408 E | B |
| A17 | 1922 | 166412 E | B |
| A18 | 1922 | 166425 E | B |
| A19 | 1922 | 166468 E | B |
| A20 | 1922 | 166470 E | B |
| A21 | 1922 | 166481 E | B |
| A22 | 1922 | 166490 E | B |
| A23 | 1922 | 166497 E | B |
| A24 | 1922 | 166501 E | PR |
| A25 | 1922 | 166523 E | PR |
| A26 | 1922 | 166525 E | P |
| A27 | 1925 | 252489 E | B |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| A28 | 1925 | 252490 E | B |
| A29 | 1925 | 252492 E | B |
| A30 | 1925 | 252494 E | B |
| A31 | 1925 | 252495 E | B |
| A32 | 1925 | 252497 E | B |
| A33 | 1925 | 252503 E | B |
| A34 | 1925 | 252504 E | B |
| A35 | 1925 | 242565 E | P |
| A36 | 1941 | 204532 E | B |
| A37 | 1941 | 204533 E | B |
| A38 | 1941 | 204534 E | B |
| A39 | 1941 | 204535 E | B |
| A40 | 1941 | 204536 E | B |
| A41 | 1941 | 204537 E | B |
| A42 | 1953 | 265958 E | P |
| A43 | 1955 | 265959 E | P |
| A44 | 1955 | 265960 E | P |
| A45 | 1955 | 265961 E | P |
| A46 | 1951 | 265962 E | P |
| A47 | 1955 | 265963 E | B |
| | | | |
| D02 | 1945 | DU1971.32 | B |
| D03 | 1945 | DU1971.33 | PR |
| D05 | 1950 | DU1972.330 | P |
| D06 | 1950 | DU1972.376 | B |
| D07 | 1951 | DU1972.281 | P |
| D08 | 1951 | DU1972.327 | B |
| D09 | 1952 | DU1972.284 | B |
| D10 | 1952 | DU1972.339 | P |
| D11 | 1953 | DU1972.357 | P |
| D12 | 1954 | DU1972.320 | P |
| D13 | 1955 | DU1972.323 | P |
| D14 | 1956 | DU1972.282 | P |
| D15 | 1956 | DU1972.286 | B |
| D16 | 1957 | DU1972.371 | P |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| D17 | 1964 | DU1972.353 | B |
| D18 | 1965 | DU1972.290 | B |
| D19 | 1965 | DU1972.367 | B |
| D20 | 1966 | DU1972.287 | B |
| D21 | 1966 | DU1972.326 | B |
| D22 | 1967 | DU1972.343 | B |
| D23 | 1967 | DU1972.352 | B |
| D24 | 1967 | DU1972.355 | B |
| D25 | 1967 | DU1972.369 | B |
| D26 | 1968 | DU1972.370 | B |
| D27 | 1967 | DU1972.378 | B |
| D28 | 1968 | DU1972.316 | B |
| D29 | 1968 | DU1972.336 | B |
| D30 | 1969 | DU1972.280 | B |
| | | | |
| F01 | 1917 | 1306 5812 | B |
| F02 | 1917 | 1306 5813 | B |
| F03 | 1917 | 1306 5814 | B |
| F04 | 1917 | 1306 5815 | B |
| F05 | 1917 | 1306 5816 | B |
| F06 | 1917 | 1306 5817 | B |
| F07 | 1917 | 1306 5818 | B |
| F08 | 1917 | 1306 5819 | B |
| F09 | 1917 | 1306 5820 | B |
| F10 | 1917 | 1306 5821 | B |
| F11 | 1917 | 1306 5822 | B |
| F12 | 1917 | 1306 5823 | B |
| F13 | 1917 | 1306 5824 | B |
| F14 | 1917 | 1306 5825 | B |
| F15 | 1955 | 2648 242225 | B |
| F16 | 1955 | 2648 242226 | B |
| F17 | 1967 | 3089 190717 | P |
| F18 | 1967 | 3089 190718 | P |
| F19 | 1968 | 3089 190719 | P |
| F20 | 1968 | 3089 190720 | P |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------------|------|
| F21 | 1967 | 3089 190721 | P |
| F22 | 1998 | 4294 342477 | B |
| F23 | 1998 | 4294 342479 | PR |
| F24 | 1993 | 4294 342497 | P |
| F25 | 1997 | 4294 342500 | P |
| F26 | 1995 | 4294 342501 | P |
| F27 | 1998 | 4294 342508 | P |
| F28 | 1997 | 4294 342523 | P |
| F29 | 1995 | 4294 342524 4294 342525 | PR |
| F30 | 1998 | 4294 342532 | P |
| F31 | 1998 | 4294 342545 | P |
| F32 | 1997 | 4294 342550 | PR |
| F33 | 1995 | 4294 342557 | P |
| F34 | 1995 | 4294 342570 | P |
| F35 | 1999 | 4088 278977 4088 278978 | PR |
| F36 | 1999 | 4088 278979 | P |
| F37 | 1999 | 4088 278980 | P |
| F38 | 2000 | 4294 342476 | PR |
| F39 | 2007 | 4294 342490 | P |
| F40 | 2006 | 4294 342492 | P |
| F41 | 2001 | 4294 342496 | P |
| F42 | 2005 | 4294 342499 | P |
| F43 | 2000 | 4294 342504 | P |
| F44 | 2001 | 4294 342509 | P |
| F45 | 2005 | 4294 342510 | P |
| F46 | 2000 | 4294 342514 | P |
| F47 | 2006 | 4294 342516 | P |
| F48 | 2004 | 4294 342520 | P |
| F49 | 2004 | 4294 342521 | P |
| F50 | 2001 | 4294 342522 | P |
| F51 | 2004 | 4294 342526 | PR |
| F52 | 2000 | 4294 342534 | PR |
| F53 | 2000 | 4294 342537 | P |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------|------|
| F54 | 2005 | 4294 342540 | P |
| F55 | 2005 | 4294 342543 | P |
| F56 | 2003 | 4294 342548 | B |
| F57 | 2007 | 4294 342549 | P |
| F58 | 2005 | 4294 342553 | P |
| F59 | 2004 | 4294 342554 | P |
| F60 | 2000 | 4294 342555 | P |
| F61 | 2000 | 4294 342565 | P |
| F62 | 2006 | 4276 342598 | B |
| F63 | 2006 | 4276 342599 | B |
| F64 | 2006 | 4276 342601 | B |
| F65 | 2006 | 4276 342603 | B |
| F66 | 2006 | 4276 342604 | B |
| F67 | 2006 | 4276 342605 | B |
| F68 | 2006 | 4276 342606 | B |
| F69 | 2006 | 4276 342607 | B |
| F70 | 2006 | 4276 342608 | B |
| F71 | 2006 | 4276 342609 | B |
| F72 | 2006 | 4276 342611 | B |
| F73 | 2006 | 4276 342 612 | B |
| F74 | 2006 | 4276 342613 | B |
| F75 | 2006 | 4276 342617 | B |
| F76 | 2006 | 4276 342620 | B |
| | | | |
| L01 | 1952 | LMA 1953.172.5973 | B |
| L02 | 1952 | LMA 1953.172.5972 | B |
| L03 | 1952 | LMA 1953.172.5971 | B |
| L04 | 1966 | LMA 1986.7.1 | B |
| L05 | 1973 | LMA 2007.38.89 | B |
| | | | |
| N01 | 1906 | E 263 359-0 | B |
| N02 | 1920 | E 397 291-0 | B |
| N03 | 1921 | E 418 531-0 | B |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------|------|
| N04 | 1921 | E 418 533-0 | B |
| N05 | 1921 | E 418 535-0 | B |
| N06 | 1924 | E 404 161-0 | PR |
| N07 | 1923 | E 326 819-0 B | P |
| N08 | 1923 | E 326 819-0 C | P |
| N09 | 1923 | E 425 624-0 | B |
| N10 | 1923 | E 425 629-0 | B |
| N11 | 1923 | E 425 635-0 | B |
| N12 | 1932 | E 364 233-0 | B |
| N13 | 1932 | E 364 235-0 | B |
| N14 | 1932 | E 364 238-0 | B |
| N15 | 1932 | E 364 239-0 | B |
| N16 | 1932 | E 364 241-0 | B |
| N17 | 1932 | E 364 242-0 | B |
| N18 | 1932 | E 364 243-0 | B |
| N19 | 1932 | E 364 244-0 | B |
| N20 | 1932 | E 364 245-0 | B |
| N21 | 1932 | E 364 246-0 | B |
| N22 | 1932 | E 364 247-0 | B |
| N23 | 1932 | E 364 248-0 | B |
| N24 | 1932 | E 364 249-0 | B |
| N25 | 1932 | E 364 250-0 | B |
| N26 | 1932 | E 364 251-0 | B |
| N27 | 1932 | E 364 252-0 | B |
| N28 | 1932 | E 364 253-0 | B |
| N29 | 1932 | E 364 254-0 | B |
| N30 | 1932 | E 364 255-0 | B |
| N31 | 1935 | E 377 428-0 | B |
| N32 | 1962 | E 420 129-0 | B |
| N33 | 1966 | E 408 253-0 | B |
| N34 | 1966 | E 408 254-0 | B |
| N35 | 1968 | E 420 138-0 | B |
| N36 | 1971 | E 420 178-0 | B |
| N37 | 1971 | E 420 182-0 | B |
| N38 | 1971 | E 420 183-0 | B |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----|------|----------------------|------|
| N39 | 1971 | E 420 273-0 | B |
| N40 | 1971 | E 420 482-0 | B |
| N41 | 1971 | E 420 504-0 | B |
| N42 | 1971 | E 420 506-0 | B |
| N43 | 1971 | E 420 537-0 | B |
| N44 | 1971 | E 420 555-0 | B |
| N45 | 1971 | E 420 755-0 | B |
| N46 | 1980 | E 421 352A-0 | B |
| | | | |
| V01 | 1978 | VB 161 91 | B |
| V02 | 1978 | VB 162 17 | B |
| V03 | 1978 | VB 162 27 | B |
| V04 | 1978 | VB 162 35 | B |
| V05 | 1978 | VB 162 36 | B |
| V06 | 1978 | VB 162 37 | B |
| V07 | 1978 | VB 162 48 | B |
| V08 | 1978 | VB 162 53 | PR |
| V09 | 1978 | VB 162 64 | B |
| V10 | 1978 | VB 162 65 | B |
| V11 | 1978 | VB 162 66 | B |
| V12 | 1978 | VB 162 67 | B |
| V13 | 1978 | VB 162 68 | B |
| V14 | 1978 | VB 162 69 | B |
| V15 | 1978 | VB 162 92 | B |
| V16 | 1978 | VB 162 97 | B |
| V17 | 1978 | VB 163 14 | B |
| V18 | 1978 | VB 163 22 | B |
| V19 | 1978 | VB 163 23 | B |
| V20 | 1978 | VB 163 40 | P |
| V21 | 1984 | VB 180 34 | P |
| V22 | 1984 | VB 180 40 | P |
| V23 | 1984 | VB 180 41 | P |
| V24 | 1984 | VB 180 43 | P |
| V25 | 1984 | VB 180 44 | P |
| V26 | 1984 | VB 180 60 | P |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| V27 | 1984 | VB 180 66 | P |
| V28 | 1984 | VB 180 76 | P |
| V29 | 1984 | VB 180 77 | P |
| V30 | 1984 | VB 180 78 | P |
| V31 | 1984 | VB 180 80 | P |
| V32 | 1984 | VB 180 81 | P |
| V33 | 1984 | VB 180 83 | P |
| V34 | 1984 | VB 180 84 | P |
| V35 | 1984 | VB 180 85 | P |
| V36 | 1984 | VB 180 87 | P |
| V37 | 1984 | VB 180 90 | P |

| ID | date | museum catalogue no. | mola |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| V38 | 1984 | VB 180 91 | P |
| V39 | 1984 | VB 180 93 | B |
| V40 | 1984 | VB 180 94 | B |
| V41 | 1984 | VB 180 95 | B |
| V42 | 1927 | VA 628 34 | B |
| V43 | 1927 | VA 628 35 | B |
| V44 | 1927 | VA 628 36 | B |
| V45 | 1927 | VA 628 37 | B |

APPENDIX E

Fieldwork carried out with the Kuna Indians 1681 – 2008

This table is not a complete listing; it is a work in progress. It provides an indication of the “ethnographic present” perspective of different scholars. It also contains early well known examples of non-scholarly reporting of time spent with the Kuna Indians, indicated with *. This table shows the breadth of research carried out, particularly in the San Blas archipelago.

Where research was carried out in the San Blas and also in Panama City this is noted. The table is confined to works written in English or translated into English.

The table is arranged by the initial year research was carried out in the San Blas.

This table is based on available information and may not include all fieldwork by the scholars. There may be errors and omissions. I am including this table to assist future researchers.

Fieldwork with Kuna Indians by name of scholar or visitor – 1681 – 2008.

| name | initial year in San Blas | time period (estimate) | islands lived on in San Blas archipelago | field of study |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Wafer * | 1681 | some months ? | mostly in inland Darien area | enforced stay in inland area of Darien – unknown if same tribe though considered to be Kuna |
| Richmond Brown & Mitchell-Hedges * | 1922 | one month ? | visited many islands (lived on boat) | Lady Lilian Mabel Alice Richmond Brown & Frederick Mitchell-Hedges travelled together to the San Blas in 1922. Each published an account: 1924 Richmond Brown - <i>Unknown Tribes, Unchartered Seas</i> ; and 1923 Mitchell-Hedges - <i>Battles with Giant Fish</i> . Note – Richmond Brown is the two word surname of Lady Lilian Mabel Alice Richmond Brown, adopted after her marriage to Sir Melville Richmond Brown. |
| Nordenskiold | 1927 | one week ? | on boat ? | ethnography; later work based on visit to Sweden of Kuna representative |
| Stout | 1940 | Sept. 1940-Jan. 1941 6 months | 5 islands | acculturation of San Blas Kuna 5 islands 1947 PhD dissertation |
| Holmer & Wassen | 1947 ? | ? | | ethnology; linguistics continued Nordenskiold's research |
| Keeler | 1950 | from 1950 – 1968, 16 trips; total of 22 trips | mainly Ailigandi ? also Nargana, Ustupu, Mulatupo | studied albinism also Kuna art especially molas |
| Holloman | 1966 | 8 weeks in 1966 + June 1967 – Nov 1967, total 7 months | | 1969 PhD dissertation describes in detail social organisation of San Blas Kuna |

| name | initial year in San Blas | time period (estimate) | islands lived on in San Blas archipelago | field of study |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Chapin | 1967 | fieldwork 3 months in 1971 3 months in 1972 9 months in 1975-6 | Ustuppu & Okopsukkun [also Peace Corps on Okopsukkun, Oct 1967 – May 1970] | 1983 PhD dissertation on medicine and curing among the Kuna ritual good glossary of Kuna words |
| Salvador | 1967 | 1967 -1969 1974 1990s | many ? | US Peace Corps volunteer in Panama City – visited various San Blas islands about once per month dissertation fieldwork – summer in San Blas islands – 3 months? 1976 PhD dissertation research for <i>Art of Being Kuna</i> exhibition, 1997 |
| Sherzer & Sherzer | 1968 | 1970 extensive + many other times Dec 1968 first trip | Sasarti - Mulatuppu | Joel Sherzer 1968 PhD dissertation on American Indian languages Kuna language and speech Sasarti - Mulatuppu |

| name | initial year in San Blas | time period (estimate) | islands lived on in San Blas archipelago | field of study |
|------------|--------------------------|---|--|---|
| Howe | 1970 | Feb 1970 Sept – Nov 1971 June – Aug 1975 [Sept 1977 – May 1978 Panama City] short visits June – July 1976 April 1980 August 1981 November 1981 1977-1978 1990s & ongoing | | dissertation fieldwork 1974 PhD dissertation research for books research for <i>Art of Being Kuna</i> exhibition, 1997 many short visits to San Blas +Panama City |
| Hirschfeld | 1974 | June – Sept. 1974 | | studied the mola as part of the Kuna political economy |
| Swain | 1975 | 9 months in 1975 | Ailigandi | 1978 PhD dissertation on Ailigandi women ritual |
| Tice | 1981 | 1981 3 months 1984 11 months | 3 islands | 1983 – lived on 3 different islands 1989 PhD dissertation |
| Perrin | 1982 ? 1989 ? | ? visits 1989 until 2004 | ? | anthropology; molas; shamanism |

| name | initial year in San Blas | time period (estimate) | islands lived on in San Blas archipelago | field of study |
|-------------|---------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Fortis | 1998 | 2003 – 2004 >12 months; also earlier undergraduate work | Okopsukkun | one village on an island with 2 villages 2008 PhD anthropology dissertation 2002 undergraduate thesis – one month in Panama City [Dec. 1998] and one week in San Blas on Nalunega |
| Margiotti | 1998 ? | 2002 – 2004 15 months | Okopsukkun | one village on an island with 2 villages 2010 PhD anthropology dissertation 2000? Undergraduate thesis also 5 months in Panama City prior to 2002 |
| Price | 2002 | May – August 2003 + ? for total 8 months Tupile ? Panama City from Jan – Nov 2008 | Tupile | 2005 Masters thesis 2011 PhD thesis |
| Agpar | 2004 ? | Nov 2007 – Oct 2008, part of time in Panama City also | Ukupseni & Colebir | 2010 PhD dissertation 2004 Peace Corp volunteer on Colebir. Prior to this in other parts of Panama. Speaks fluent Kuna and Spanish. |

* early well known examples of non-scholarly reporting

APPENDIX F

Mola research at museums

To establish the “reference collection” for my dissertation, museum research was carried out from 2009 – 2011. Permission was gained to examine Kuna molas in the major ethnological, anthropological, natural history and textile museums in the US, UK, Japan and Europe. The “reference collection” was sourced from the museums denoted with ## below.

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| March 2009 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museum of Man, San Diego • Denison Museum, Ohio • Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, Los Angeles |
| November 2009 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MINPAKU, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka |
| February – March 2010 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, Los Angeles • National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC • National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC • Textile Museum, Washington DC • William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut |
| October 2010 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denison Museum, Ohio ## • National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC ## • National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC ## • Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago ## • Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit ## |
| | Fabric research: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fashion Institute of Technology, New York |
| April 2011 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin ## |
| September 2011 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British Museum, London • Museum fur Volkerkunde, Vienna |
| December 2011 | Examined Kuna Indian molas: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK |

APPENDIX G

Calculating fabric consumption for mola blouses

Patterns were made of representative samples from the “reference collection” to determine the yoke fabric yardage needed for these mola blouses. The fabric yardage calculations have been converted into inches since fabric was manufactured in Imperial units and sold to the Kuna Indians in Imperial units (1 yard = 36 inches which is approximately 91.5 cm).



This is an initial exploration and further work will be carried out in ongoing museum research.



These explanatory notes relate to the table on the following pages:



- The examples chosen are:
 - F09 collected by Major G L Fitz-William on Ailigandi, <1917
 - N19 collected by Dr Matthew W Stirling on Rio Tigre, 1931-1932
 - A39 collected by David B Stout in San Blas, 1940-1941
 - D09 collected by Prof Clyde E Keeler on Ailigandi, 1952
 - N37 collected by Dr F Louis Hoover on Ailigandi, 1966-1971
 - V18 collected by Prof G Hartmann on Mamitupu, 1978
 - F22 and F56 collected by Louise Young on Achutupu, 1998 and 2003.
- Option 1 layout is the most likely option for each example; other options are possible.
- The yardage for the *morsana* (the Kuna word for the yoke and sleeves) has increased over time; the yardage for the pair of mola panels has decreased over time.
- Narrow fabric widths in early mola blouses frequently necessitated the use of small gussets being added to sleeves under the arms prior to joining to panels. Gussets generally consist of a small square piece of fabric sewn on the cross.
- Fabric widths increased over time. Polyesters used after 1990 may have been 140 cm [55"], 150 cm [59"], 180 cm [71"]. This increased loom width may explain the popularity of large sleeves from the 1990s. When I asked to buy fabric for a mola yoke in Panama City in 2010 in a shop frequented by Kuna women, I was told to purchase one yard of fabric, and the fabric was 53" [135 cm] wide.
- Silk [satin] was manufactured in widths 37 – 52" during 1931 – 1939; other silk 27-40" wide. Source: Gridley, J. S., Kiplinger, J. R., & McClure, J. G. (2006). *Vintage Fabrics: Identification and Value Guide*. Paducah: Collector Books. (page 134).
- Panel yardage has not been calculated. To calculate panel fabric usage the formula used would comprise (width + seam allowance) x (depth + seam allowance) x no. layers in a panel x 2 [there are 2 panels in a blouse]. Panels with many layers were found in older molas increasing the amount of fabric used. See Chapter 4.
- The blouse dimensions are included in the table to assist with visualising the scale of the blouses. These dimensions are given in metric units. These columns are shaded in the table.
- See Chapter 4 for further discussion on fabric consumption and sample cutting layouts for two early molas, N01 and F14.

Calculations of fabric consumption. See explanatory notes above. Areas have been converted to Imperial units.

| ID | collection date | panel width [cm] | panel depth [cm] | max width blouse [cm] | max depth blouse [cm] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 1 [inches] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 2 [inches] | amount of fabric used for yoke [square inches] |
|-----|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| F09 | <1917 | 67 | 47.5 | 81.5 | 67.5 | 26" x 27" [approx. ¾ yard] | 17" x 45" [approx. ½ yard] | 702 sq.inches |
| N19 | 1931 - 1932 | 58 | 39.5 | 76.5 | 57 | 24" x 27" [approx.¾ yard] | | 648 sq.inches |

| ID | collection date | panel width [cm] | panel depth [cm] | max width blouse [cm] | max depth blouse [cm] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 1 [inches] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 2 [inches] | amount of fabric used for yoke [square inches] |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
|  shiny jacquard yoke, appears to be natural silk | 1940 - 1941 | 56 | 40 | 71.5 | 53.5 | 28½" x 16½" [approx.½ yard] | 23" x 22" | 506 sq.inches |
|  plain cotton yoke | 1952 | 54.5 | 37.5 | 68 | 54 | 23 x 25 [approx.¾ yard] | 28 x 19 | 575 sq.inches |

| ID | | collection date | panel width [cm] | panel depth [cm] | max width blouse [cm] | max depth blouse [cm] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 1 [inches] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 2 [inches] | amount of fabric used for yoke [square inches] |
|-----|---|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| N37 |  cotton otomana yoke - a fabric more often used for a panel layer | 1966 - 1971 | 50 | 36.5 | 63 | 50 | 20½ x 25 | only 1 option due to grain | 512 sq.inches |
| V18 |  thick man-made stiff shiny jacquard fabric | 1978 | 44.5 | 30 | 70 | 53 | 23 x 31½ | | 724 sq.inches |

| ID | collection date | panel width [cm] | panel depth [cm] | max width blouse [cm] | max depth blouse [cm] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 1 [inches] | yoke fabric calculation - Option 2 [inches] | amount of fabric used for yoke [square inches] |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|---|
|  <p>flowing shiny polyester for yoke and frill</p> | 1998 | 41 | 32.5 | 106.5 | 67.5 | estimate with frill of same fabric:- 71" x 36" [1 yard] | estimate 55½" x 36" [1 yard] with frill of same fabric:- 1¼ yard | 1998 sq.inches |
|  <p>shiny flowing polyester yoke</p> | 2003 | 38.5 | 28.5 | 108 | 62 | estimate 53" x 36" [1 yard] | | 1908 sq.inches |

APPENDIX H

Visual analysis of the dress of Kuna women and girls using the available photographic record

I have recorded my assessment of the dress ensemble of Kuna women and girls in this Appendix under these headings:

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

Note: Kuna words in italics

The tables in this Appendix cover these periods:

| | |
|---------|-------------|
| Table A | 1911 – 1920 |
| Table B | 1922 – 1924 |
| Table C | 1931 – 1938 |
| Table D | 1941 |
| Table E | 1950 – 1960 |
| Table F | 1963 – 1967 |
| Table G | 1970 – 1974 |
| Table H | 1984 – 1986 |
| Table I | 1991 – 1997 |
| Table J | 2003 – 2010 |

The following appendix, Appendix I, contains some key photographs for each of the Tables A – J.

See References for details of printed works cited here.

Table A – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|---|------------------------|---|
| 1911 1912 1920 photographs all black & white | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose – women & girls |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | all – young girls wear small nose rings, young adults wear medium nose rings, women wearing large nose rings extending below lower lip |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins, and what appear to be seeds, bones & teeth |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | small wini [few strands] visible on arms legs mostly covered by skirts; wini appear to be present on some women |
| | footwear | none |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by women and some girls, mostly older girls headscarves in bold patterns, appear to be larger than first headscarves in museum collections [1921]; wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders colours unknown – earliest museum example 1921 is red & yellow |
| | mola blouse | young girls wearing smaller dress-like molas with simpler designs young girls same as women women wearing large molas which flow over skirt; very loose fitting; drawstring neckline panel designs frequently large and geometric –linear & curvilinear mola bands either dientes or appliqué – some wide appliqué bands % mola panel visible when worn = all when worn as dress; 50% for women; up to 60% for girls |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth; colours unknown extends to ankles or longer, nearly to ground |

Sources: Prince (1912); Pittier (1912); Verner (1920); National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – various sources (unprovenanced). Notes: Pittier (1912: 657) noted in addition to the wrap skirt, an underskirt was worn of “red or blue, extending from the hips to the knees”; the necklaces were made of “red, white, or blue beads, to which are added old Colombian silver coins”; the headscarf was “a bright bandana handkerchief”. He gives a detailed description of wini worn by a chieftain’s wife: “. . .she wore on each arm a broad cuff at the wrist and a narrower band at the elbow; her legs were incased [sic] each in three tight bands, bound together by three vertical strings. Through the broad intervals the muscles were bulging abnormally, showing that the band had been placed long ago and never removed. All these latter ornaments were made of white beads sown [sic] closely together on a piece of strong canvas.”

“Reference collection” molas: F02, F04, F06, F08.

Other sources were also consulted for each time period.

Table B – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|--|------------------------|---|
| 1922 - 1924 photographs all black & white | body modification | |
| | skin painting | not visible; photographs are not good resolution |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | not visible on young girls, young adults wear medium nose rings, women wearing large nose rings extending below lower lip |
| | necklaces | variety – appear to be seeds, bones & teeth |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | small wini [few strands] visible on arms legs mostly covered by skirts; wini where visible are larger than earlier era |
| | footwear | none |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by women and some girls, mostly older girls wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders museum collection red & yellow headscarf 1921 |
| | mola blouse | young girls wearing smaller dress-like molas young girls same as women or smock-like mola with or without short underskirt some girls may be wearing mola same size as adult women wearing large molas which flow over skirt; very loose fitting; drawstring neckline panel designs frequently large and geometric –linear and curvilinear mola bands either dientes or appliqué – some wide appliqué bands % mola panel visible when worn = all when worn as dress; 50-60% on women; up to 50% on girls - varies |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth extend mostly to ankles, few longer museum collection dark blue skirt with yellow and light blue 1921 |

Sources: Richmond Brown (1924); National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – various sources, including Marsh and Randolph; NMAI – Verrill.

Notes: There is very extensive photographic coverage of this period.

Where museum collections include headscarves and wrap skirts this information is included to provide information on the colours.

Re % mola panel visible when worn: the depth of mola panels decreased over time (this is the dimension tucked into the skirt). Some older molas, prior to 1930 had a ratio of panel width to panel depth which resulted in a “squarish” shape rather than a rectangular shape, so more of the panel likely to have been covered by the skirt.

“Reference collection” molas: A15, A34, N05.

Table C – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|--|------------------------|--|
| 1931-1938 photographs all black & white | body modification | |
| | skin painting | not visible |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | all – young girls wear small nose rings, young adults wear medium nose rings, women wear nose rings extending to centre of lips |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins, and what appear to be seeds, bones & teeth |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | more strands of wini visible on arms legs mostly covered by skirts; where visible more strings of beads |
| | footwear | none |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by women only variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders visible border on some headscarves museum collection red and yellow headscarf 1941 |
| | mola blouse | young girls wearing smaller dress-like molas young girls same as women or smock-like mola women wearing large molas which flow over skirt; not as loose fitting as earlier molas; drawstring neckline panel designs frequently geometric, some overall labyrinth mola bands either dientes or appliqué – some wide appliqué bands % mola panel visible when worn = all when worn as a dress; 50% or less on girls; 50%-75% on women |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth many with horizontal patterns extends to ankles or a bit shorter museum collection navy skirt with reddish-brown pattern 1941 |

Sources: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – Stirling; NMAI – Edholm; Aked (1940) and Aked 1936 photographs from archive at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

Notes: 1931-1932 Stirling expedition photographs taken on El Tigre island. Museum collections show more figurative designs on panels than the photographs.

“Reference collection” molas: N18, N22, N28, N30.

Table D – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|--|------------------------|---|
| ≤1941 photographs black & white and first colour photographs found of molas | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose – some women |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | all – young girls wear small nose rings, young adults wear medium nose rings, women wearing large nose rings extending to lower lip |
| | necklaces | variety – including what appear to be seeds, bones & teeth and beads |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | large wini visible on arms & legs |
| | footwear | none |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | women wearing red & yellow headscarves with borders – same colours in museum collection 1941 wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders |
| | mola blouse | young girls wearing smaller dress-like molas young girls same as women women wearing molas which flow slightly over skirt; loose fitting; drawstring neckline variety of panel designs mola bands with simple dientes no sleeve trim or cuff % mola panel visible when worn = all if worn as dress; girls varies – some 50%; women varies 50% - 75% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth museum collection navy with reddish-brown lines 1941 photographs show skirts above ankles mostly navy |

Sources: Stout (1947); National Geographic magazine – two articles in 1941 with coloured photographs (Marden, 1941; Feeney, 1941).

Notes: National Geographic articles from 1941 (Feb. and Nov.) were the first to include coloured photographs which show the high impact of colours of dress ensemble; also show dress appears quite uniform from a distance – only in close up photographs is difference discernable. Stout’s black & white photographs, as well as molas, skirt and headscarf in the NMAI collection were obtained during his doctoral fieldwork Sept. 1940 - Jan. 1941.

“Reference collection” molas: A36, A37, A39, A40.

Table E – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|---|------------------------|---|
| 1950-1960 photographs black & white and colour | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose – visible on some women, girls, infants |
| | hair length | mostly short; some girls with long hair |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | all – young girls wear small nose rings, young adults wear medium nose rings, women wearing large nose rings extending above lip older woman wearing larger nose ring |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins, and what appear to be seeds, bones & teeth, metal keys |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | large wini visible on arms & legs |
| | footwear | none |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by women and some girls, mostly older girls wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders museum collection red and gold 1962 and 1960 photograph |
| | mola blouse | young girls sometimes in Western clothes, sometimes wearing smaller dress-like molas young girls same as women women wearing closer fitting molas but still loose; drawstring neckline older women wearing looser blouses panel designs geometric and figurative sleeves tighter around upper arms; sleeves in transition, some like 1940s, others more rounded. Elaborate sleeve trim. mola bands either dientes or appliqué – some wide appliqué bands % mola panel visible when worn = all if worn as dress; girls 50%; women 50% - 75%. By 1960 more panel visible due to reduction of panel size over this decade |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth; colours unknown worn above ankles or mid-calf length museum collection skirt navy and grey 1962 |

Sources & Notes: Carles (1960)– one coloured photograph; Keeler photographs taken 1950-1956 (1956); National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – Whitaker (1954); Torres de Ianello (1957).

“Reference collection” molas: F15, D08, D15, L02, L03

Table F – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|---|------------------------|---|
| 1963-1967 colour and black & white photographs | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose not visible one photograph with woman with reddened cheeks |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | young girls, young adults, women wear small nose rings |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins, and what appear to be seeds, beads. Beads have become very colourful – perhaps plastic rather than glass |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | extensive wini on arms & legs, intricate designs visible |
| | footwear | one photograph (1963) shows plastic flip flops (thongs) |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | women and some girls wear headscarves; wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders museum collections all red & gold – dating from 1962, 1966, 1966-1971, 1968, 1968-1974 |
| | mola blouse | young girl in mola dress; some girls same as women, some girls wearing Western clothes women wearing quite close fitting molas; drawstring neckline panel designs geometric & figurative sleeves puffed and spherical mola bands have dientes and frequently rick rack braid, which is also used as a sleeve trim % mola panel visible when worn = all when worn as dress; women and girls 75% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; many large scale prints; mid-calf length museum collections various blues, with gold or green or yellow or grey from 1966, 1966-1971, 1968-1974 |

Sources: Elisabeth Hans (personal collection); National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – Mrs Davis, Sam Hilu.

Notes: Photographs of “reference collection” mola blouses do not reveal how puffy the sleeves are when worn.

“Reference collection” molas: D19, D21, D23, D22.

Table G – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| 1970-1974 colour photographs | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose - some women reddened cheeks |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | some girls wear small nose rings, women wear small nose rings older women wear larger nose rings |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins, and what appear to be seeds, bones & teeth |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | extensive wini on arms and legs – variety of styles |
| | footwear | none visible |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by some girls, most women wide variety worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders, red and gold with border pattern museum collection 1966-1974 red and gold |
| | mola blouse | young girls same as women women wearing molas more close fitting to upper chest; older women looser fitting drawstring neckline panel designs include geometric, narrative, figurative, Christian, Western print based mola bands either dientes or appliqué – some wide appliqué bands sleeves large puffs; some have separate cuffs % mola panel visible when worn = 50% - 75% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth in bold patterns on navy base with one colour some girls have knee length skirts or a bit longer, women wear to mid-calf by end of 1970s sleeves were much larger, though still a puffed style |

Sources: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington – Hoover; Salvador (1997); Denison Museum archives – Webster.

“Reference collection” molas: N39, N43, V02, V10, V19.

Table H – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|--|------------------------|---|
| 1984 - 1986 photographs all black & white | body modification | |
| | skin painting | central line painted on nose – some women |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | some women wear very small nose rings |
| | necklaces | variety – including coins and beads |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | wini on arms and legs |
| | footwear | plastic flip flops – not thong style |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | worn by women and some girls worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders |
| | mola blouse | girls same as women molas close fitting except for older women; drawstring neckline many types of panel designs mola bands – some appliqué and extensive use of rick rack or other commercial braid – bands are elaborate above panel and on cuffs larger longer puffy sleeves extending to shoulders and wide cuffs yokes in fluoro colours; large floral; all with flowing synthetic fabric – appears to be opaque % mola panel visible when worn = 50% - 75% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth – some horizontal stripes re-appeared; younger women below knee length; older women mid-calf skirts navy with one colour – bold prints |

Sources: Salvador (1997); National Geographic magazine (Cobb, 1986).

“Reference collection” molas: V22, V38, V39, V40, V41.

Table I – Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|---|------------------------|--|
| 1991 - 1997 photographs all colour | body modification | |
| | skin painting | some women central line painted on nose reddened cheeks |
| | hair length | mostly short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | some women wear nose rings, very small, can be difficult to see |
| | necklaces | variety – including gold shapes and round beads |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | wini even larger, more strands wound around arms and legs |
| | footwear | none visible |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | red and yellow, worn flowing over head, in front & behind shoulders; also tied and knotted at back |
| | mola blouse | some girls in Western clothing; some girls same as women very close fitting molas; “reference collection” blouse has zipper on one side from armhole down side of blouse indicating tight fit drawstring neckline yokes appear to be longer; made of shiny synthetic flowing fabric little handwork on bands – mainly braid and rick rack; frequent use of elaborate braid including on neckline, sometimes two braids used together large sleeves increased in size again – flowing at least to elbows; separate cuffs % mola panel visible when worn = 50% - 70% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth with medium and small patterns, navy with one colour length below knees |

Sources: Salvador (1997); Howe in Salvador (1997).

Notes: Only one blouse in “reference collection” from 1990s; 19 panels in “reference collection”. Yoke fabric also used for frill at bottom of mola panel; indicating sufficient excess fabric and indicating perhaps also wide loom width. Long frill would be useful to keep blouse tucked into skirt and would be gathered to accommodate hips. Close fitting panels of blouse would end at waist or require splits at side to fit over hips.

“Reference collection” molas: F22, F26.

Table J– Summary of visual analysis of photographs.

| period of photographic record | | comments |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| 2003-2010 colour photographs | body modification | |
| | skin painting | not visible |
| | hair length | short |
| | body supplements | |
| | nose rings | some women wearing tiny nose rings, difficult to see unless close |
| | necklaces | variety – small gold pendants, beads |
| | arm & leg wini [beads] | larger wini – some from knee to ankle and from wrist to elbow |
| | footwear | variety of plastic slip on flip flops |
| | cloth components | |
| | headscarf | women wear in a variety of ways, wrapped, folded, tied red and yellow in photographs; also museum collection 2003 & 2010 fieldtrip |
| | mola blouse | young girls same as women very close fitting molas; evidence of foundation garments [bras] effort made for commercial trim to reflect colours in mola panels effort made for yoke fabric to reflect colours in mola panels variety of necklines – differentiating front of blouse for first time translucent fabric popular for yokes and sleeves which are becoming bigger - sleeves fall below elbows, frequently with frill below cuff older woman wearing drawstring neckline with opaque yoke similar to 1990s style panel designs - variety of motifs commercial braid on neckline, sleeves, band; often more than one type braid used yoke fabric very bright large florals % mola panel visible when worn = 50% - 85% |
| | wrap skirt | skirt wound around blouse, sufficient to hold in place, not noticeably tight; wide variety of printed cloth; other colours as base colour including yellow, black, white knee length or slightly below for older women |

Sources: Fieldwork 2010 – photographs on Mamitupu island, Wichubuala island, Ustupu island, Panama City; also see photographs in Chapter 7 of documentary screen shots from Perrin (2003) and Vigessaa (2009).

Notes: Frill beneath panel frequently in same fabric as yoke; as for 1990s indicates wide loom width and need to create additional length to tuck in blouse around hips. “Reference collection” molas show often splits in side of blouse to fit hips when tucked in.

“Reference collection” molas: F62, F64, F74; also mola blouses collected in 2010 in Chapter 1.

APPENDIX J

Examples of details in mola panels

This Appendix provides examples of mola panel workmanship chronologically, from 1906 – 2006. The Glossary in Appendix B contains an explanation of the sewing terms and the mola sewing techniques referred to in this Appendix.

Detailed sections, photographed using a 2 inch by 2 inch template, are contained in this Appendix. When printed at this size the detailed sections will be reproduced at actual size. These details were drawn from 41 mola panels.

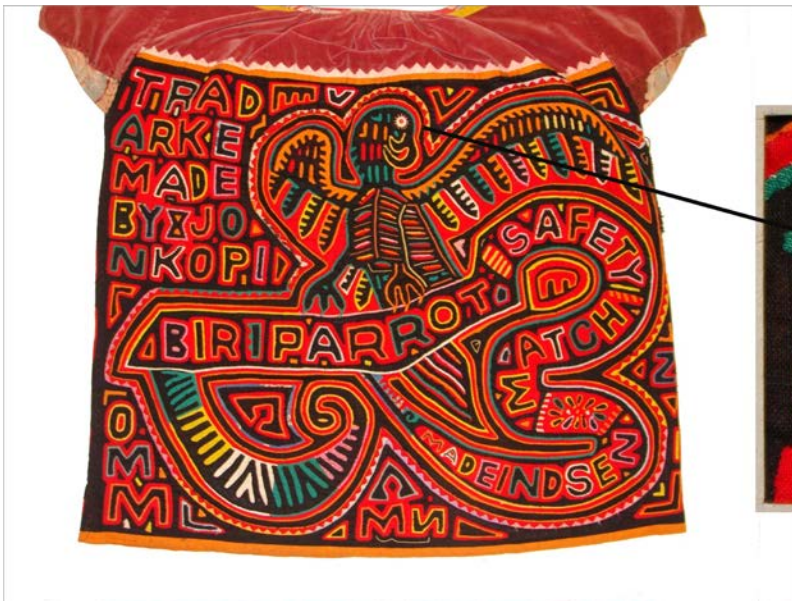
The relationship between the detailed sections discussed in this Appendix and the mola panels is illustrated with five examples below. As discussed in Chapter 8, the amount of work in a mola panel, typified by these “detail” photographs, has increased significantly over the last century. A typical panel in a mola blouse in the 1920s measured over 24 inches wide and over 16 inches deep. A pair of mola panels from this era would require the sewing of over 200 squares the size of the template, 2 inches by 2 inches. A typical panel in a mola blouse in 2006 measures at least 17 inches wide and 14 inches deep. A pair of mola panels from this era would require the sewing of over 120 squares the size of the template, 2 inches by 2 inches.

The photographs below show the whole mola panel and an example of a 2 inch by 2 inch detail taken from the panel, to highlight the scale of the detailed sewing work. The detailed work in these examples is discussed later in this Appendix.





N22 1932



A36 1941





F15 1955



V36 1984



In addition to the photographs of mola panels, together with examples of details for N05, N22, A36, F15 and V36 above, other photographs showing the complete mola panels for which details are illustrated in this Appendix, are indicated in the table below.

Location of photographs of mola panels with indicative 2" x 2" details in this Appendix

| Year and detail ID | Location of photograph of full panel |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1906 N01 | Chapter 6 |
| 1917 F06 | Appendix I Table A |
| 1917 F08 | Appendix I Table A |
| 1921 N05 | Appendix I Table B |
| 1922 A15 | Appendix I Table B and Chapter 8 |
| 1932 N22 | Appendix I Table C |
| 1932 N28 | Appendix I Table C |
| 1941 A36 | Appendix I Table D |
| 1941 A40 | Appendix I Table D |
| 1955 F15 | Appendix I Table E |
| 1965 D19 | Appendix I Table F |
| 1968 N35 | Chapter 1 |
| 1971 N37 | Appendix G |
| 1971 N39 | Appendix I Table G |
| 1978 V02 | Appendix I Table G |
| 1978 V10 | Appendix I Table G |
| 1984 V22 | Appendix I Table H |
| 1984 V38 | Appendix I Table H |
| 1995 F26 | Appendix I Table I |
| 1998 F22 | Appendix I Table I |
| 2006 F62 | Appendix I Table J |
| 2006 F74 | Appendix I Table J |

The first two examples are details from the earliest mola in the “reference collection”.¹ The dientes are large, with only two complete dientes sewn in a 2” length. The stitches are visible. The mola panel is sewn solely using the reverse appliqué technique. There are four layers, each layer being a one piece labyrinth. There is no surface appliqué, no fabric is inserted between layers and there is no embroidery.



1906 N01 detail 1



1906 N01 detail 2

Below are details from three mola blouses collected in 1917. In the first example below [F06] there are three complete dientes in a 2” length in one detail and four complete dientes in a 2” length in another detail from the same blouse². The dientes are carefully executed in parallel rows. All are extensively faded possibly due to museum display conditions, since the fading is uneven. The details immediately below are from 4 layer panels – two layers are patterned, and there are also two false layers on top of black and yellow. There is no surface appliqué and no inserts.



1917 F06 detail 1



1917 F06 detail 2

¹ The mola sewing terms and techniques used in this Appendix, such as dientes, tas-tas and reverse appliqué are described in Appendix B.

² Frequently one mola panel in a pair exhibits finer workmanship than the other. Perhaps there is more work in the front panel in some blouses, though generally more of the back panel is seen when the blouse is worn so it is difficult to determine. Early mola blouses are reversible, it being possible to wear either panel at the front. Sometimes there is an indication that the cord in the drawstring neck has been worn at the front, where it is easier for the woman to adjust after she has put it on. Some blouses were observed with the drawstring cord in the centre of the neckline and a few with the cord at one side of the neckline. Where a button is used as a neckline closure it is assumed that this was worn at the back of the blouse. Many blouses with this closure were smaller in size and evidently sewn for children.

In the mola panels below [F07] reverse appliqué has been carefully sewn, showing sharp angles at the corners which are difficult to sew. There are 3 layers; no surface appliqué and no inserts.



1917 F07 detail 1

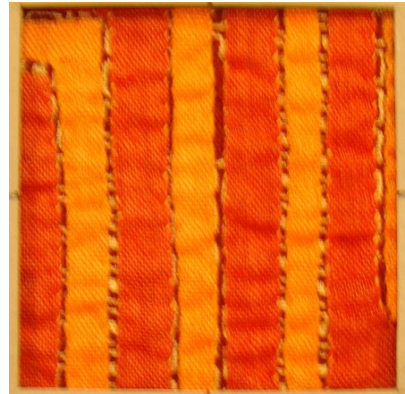


1917 F07 detail 2

In the details below [F08] reverse appliqué is used to sew many careful parallel large and small chevrons. There are 3 layers, with the base layer of patterned fabric. There is no surface appliqué and no inserts.



1917 F08 detail 1



1917 F08 detail 2

In the details below [N03] the panels have many small pieces of fabric appliquéd onto the top of different layers of the panel, which have been exposed by reverse appliqué. It is difficult to create such small appliquéd pieces. There are 3 layers, no inserts or embroidery.



1921 N03 detail 1



1921 N03 detail 2

In the details below, [N05] both reverse appliqué and surface appliqué are sewn on the counterchange panels. There are 3 layers, some inserts and no embroidery. There are many zigzag appliqué pieces applied.



1921 N05 detail 1



1921 N05 detail 2

In the details below [A06] a great effect is created from rough work. The thin lines are not parallel however the overall impact of the design is interesting due to the fabric colour and pattern arrangement. The patterned base shows through. There are 5 layers, including 2 red layers and patterned inserts. There is no surface appliqué.



1922 A06 detail 1



1922 A06 detail 2

In the details below [A15] the red, blue and white panels have high impact. The shapes are very intricate, though the lines are not parallel. One panel of the blouse has much wider channels than the other. There is no surface appliqué and no inserts.



1922 A15 detail 1



1922 A15 detail 2

In the details below, careful work has resulted in sharp points to the dientes and sharp corners. Dientes with sharp triangular shapes take time to execute well. Alternate layers of patterned fabric are used to good effect. There are 5 layers, two of which are patterned. Not all the work on this panel is good. There is no embroidery and no inserts.



1923 N08 detail 1



1923 N08 detail 2

In the details below [A28] the design is framed through lines which are not parallel. Whilst the sewing is quite rough the impact of the design is high due to the fabric colours and the pattern fabric arrangement, with black a dominant colour. There are many small patterned and plain pieces appliquéd on top. There are no inserts.



1925 A28 detail 1



1925 A28 detail 2

In the details below [A29] some stitches are coming apart and fabric is fraying. This is a well executed panel with detailed work. Not all the lines are parallel but the impact of colour definition obscures this. There are 4 layers. The work involves only reverse appliqué.



1925 A29 detail 1



1925 A29 detail 2

In the details below [A33] careful colour juxtapositioning has created good panels with rough workmanship. A high level of skill was needed to sew these counterchange panels of reverse appliqué and surface appliqué. There are no inserts. The panels are 4 layers. The design is intricate with a complicated swapping of fabric layers between panels. Detail 1 has 7 layers of appliqué.



1925 A33 detail 1



1925 A33 detail 2

In the details below [N14] the work is both rough and detailed and the resultant panels are beautiful. A patterned base layer providing strong contrast, has navy dientes on top, with a red layer on top of it, which has some very thin lines in parts to expose the dientes. The panels have 4 layers, with the patterned base on one side only. There is no surface appliqué, no inserts and no embroidery.



1932 N14 detail 1



1932 N14 detail 2

In the details below [N20] the panels are filled with many different tiny shapes appliquéd onto a layer which has been cut into the layer below; some single and some two layers. Many different patterned fabrics are used. Around 6 dientes are in a 2" length. The panels are 4 layers, with some inserts and extensive surface appliqué. The work is detailed and carefully sewn.



1932 N20 detail 1



1932 N20 detail 2

In the details below [N22] the result of the detailed work is optical movement. Many patterned pieces are used as appliqué alone or under the top red layer. There is extensive use of stylised Kuna symbols [swastikas] on these panels, which have 3 layers.



1932 N22 detail 1



1932 N22 detail 2

In the details below [N27] the lines are uneven and not parallel. The dientes are carefully executed. There are four layers on a patterned base. There is some surface appliqué but no embroidery or inserts.



1932 N27 detail 1



1932 N27 detail 2

In the details below [N28] the very wide channels reveal the patterned base layer. Four rows of parallel dientes are seen, which are difficult to sew well, so there are some flaws though the effect is good. This is used to delineate the tail of an animal (possibly a monkey). The thin lines are not parallel. These panels have good colour placement. Possibly it was made by a child, which would account for the average quality workmanship. There are no inserts and some tiny pieces of surface appliqué in the 4 layer panels.



1932 N28 detail 1



1932 N28 detail 2

In the details below [A36] very fine work is shown and this blouse is stunning. Tiny embroidery stitches are seen for the eye of the bird. There are thin parallel lines and tiny tas-tas in these panels. Careful 2 layer appliqué is seen in Detail 2, where some stitches are unravelling perhaps because the stitches were not close enough together to hold under the tiny fabric hems. These panels consist of 3 layers of fabric.



1941 A36 detail 1



1941 A36 detail 2

In the details below [A40] very thin tas-tas and chevrons are finely sewn. The chevrons are along a curve, explaining the reason they are not precisely parallel. These panels are 4 layers.



1941 A40 detail 1



1941 A40 detail 2

In the details below [D02] wide cross-hatching and large gwini are seen. This panel has 3 layers, many inserts and no surface appliqué except for the cross-hatching. The cross-hatching is created by appliquéing quite wide strips between the layers, then cutting tas-tas at 90 degrees in the top layer to expose them. On this panel there is extensive cross-hatching as the background filler. Compare this cross-hatching to 2006 example [F62].



1945 D02 detail 1



1945 D02 detail 2

In the details below [D11] the panels are fabulous optically due to the vibrant vivid colour choices. The panel is very well executed, with sharp angles, parallel lines and many tiny crosses appliquéd on top. The panel has 3 layers.



1953 D11 detail 1



1953 D11 detail 2

In the details below [D12] there are extensive inserts and surface appliqué in the three layer panels (plus a false layer). The two coloured tas-tas in Detail 1 are difficult to sew – requiring careful placement of fabric and careful cutting and sewing to achieve this result. The fabric beneath has been placed so that the selvages of the fabric are at the centre of the tas-tas. The slit for the tas-tas would be cut by feeling the pieces through the top red layer. There are 6 dientes in a 2" length. The pips in Detail 2 are well spaced, leaving much background unfilled. These panels are 4 layers with extensive inserts and surface appliqué.



1954 D12 detail 1



1954 D12 detail 2

The four details below [F15] are from an extraordinary detailed mola blouse. It may be considered a masterpiece³. There is very detailed work on both panels of the blouses, one side slightly better than the other (perhaps the front is better). Tiny appliquéd pieces and tiny square gwini are seen. There are many small well executed double spirals. The embroidery stitches are tiny. The photos show the tiny stitches used. Note that originally the thread may have matched the fabric but that the colour has leached due to washing conditions. The panels are 3 layers.



1955 F15 detail 1



1955 F15 detail 2



1955 F15 detail 3



1955 F15 detail 4

³ Not shown – on the back panel there are 7 birds which have tiny white painted eyes. Not seen on any other mola in the museum research for this dissertation. It is possible that the floral design incorporated into this blouse could be based on the print design of a Kuna wrap skirt. Similar designs have been found on archival photographs prior to 1955. There is evidence that this blouse was worn – including damage to yoke and side seams.

In the details below [D19] the panel background is filled with well executed appliqué shapes with small appliqué pieces on top. A number of very small Kuna symbols (swastikas) are appliquéed on both panels of this blouse. There are 4 layers, reverse appliqué, extensive surface appliqué and no inserts.



1965 D19 detail 1



1965 D19 detail 2

In the details below [F19] fine work is shown. On this panel two realistic appliquéed Panamanian flags are shown on flagpoles; other political flags are also shown on flagpoles. It is apparent that the Kuna people are supporting the political candidate portrayed on the panel. The tas-tas are very narrow and form extensive background filler. There are 7 tas-tas in a 2" length. This panel has 4 layers. Compare the size of this Panamanian flag to the US flag in a 1971 blouse [N37], later in this Appendix.



1968 F19 detail 1



1968 F19 detail 2

In the details below [N35] parts of a Kuna gold necklace are shown. Both panels of this blouse are covered in tiny appliqué and reverse appliqué sections, with outstanding detailed embroidery. This blouse is a masterpiece. The complete band and yoke and sleeves are also heavily decorated with surface appliqué. Detail 2 is the appliqué piece at the centre of the mola which depicts a Kuna gold necklace in considerable detail. It possibly shows an eagle. The panels are 3 layers with extensive surface appliqué, embroidery and some inserts.



1968 N35 detail 1



1968 N35 detail 2

The four details following [N39] are from mola panels based on a poster from the 1950 Panama census⁴. This is an exceptional blouse, with band, yoke and sleeves also heavily decorated with surface appliqué. Detail 1 shows tiny circular pieces of fabric appliquéd to represent pieces of grain. It is extremely difficult to appliqué tiny circular pieces and there are over 60 on this panel.

Detail 2 shows very fine dientes, 6 in a 2" length, used on this panel to represent spikes on an armadillo. In Detail 3 two circular layers are appliquéd onto the top layer. Red and black top layers of these circular pips reflect the 2 layers of the panels. Detail 4 shows small pips which fill the background. Both plain and patterned fabric is used, appliquéd onto the base black layer, exposed by reverse appliqué from the top red layer. There is a small amount of embroidery on one panel only on the face of the man.



1971 N39 detail 1



1971 N39 detail 2



1971 N39 detail 3



1971 N39 detail 4

⁴ I found a copy of this in newspaper archives in Panama. Whilst some molas with the armadillo have lettering relating it to the census, the other side with the agricultural worker appears unrelated until the original poster which shows this is viewed. The pair of panels on most mola blouses is related in some way, though it can be difficult to decipher and interpret, especially for very old molas when the design may relate to a contemporary event. Another example is a mola blouse which relates to a 1951 earthquake in Kuna Yala, sewn or copied many years later (Salvador, 1997: 102-103).

In the details below [N37] the thin tas-tas used as background filler are uneven and not well sewn. Detail 2 shows a good representation of a US flag, with the red stars embroidered in chain stitch. The flag is all surface appliqué, with the red stripes appliquéd on top. There is an excellent line of white embroidery used to designate the rope attaching the flag to the blue flagpole. On the other panel of this blouse there is a Panamanian flag. These panels are 4 layers, with reverse appliqué, surface appliqué, inserts and embroidery. The band attaching these panels to the yoke had tiny Kuna symbols (swastikas) in surface appliqué across the full length, completing a very patriotic / nationalistic blouse.



1971 N37 detail 1



1971 N37 detail 2

In the details below [V02] different fillers are used for the body of the fish on each panel of the blouse. On one side the fish is filled with rectangular appliqué pieces with small rectangular gwini cut into the top layer. On the other panel the fish is filled with rounded appliqué pieces with circular embroidery at the centre. The panels are 2 layers.



1978 V02 detail 1



1978 V02 detail 2

In the details below fine work is shown. The eye of the bird is depicted with fine embroidery around a 2 layer appliqué of red and white. Well executed dientes are shown in Detail 2 though not all lines on this mola blouse are fine or parallel. The panels are 4 layers with two false layers of green and pink.



1978 V10 detail 1



1978 V10 detail 2

In the details below [V22] a simple 2 layer mola panel is shown. The panels have been well sewn, with nearly equal widths of the green base layer and red reverse appliqué maintained for most of the panel. The spiral pattern, with even well spaced stitches, has many sharp corners and has strong optical movement.



1984 V22 detail 1



1984 V22 detail 2

The details below [V30] indicate that this panel was most likely sewn for trade, frequently referred to as a “tourist mola” though I prefer to use the term “made for trade”⁵. There is no evidence that this panel has been part of a mola blouse. There is sparse embroidery; mostly surface appliqué is used; the only reverse appliqué is the widely spaced tas-tas which are not well sewn. The design also indicates that this is a representation of Kuna village life, which appeals to outsiders.



1984 V30 detail 1



1984 V30 detail 2

In the details below [V31] there is extensive embroidery. On the arms and face of the Kuna woman depicted in this mola panel there are rows of stitching as shown in Detail 1. Detail 2 depicts the beads [wini] wrapped around the arms of a Kuna woman. The embroidery is detailed, with many rows of chain stitch adjoining, and a white row of chain stitch showing the way the beading is wrapped between sections of the beading. This mola does not appear to have been part of a blouse and was most likely “made for trade”.



1984 V31 detail 1



1984 V31 detail 2

⁵ The term “made for trade” is preferred because it is less emotionally laden and because the Kuna makers may not be selling directly to the tourist market. There may be intermediaries, including Kuna operated mola cooperatives, where work is commissioned and is based on marketing knowledge of what the consumers will find appealing. Using the term “tourist mola” implies that the Kuna women sewing these molas are specifically producing lower quality molas to a market not aware of the quality of molas worn by Kuna women.

The two examples below appear to have been “made for trade” [V35 and V36]. The details [V35] show the sparse placement of roughly sewn surface appliqué and sparse embroidery. Reverse appliqué only outlines the design.



1984 V35 detail 1



1984 V35 detail 2

In the details below [V36] only simple work is found. The panel only has surface appliqué and sparse embroidery. It is not a true mola; there is no reverse appliqué and the background is unfilled. This technique is not usually found on mola blouses. It is apparently “made for trade”.



1984 V36 detail 1



1984 V36 detail 2

In the details below [V38] the embroidery depicts feathers on a bird and is carefully and extensively found on this panel. Small coloured pips fill the background. Some colours appear fluorescent.



1984 V38 detail 1



1984 V38 detail 2

In the detail below [F26] the eye and mouth of the fish is carefully appliquéed and then embroidered with tiny stitches and thin thread. Detail 2 shows part of the detailed filler which includes surface appliqué and reverse appliqué. The tail of the fish is embroidered with tiny yellow, blue and green stitches. The panel has 3 layers and a false layer of maroon and no inserts. There is a small known market of foreign tourists willing to pay high prices for very good molas.



1995 F26 detail 1



1995 F26 detail 2

The three details below [F22] show excellent work in surface appliqué and embroidery. The tiny triangular pips shown in Detail 1 are very carefully sewn. The rounded pips in Detail 2 all have black top layers, sewn with small stitches. The embroidery in Detail 3 is sewn in small intricate shapes created by chain stitch. It appears that thicker than usual thread, perhaps embroidery thread, has been used in this detail; in other sections of the panel thin thread is used for embroidery. The panels in this blouse have 3 layers and no inserts.



1998 F22 detail 1



1998 F22 detail 2



1998 F22 detail 3

In the details below [F51] there is outstanding surface appliqué and outstanding embroidery depicting a traditional Kuna feathered hat. This is sewn on both panels of this pair. The appliqué stitches are very close together. In Detail 2 the yellow embroidery, using feather stitch, appears to depict a plant. These panels have 3 layers and do not appear to have been in a blouse, and perhaps were “made for trade”.



2004 F51 detail 1



2004 F51 detail 2

In the details below [F62] fine dientes have been used to outline shapes, which have repeated fine lines around their inside edges of reverse appliqué and surface appliqué. An extensive area of the background filler on both panels uses a fine cross-hatching technique. Compare this Detail 2 to the much wider cross-hatching in the 1945 example [D02]. These panels have 3 layers.



2006 F62 detail 1



2006 F62 detail 2

In the details below [F74] there is superb workmanship exhibited. This is consistent in both panels in this blouse. The colour choices create an optical illusion with strong movement. There is very fine cutting and the stitches are extremely small. A type of “square dientes” is used extensively on these panels. The panels are sewn solely with reverse appliqué. There are 2 layers – maroon and orange and three false layers – yellow, light orange and black. One side (possibly the front) has much better work. The curves are smooth and the thin lines parallel.



2006 F74 detail 1



2006 F74 detail 2

APPENDIX K

Summary of Panamanian Laws related to Kuna Indians from 1972

| Law | Content |
|--|---|
| <p>Indigenous Rights Panamanian Constitution of 1972, as amended. Articles 1, 5, 84, 86, 104, 120, 122, 123, 141, 287</p> | <p>Recognizes the rights of indigenous groups to their own territories; to their own language; to bicultural and bilingual education; to their collective rights; to political representation in the Legislative Assembly; to their culture and to their self determination. Establishes the duty of the Panamanian state to protect the indigenous groups; to promote their well being and their cultural identity and to compensate them if dispossessed of their lands.</p> |
| <p>Autonomous Territories Law No. 16 of 1953; Law No. 22 of 1983; Law No. 24 of 1996; Law No. 10 of 1997; Law No. 34 of 2000</p> | <p>Creates the Comarcas of San Blas (eventually re-named Kuna Yala); Emberá -Wounaán; Kuna-Madungandi; Ngöbe -Buglé; and Kuna-Wargandi.</p> |
| <p>Family Law Law No. 25 of 1984 and Law No. 3 of 1994</p> | <p>Gives ritual marriages same legal status as civil marriages and allows <i>sahilas</i> to grant divorces in the indigenous territories.</p> |
| <p>Environment and Indigenous Rights Law No. 41 of 1998</p> | <p>General law regarding the Environment. Recognizes traditional indigenous rights to their lands, their traditional knowledge, their sustainable environmental practices, their spiritual relationship with the environment; and grants them the right not to be relocated or moved from their lands without their previous consent. These rights apply regardless of the indigenous groups being in protected comarcas or not. Includes 'environmental crimes' and their punishments.</p> |
| <p>Education Law No. 34 of 1995</p> | <p>Creates bilingual and bicultural education in all the indigenous territories to protect their culture and languages.</p> |
| <p>Traditional Medicine Resolution No. 4376 of 1999 of the Ministry of Health</p> | <p>Recognizes traditional medicine and establishes a joint effort between the Health Ministry and the indigenous groups for the promotion, development, and usage of traditional medicine</p> |
| <p>Protection of Indigenous Women Law No. 4 of 1999, art 25.</p> | <p>Establishes equal opportunities for men and women; prohibits gender discrimination. Establishes incentives for authors and writers to record the traditions, stories, cultural patterns of the indigenous groups, expressed by their women, for posterity.</p> |

Table continues on next page

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Intellectual Property and craft development Law No. 26 of 1984 (prohibiting importation of molas); Law No. 15 of 1994 (copyright); Law No. 35 of 1996 (industrial property); Law No. 23 of 1997 (plant varieties); Law No. 27 of 1997 (protection of crafts); Law No. 20 of 2000 (indigenous IP law); Law 35 of 2000 (indigenous crafts fairs)</p> | <p>Prohibits the importation of counterfeit <i>molas</i> into the country. Establishes a copyright and industrial property framework. Establishes the protection of New Plant Varieties. Promotes and protects the development of crafts. Establishes indigenous intellectual property rights that are collective and perpetual. Creates the Foundation for the Indigenous Crafts and Art Fairs aimed at promoting indigenous folklore, art, crafts, and traditional knowledge domestically and internationally.</p> |
| <p>Legislative Assembly Internal Regulations – 1995</p> | <p>Creates the Commission for Indigenous Affairs as a permanent working group of the Legislative Assembly for the promotion of Indigenous laws</p> |
| <p>Ministry of the Presidency Executive Decree No. 1 of 2000</p> | <p>Creates the National Council for Indigenous Development as part of the Ministry of the Presidency. The Council does not seek assimilation of the indigenous groups but the understanding and protection of the interests of the indigenous people as part of the multi-ethnic profile of Panama</p> |

Source: De Obaldia, I. (2005). Western Intellectual Property and Indigenous Cultures: The Case of the Panamanian Indigenous Intellectual Property Law. *Boston University International Law Journal*, 23(2), pages 360-361.