



The birth of design: a Kuna theory of body and personhood

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This article explores the concept of 'design' (*narmakkalet*) held by the Kuna people of Panamá. It demonstrates that the native concept of design and its relation to the human body is central to Kuna ideas concerning personhood. The main argument is that design is an attribute of the body which enables the creation of persons through the transformation of their relationship with animal entities. Through analysing the particular case of 'amniotic designs' (*kurkin narmakkalet*), which are sometimes visible on the heads of neonates, the article shows that designs provide a visual representation of the relationship between human beings and animals, and as such are integral in the formation of persons among the Kuna. To comprehend Kuna aesthetics, it is suggested, we need to look at the way Amerindians conceive the person, at how bodies are created, and at the relationships that human beings and animals entertain.

In native thought, as we saw, the design *is* the face, or rather it creates it.

Lévi-Strauss 1972: 259

My concern in this article is to explore ethnographically the relationship between self, design, and body appearance among the Kuna of Panamá. Recently, the relation between designs, personhood, and the body has been considered in anthropology (Gow 1999a; Lagrou 2007; Taylor 2003). In his observations of the Caduveo of Mato Grosso (Brazil), Lévi-Strauss noted the creative tension between face paintings and the body upon which geometric designs are drawn among the Caduveo (1955; 1972). By studying the elaborate body painting of Caduveo women, in comparison with the 'split representations' in the art of the Indians of the Northwest coast of America (Boas 1927), Lévi-Strauss suggested that Caduveo face painting hints at the creative opposition between social person and 'dumb biological individual' (1972: 259). In brief, designs give social visibility to the individual and make her a person in the eyes of other people.

Much literature on body art among Amerindians (Seeger 1975; Turner 1980) tends to focus on body paintings, tattoos, feather decorations, and other ornamentations as societal inscriptions upon essentially natural bodies (Ewart 2007: 37), pursuing the transformation of bodies from natural substrata into fully socialized human beings. In this article, I suggest the value of looking at 'the intrinsically social character of the

human body' (Turner 1995: 145), but not as the opposition between a common physical substratum and local ways of creating persons. Rather, in line with recent ethnographic theories on corporeality in Lowland South America, I propose to understand the 'dumb biological individual' as a being who has not yet acquired a human body (Vilaça 2002). Thus, Amerindian aesthetics deals with a particular way of conceiving the body and its implications in social life. My concern here, through an ethnographic exploration of the relationship between body and design, is to focus on how Kuna people from the San Blas Archipelago of Panamá understand personhood. I suggest that the conceptual relationship between body, person, and designs that emerges from Kuna ethnography could also be extended to explore Amerindian aesthetics further. By discussing the Kuna category of 'amniotic designs' (*kurkin narmakkalet*),¹ which refers to the link between newborns and animal entities, and by analysing the visibility and invisibility of amniotic designs at birth, my argument is that design is an attribute of the body that enables the creation of persons through the transformation of their relationship with animal entities.

Person and designs

Only recently has Lévi-Strauss's observation on the relationship between designs and indigenous conceptualizations of the person been taken into account and developed within the field of Amazonian studies. Gow (1989) demonstrates that designs are intrinsically related to the body and its social value, and that such ideas are widespread in South America. He suggests examining the relationship between the inside and the outside of the body in order to understand the emphasis on surface decorations and bodily appearance among indigenous Amazonian peoples. Given the centrality of kinship in the social life of indigenous people in the region, Gow (1999a) also suggests analysing the strong relationship between the creation of designs by Piro women of Peruvian Amazonia and the control over her bodily fluids and fertility that each woman acquires during the course of her life. Proposing that Piro women's action of painting with design is a 'meaningful social act', Gow shows how learning to paint goes hand in hand with the development of a woman's control, firstly, over her own procreative capacities, and, later on in her life, over younger women's fertility.

Both in Amazonia and Melanesia, ethnographers have explored the ways in which indigenous peoples conceive the intimate links between the outward appearance of the body and the personal qualities of the person. My aim here, however, is not to draw comparative examples between such different ethnographic regions. Rather, I will concentrate on how people give different meanings to the relation between selfhood and bodily appearance, which is for them central to the conceptualization of personhood. From a Melanesian perspective, Strathern (1979) noted the relationship between the self and self-decoration, calling attention to the indigenous preoccupations with 'turning outward' the inner qualities of the person. By analysing how, during rituals, Hageners show what is normally hidden – their inner self – Strathern suggests further that a Melanesian theory of the person should consider 'the relationship between physical appearance and internal qualities' (1979: 249). Gell (1998) takes this a step further in the direction proposed by Lévi-Strauss, suggesting that the two-dimensional character of graphic designs imposed on the skin and the three-dimensional plastic form of the body are indissolubly linked in societies where social persona and subjectivity unite, and this Gell argues is the case in much of Polynesia and South America;

thus skin decorations are an integral part of persons, indissolubly linked to their humanity, and therefore to their mortal condition (1998: 194-5).

The role of design in the everyday life of indigenous people in Lowland South American ethnographies focuses both on the perception of cosmic transformations during shamanic curing (Gebhart-Sayer 1986; Gow 1989; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978) and on bodily processes linked to fertility and procreation, showing the relevance of incorporating the concept of design into the indigenous notion of personhood (Gow 1999a; 1999b; 2001; Lagrou 2007; Overing 1989). Examining the relation between bodily designs and inner subjective experience, Taylor (1993; 2003) noted the importance of face designs for the Achuar of Ecuador in showing a person's association with an ancestral soul (*arutam*). Achuar people, who regard red face painting as a sign of prestige for men and women, keep the identity of their mystical companions secret; otherwise they lose the protection and the power given by such association. Meeting an ancestral soul grants a person power by enhancing a positive internal tension with an enemy/ally (an internal double) that reinforces the strength of the subject. It endows a person with an 'intensified subjectivity', which consists of enhanced health, fertility, and longevity (Taylor 2003: 238).

Drawing on the above-mentioned ethnographic studies, I suggest that by examining the ways body appearance is visually enhanced through designs and decorations, anthropologists should be able better to appreciate indigenous theories of the person and of the self. As I demonstrate below, the debate on Amerindian bodies and perspectivism is relevant to Kuna conceptualizations of body and personhood, and to their understanding of designs.

Body

The body has been the subject of many Lowland South American ethnographies in recent years, since it first received deserved analytical attention from Seeger, da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro (1979). Amazonian scholars have focused on its complex conceptualization and on the social practices surrounding its fabrication (Turner 1980; 1995; Vilaça 2002; 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1979), arguing that the body, for indigenous groups, is the essential medium for the reproduction of human sociality. Viveiros de Castro noted for the Yawalapíti of the Upper Xingu (Brazil) that, rather than the body being the base onto which sociality is inscribed, it is society that creates the body (1979: 40). Processes of creating persons thus require the creation of human bodies first. Moreover, social interventions on the external visual appearance of the body are to be understood as part of the creation of the body itself. Therefore, as it has been aptly put, the application of bodily decorations is a 'graphic and physical penetration of society in the body that creates the conditions to generate the space of corporeality, which is individual and collective, social and natural at the same time' (Seeger *et al.* 1979: 15, my translation).

For Kuna people, as well as for other Amerindian societies (cf. Gow 1991; Lagrou 2007; Vilaça 2002), when babies are born they are not yet considered fully human by their adult kinspeople.² They have animal features, which render them liminal beings that need to be formed into humans. The latter normally happens through the manipulation of the body of newborns during the early days of life and through the use of medicines, intended to neutralize the predatory action of animals and spirits towards the baby (Gow 1997: 48; Lagrou 2007: 303-9; Viveiros de Castro 1992: 181-3).

Recent studies present the importance of feeding, nurturing, giving advice, and of emotional states of fear and compassion, in the constitution of bodies and the achievement of sociality (Overing & Passes 2000). Further to such processes in the constitution of human bodies and selves there is the ever-present possibility that bodies might not be human, thus representing danger for kinspeople. Amerindians conceive human beings as constantly being at risk of transforming and losing their human point of view (Vilaça 2005) – that is, their moral gaze and capacity to recognize their kinspeople – thus becoming predators towards them (Belaunde 2000: 215; Fausto 2001: 316-17; Londoño Sulkin 2000: 175; 2005; Overing 1985: 265; Severi 1993). Human beings retain the potential of metamorphosing into animals; they have what Kuna people call an ‘animal side’ (*tarpa*). For Amerindians, what needs to be achieved is a proper human body that, as Vilaça points out, has to be extracted from a ‘substrate of universal subjectivities’ (2002: 350). With this, Vilaça refers to an Amerindian view of the world as a realm populated by different beings and life forces that share the same soul or spirit, or rather have a common ‘internal human form’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471).

On the one hand, there is therefore a continuum between humans, animals, plants, and other kinds of living beings, who share the same internal form. On the other hand, differences are predicated upon the external visual appearance of the bodies of each species. The body, as Viveiros de Castro argues, is ‘not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*’ (1998: 478). Each species is endowed with its own specific *habitus*, which enables members of the same species to see other members of their species as humans, while they see members of other species as animals.³ What distinguishes each species is, for example, that animals ‘see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks, etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments’ (1998: 470). This is what Viveiros de Castro calls ‘point of view’, the capacity to distinguish between similar and different beings in the world, which also implies the capacity to change perspective, adopting that of another species, as in the case of shamans.

This explains why Amerindians take the decoration of bodies, and generally their visual appearance, so seriously. If decoration is part of the creation of the human body (cf. Lagrou 2007), then visual appearance is pivotal to its socialization and individualization. In his study of the Yawalapíti, Viveiros de Castro argues for a dialectical opposition between fabrication and decoration of bodies, between internal processes and the exterior of the body. ‘This dialectic enlightens the ways in which individuality (in its wider sense) emerges in Xinguano society’ (1979: 47, my translation).

Building on the dialectical opposition between fabrication and decoration of bodies, and on the opposition between body and design noted by Lévi-Strauss, I show that design, for the Kuna, is part of the process of the fabrication of human bodies. I demonstrate how ‘amniotic designs’, as a particular attribute of the body, render the continuity between humans and animals visible, and describe how Kuna people act upon this continuity via designs to create persons. I explore further the way that Kuna people logically connect different forms of design, such as those appearing on the residues of the amniotic sac, those of clothing (*mola*), and other bodily and object decorations. All forms of design are intimately connected to personal identity, which is manifested through a person’s praxis and is predicated upon the relationship with non-human entities. These conclusions might, I hope, be applied to further our understanding of Amerindian conceptualizations of design and its strict relationship to the body.

Design and the Kuna body

The Kuna are an indigenous people living in the San Blas archipelago off the Atlantic coast of Panamá, in the Darién rainforest near the Bayano Lake, and close to the border with Colombia. Two Kuna villages are also situated in Colombian territory, on the Urabá gulf. The ethnography upon which the present article is based has been conducted in the island village of Okopsukkun, with a population of around 1,500 and situated in the middle-east part of the San Blas archipelago.

Living in matri-uxorilocal households, consisting of some five to fifteen individuals, 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*).⁴ Designs in the Kuna lived world are created using three different techniques: women's blouses (*molakana*, sing. *mola*), beadwork (*wini*), and baskets (*sile*). Kuna women sew their blouses, which they compose by cutting and sewing various layers of coloured fabrics, creating beautiful (*yer tayleke*) designs.⁵ *Mola* blouses are generally distinguished between old people's *molakana* (*serkan molakana*), which are composed of 'geometric' designs, and those with 'figurative' designs (*morko nikkat*, 'with lots of fabric'),⁶ often inspired by pictures from magazines or advertisements seen in Panama City. Women also spend time realizing the other designed component of their attire, in the form of beadwork (*wini*), for coiling around forearms and calves.⁷ Kuna men, when not engaged in subsistence productive activities (gardening, fishing, and hunting) and wage labour in urban areas, engage in basketry, creating geometric patterns by blackening the vegetal fibres with *saptur* (*Genipa americana*). Woodcarving is considered one of the prominent forms of Kuna men's artistry. They carve (*sopet*) dug-out canoes, essential for reaching the mainland gardens and fishing, as well as stools, kitchen utensils, and wooden figures (*nuchukana*), used in curing rituals.⁸ *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. As elder people often stress, if young women and men stopped learning and putting their knowledge into practice, they would soon turn into white people (*waymala*).

Here I will discuss two Kuna categories: that of 'design' (*narmakkalet*) and that of the 'amniotic sac' or amnion, 'caul', 'brain', 'hat' (*kurkin*, also translated as 'intelligence').⁹ I will focus on the specific relation between these two categories, which, as I show below, is vital in understanding how Kuna people develop their praxis: that is, making *mola*, beadwork, baskets, and so on. To introduce the category of amniotic design, data are presented on Kuna ideas of procreation and illness that are central to the following analysis.

Kuna people have specific ideas on how babies' bodies are formed during gestation. In response to Margherita Margiotti's question about how sexual substances transform into the body of a foetus, a Kuna ritual specialist drew a cross on the sandy ground of his house with a stick. Then he said, 'What happens if you pour an alloy here in the cross? It condenses and you have a cross. In such way we are made'. He explained that a woman's womb contains the shape of a baby, and that when sexual fluids condense they acquire that shape (Margiotti 2009). The mother's uterine fluids and the father's semen mix in the mother's womb and create the body of the foetus (cf. Chapin 1983: 394; Margiotti 2009). Kuna people use the term *purpa* to denote both soul and semen, thus signifying their metamorphosing character.¹⁰ Furthermore, Kuna people talk about the intervention of non-human entities in the formation of babies. They are called *muukana* ('grandmothers'),¹¹ and live in a separate domain of the cosmos. I was

told that ‘*muukana* draw designs on the *kurkin*’ of foetuses, ‘*muukana kurkin nar-makke*.¹² *Kurkin*, during foetal life, is the amniotic sac enveloping the foetus, and pregnant women are described as *kurkin nikka*, ‘having *kurkin*’. Designs on the *kurkin* link babies to specific animals and are explained as the future disposition of each person as well as the cause of illnesses.

It is striking how Kuna people are explicit in associating designs and the body in their discourses about procreation. The formation of the shape of the human body takes place within a designed envelope, *kurkin*, which is understood to be part of the foetus’s body.¹³ Therefore, for the Kuna, from before birth, there is a link between designs and the body, between graphic and plastic elements, as Lévi-Strauss (1972) suggests, and this link, I argue, is crucial to the development of Kuna persons.

Both parents are required to follow many restrictions during pregnancy in order to prevent consubstantial links between the baby and animal entities. The risk is that the baby will acquire the physical and/or behavioural characteristics of certain animals. Therefore, expectant mothers follow a host of dietary taboos concerning animals. For example, sharks are avoided as their aggressive behaviour is considered capable of damaging the baby’s affective disposition; and octopuses, for their physical characteristics, such as sticky tentacles would affect the child’s body, preventing the descent of the baby through the birth canal.¹⁴ Men strictly have to avoid hunting, or even looking at animals, such as snakes, sloths, and anteaters, during their wives’ pregnancy. The *purpakana* (souls) of these animals are able to become attached to the foetus and remain so, causing illnesses that could be passed on for generations.

After birth, consubstantialization with kinspeople is carried out initially through breast-feeding and then through eating ‘real food’ (*masi sunnati*). Thus through feeding (*okunne*), as well as through constant counsel and advice (*unaet*), Kuna children are made into ‘real people’, *tule sunnati*. On the other hand, consubstantial links with animals might be caused by the careless behaviour of parents breaking taboos during pregnancy, or by animal predation, especially during pre- and early post-natal life, when a baby is considered weak and open to cosmological alterity. In most instances, illnesses are not discovered until a child starts dreaming, or, in the case of a boy, when he is grown up enough to go to the mainland forest. Persistent dreaming and animal encounters in the forest are signs of illness, in which case a seer (*nele*) has to be summoned to look at the child’s *kurkin* (‘brain’), to see if the design of an animal is present (*kurkin-ki poni nai*).

Amniotic designs

As anticipated above, *kurkin* means ‘amniotic sac’, ‘hat’, ‘brain’, and ‘intelligence’. In everyday speech, *kurkin* indicates the ‘hat’ worn by men, which can be either woven from the fibres of *naiwar* (*Carludovica drudei*), a man’s black hat, or a baseball cap. Sometimes *kurkin* was described to me as the ‘hat’ worn by babies when they are born (cf. Nordenskiöld 1938: 367). Designs are an integral feature of *kurkin*, which is itself an integral component of the Kuna person. *Kurkin* is an invisible feature of adult persons, located in the head, and it is normally translated in Spanish as ‘*inteligencia*’ (‘intelligence’).

However, and this is important for the present discussion, some babies are born showing *kurkin*: that is, with the remains of the amniotic sac covering their head. In such cases *kurkin* either displays visible designs or is an immaculate white. Other babies do not show *kurkin* at birth. In the first case, babies are considered endowed with a

special capacity to learn or, as we will see below, when the *kurkin* is white, with shamanic skills. In the second case, when *kurkin* is not shown at birth, these babies are considered to be without any particular potentiality. This does not mean that they are considered incapable of learning skills during their life, but they will need plant medicines to increase their learning capacities. Regardless of its visibility at birth, *kurkin* remains an attribute of every Kuna person. The visibility of *kurkin* during childbirth allows for the development of particular praxis during the person's life, thus providing an excellent case for unfolding a Kuna understanding of design.

Designs visible on the remains of the amniotic sac adhering to the head of the newborn are called 'amniotic designs' (*kurkin narmakkalet*). They are visible only in the brief moment following the birth, and will soon fade. Midwives also check how many layers of amniotic membrane cover the head of the newborn. These were described to me as the layers of *mola* blouses. Accordingly, the *kurkin* of the newborn is described as their first clothing (*mola*).

Prisilla Diaz, a Kuna seer and a specialist in childbirth medicine (*muu ina*) told me that *kurkin* is the first thing that appears when a child is born and its scrutiny is a source of great interest for midwives. In some cases, when the amniotic sac does not break before the baby starts emerging from the birth canal, the head will come out completely covered in white layers, as if the baby is wearing a hat. Prisilla once described to me what happened when she was called to help in the birth of her son's child. The baby came out covered in four layers of amniotic sac, which she had to break:

They opened up like a flower. The layers came off like a dress, and underneath there were many designs. This is the *kurkin*! This means that when the baby grows up she will start sewing *molakana* or she will be someone special. Then I asked the mother whether she had understood what was shown. We, the Kuna, say that when one is born everything is shown.

Amniotic designs are classified depending on the animal pattern that forms on them.¹⁵ Each design corresponds to a particular predatory animal with which the baby is linked. During my fieldwork I heard of a few different types of design that might appear over a newborn's head, such as the 'jaguar design' (*achu narmakkalet*), 'snake design' (*naipe narmakkalet*), or 'crocodile design' (*tain narmakkalet*). When a baby is born, for example, with a jaguar design, s/he is said to be 'on the jaguar's side' (*achu sikkit*). When s/he is born showing the snake or the crocodile design, it will be said that s/he is either 'on the snake's side' (*naipe sikkit*) or 'on the crocodile side' (*tain sikkit*).¹⁶ Bearing the design of a particular animal, a baby is said to be seen by that animal as a similar being. For this reason a baby boy born 'on the jaguar's side', once grown up, will be likely to meet jaguars in the mainland forest, because, as a Kuna man told me, jaguars see him as one of them. Being born 'on the side' of a particular animal refers to a personal relationship between the baby and the animal species: they share a common nature and attract each other.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the relationships manifested through amniotic designs are with dangerous predators. Jaguars, snakes, and crocodiles are considered the most frequent cause of illness among the Kuna, owing to their greed for human souls. They particularly fancy small children and lonely adults, which would suggest a tendency to incorporate individuals from other species to increase the population of one's own species (Vilaça 2002: 351-5). Moreover, the capacity to distinguish between members of the same species from other species suggests the subjectivity and intentionality of these animals (Vilaça 2002: 351; Viveiros de Castro 1998). For the Kuna,

then, these predators are feared for their capacity to turn human beings into animals, or ghosts, who will prey on their former kinspeople (cf. Severi 1987; 1993).

Amniotic designs are the visible manifestation of the capacity to learn through the association with an animal predator. Babies who are born with amniotic designs will become good *mola*-makers, basket-weavers, woodcarvers, ritual chanters, or learners of foreign languages. In one case, geometric patterns similar to those of a *mola* were observed on the amniotic designs of a baby girl. The comment of the midwife was that the baby girl would become an excellent *mola*-maker when she grew up.

Animals such as jaguars, crocodiles, and snakes (but also anteaters, sloths, river otters, turtles, and sirens) are described as knowledgeable beings. They possessed many valuable skills in mythic times, but after the separation from humans these were lost. They are not able to perform such activities as making *mola*, basket-weaving or carving canoes, but they can teach these skills to human beings in dreams.¹⁸ Kuna people explain the mythic origin of designs through the personal journey of Nakekiryai, a woman who travelled to the underworld village of Kalu Tukpis, where she observed all types of designs covering tree trunks and leaves. When she returned to her village she taught other women how to make such designs (Méndez in Wakua, Green & Peláez 1996: 39–43).¹⁹ I wish to suggest that people who become particularly skilled in making designs, woodcarving, and learning ritual knowledge do so in virtue of their openness to alterity. Being born on the side of an animal means therefore to be intrinsically open to animal alterity.

When a seer (*nele*) is born, I was told, either his entire body or just his head are wrapped in the amniotic sac, but no designs are visible on this; the *kurkin* is immaculately white.²⁰ Young seers are said to be highly attractive to animals, and, different from babies born with amniotic designs, they appeal to various species, rather than being linked to only one.²¹

What is peculiar in the case of seers is that it is impossible to know which particular animal they associate with. Adult kinspeople are not able to see the design on the seer's *kurkin*, because the design is 'invisible' to them. Here I use the word 'invisible' as a translation of the Kuna expression *akku tayleke*, 'not to be seen', which is the opposite of *yer tayleke*, 'to be seen vividly' (it also means 'beautiful'). What is not visible is what does not show itself, what does not cause itself to be seen. Following this conceptual reasoning, we cannot infer that what is 'not to be seen', what is 'invisible', does not exist. On the contrary, there is a strong ontological statement underlying the Kuna concept of invisibility: namely what is not to be seen by human beings may be visible to other beings. In the case of seers, their amniotic designs are visible to their animal companions, but not to their human kinspeople. Designs therefore act as a boundary between human and animal perception.

Kuna people say that all babies are closely connected to the world of animal entities during their foetal and post-natal life. Each baby has to be treated with medicines and the afterbirth must be buried following a specific ritual in order to prevent the baby becoming ill.²² Being born with amniotic designs shows the intrinsic relationship between a baby and a specific animal and allows adult kinspeople to transform a dangerous relationship into the capacity to learn. Being born with invisible designs, with the amniotic residues present but not showing any designs visible to humans, keeps the relationship with animals secret, thus not allowing the seer's kinspeople to humanize him fully. In general, what distinguishes babies born with *kurkin* – either designed or not – from those without is the possibility to turn a potential threat into praxis. How does this transformation take place?

Becoming visible

The implication of the presence of animal designs on the *kurkin* is twofold. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it shows a baby's potential to excel at a specific activity, and its future as an endowed person. On the other hand, designs show the threat facing adults, who will attract dangerous animals trying to incorporate them as kin.

Normal babies born without *kurkin* are treated with plant medicines to increase their capacity to learn, and, unless any sign of illness shows, they are not the object of particular healing attention from their adult kinspeople. Nonetheless, illness caused by consubstantial links with animals may occur later on in life. Once I heard of a person suffering from a persistent headache. The healer, after he made his diagnosis, told me that the man had an 'animal companion attached to his brain' (*kurkin tarpa nasisa*). The implication of not showing *kurkin* at birth, and therefore not showing designs, is that personal links with animals are perceived only as illness and misfortune and cannot be transformed into social praxis, apart from few rare cases.²³ Each person being constantly open to attack from animal entities, it follows that personal identity is a constant and significant concern for the Kuna. As an old man in Okopsukun once told me, you never know the nature of the person whom you marry, you do not know what illness she has (*ipu poni nikka pe wichuli*).²⁴

The point here is that amniotic designs are thought of as a gift by Kuna people because they make the cause of illness and misfortune visible at birth, thus allowing adult kinspeople to heal the baby and to transform their relationship with dangerous alterity into socially productive praxis. These two aspects of design are not at all antithetical. On the contrary, they are the two sides of the same concept, which for Kuna people describes the human person as composed of an inherent duality in a constant process of transformation (cf. Vilaça 2005).

Although from birth onwards all children are rendered human through feeding and the use of plant medicines that protect them against animal predation, particular medicines are prepared for babies who are born with *kurkin*. In the case of amniotic designs being visible, medicines might be used to sever the dangerous link with the animal companion, through an operation defined as 'jumble up the path' (*ikar opuret*).²⁵ *Saptur* (*Genipa americana*) is generally used to paint the whole body black, thus rendering the child's soul/self invisible to the animal. In one case I observed a baby boy being bathed in water in which a coiled vine, called *naipe ina* (snake medicine), had been added. This, I was told, would prevent the child meeting snakes in the forest. However, Kuna people stress that personal relationships with animals inscribed on the *kurkin* never disappear completely. They can be temporarily severed, but they will eventually reappear during the person's life. I argue therefore that amniotic designs work as intensifiers of a human capacity to learn praxis by making visible the dangerous proximity with animal entities. It is by knowing which animal is associated with their children that Kuna specialists are able to tailor the best plant medicines to transform the dangerous relationship with an animal into a particular form of intelligence. Children whose *kurkin* has clearly visible designs (*yer tayleke narmakkalet nikka*) are more likely to develop specific forms of praxis and to become renowned within their community.

In the case of amniotic designs not being visible, young seers are not transformed into kinspersons as other children are, and their position in human social life remains problematic. Their excessive availability to cosmic transformations renders any act of humanization more difficult. Consequently, they do not come to see their parents as

kinspersons; on the contrary, they start seeing animal entities, whom they frequently meet in dreams, as their kin. Seers are often perceived as solitary beings, whose a-sociality is connected to their hyper-sociality within the world of animals and spirits. Although their status in Kuna social life is always a matter of debate and disagreement between Kuna people, seers become recognized specialists once they have undergone ritual initiation, which involves the presence of a master specialist and the help of several villagers. In this way, Kuna people say, one becomes a 'real seer' (*nele sunnati*). This, as I have argued elsewhere (Fortis 2008: 180-4), can be described as a process of becoming visible. In other words, the lack of visible designs on the seer's *kurkin* at birth is compensated by the public acknowledgement of his association with a specific animal or spirit.

Babies born with *kurkin*, with or without designs, require special treatments to manipulate their openness to alterity. Cacao seeds are burned in clay braziers to smoke the heads of these children. Cacao smoke (*sia ue*) strengthens their *kurkin* and improves the capacity to learn. I was told that young seers often dream of monsters, which scare them and prevent them from sleeping. When their *kurkin* is treated with cacao smoke, they see people instead of monsters, and are thus able to converse with them. This is in fact the first stage of shamanic learning. Once they become teenagers, seers are kept in seclusion for long periods, during which their heads are bathed with medicinal water to strengthen their *kurkin* further. During seclusion they only interact with their maternal grandmother (*muu*) and with the specialist (*api sua*) who prepares the medicinal baths. Dreams are an important means of checking the ongoing process of initiation, through which the seer becomes acquainted with his potential auxiliary spirits. At the end of seclusion the seer's capacity to interact with animal entities in dreams is improved. Seclusion works as a form of fabrication of a new body for the seer (Viveiros de Castro 1979), whose capacity to interact with powerful alterity becomes balanced by his new emerging role as a healer.

As suggested by Gow for the Piro, being born is losing one's 'first design', the placenta, thus acquiring a differentiation between the inside and outside of the body, which is the precondition for entering into social life (2001: 108). Becoming a human being for the Piro, he suggests further, is losing one's other half, the placenta. Taylor (2003) has argued that the acquisition of a mystic companion in the form of an ancestral soul (*arutam*) is, for the Achuar, an intensification of a person's subjectivity: in this specific case, the capacity to kill for a man and the skill of gardening for a woman. I suggest understanding the encounter with an ancestral soul (which at first shows itself to the seeker in the form of an animal) as the completion of a person, who has lost one form of completion at the moment of birth. This is the establishment of a relationship with the soul of a dead person, completely detached from humanity, de-personalized and undifferentiated from other non-human entities (Taylor 1993). It is interesting to note that the intensification of subjectivity is manifested through the painting of designs on the faces of Achuar men who have met an ancestral soul. I suggest that there is a common feature between 'face designs' for the Achuar, 'first design' for the Piro, and 'amniotic designs' for the Kuna. All are manifestations of intrinsic relations between the human and the non-human component of the person, be it an ancestral soul, the unborn twin, or an animal companion.

My point is that amniotic designs, for the Kuna, are the visible manifestation of the constitutive duality of human beings. Humanity is not a given state, but, as noted above in comparison with other Amerindians, is a condition that has to be achieved. What

amniotic designs provide is therefore a heightened possibility to shift the intrinsic duality towards the exterior of the person. Once the relationship with a specific animal becomes visible, the matter becomes how to make this productive for social life. In this way, Kuna people create persons who, through their praxis, are able to reproduce their lived world. The paradigmatic case is that of seers, who, through their skills, protect people from illness and death.

Kurkin

In light of the above, in this last section I wish to examine further the nature of *kurkin* and demonstrate how it provides a means for transforming relationships with animals into social praxis in the Kuna lived world. What do the apparently different meanings of ‘amniotic sac’, ‘brain’, ‘hat’, and ‘intelligence’ have in common?

As Lévi-Strauss suggests at the beginning of *The story of Lynx*: ‘[I]n American Indian thought and probably also elsewhere, the hat has the function of a mediator between up and down, sky and earth, the external world and the body. It plays the role of intermediary between these poles; it can either unite or separate in different instances’ (1995: 8). I argue that *kurkin* mediates between human beings and animals, and it allows for the development of communication between human beings.

Kurkin is like an external skin of the foetus that mediates between the foetus and cosmic entities. Foetuses do not yet have a separation between the internal and the external body (cf. Gow 1999a: 238). This separation begins to take place at birth, when *kurkin*, as a hat, becomes the first clothes (*mola*) of the newborn. After birth, the separation between internal and external body becomes coextensive with the separation between human and non-human. Nonetheless, *kurkin* retains its function of mediating between humans and animals, transforming a previous state of non-differentiation into a dangerous potential relation. Amniotic designs thereby become an invisible (internal) attribute of the person that can be rendered visible through transforming it into social praxis. *Kurkin* is internalized and a loss occurs: what before was accessible because of the undifferentiated state between foetus and animal entities becomes inaccessible because the baby is humanized, with the exemplary exception of seers. Animals become others, and human beings become potential kin for the new child. What is gained then is the possibility of interacting with other human beings, entering human social life, and developing social praxis. Praxis is thus a form of communication between human beings, which derives from a previous (transformed) state of mediation between humans and animals. *Kurkin* becomes intelligence, through which a person is able to learn, to see, to listen: in other words, to communicate with other persons.

However, by retaining the function of mediating between humans and animals, *kurkin* renders Kuna people’s bodies unstable (Vilaça 2005). Amniotic designs, by transforming relations with animals into human praxis, provide a means of stabilization. The invisibility of amniotic designs, although a highly dangerous state, provides the possibility eventually to transform excessive openness to alterity into a socially productive role. Thus the role of seers seems characterized by a controlled instability, whereas all other people, those born without showing *kurkin*, remain in a constant state of instability. They are subject to animal predation, and their *kurkin* can be ‘damaged’ by an animal design at any moment, needing the intervention of seers and other ritual specialists to be healed.

Therefore, people born with amniotic designs and those born without *kurkin* stand at two opposite poles of a trajectory that describes the human condition from a Kuna

perspective, and seers stand in the middle, being able to control their movements between humanity and animality. Shamanic and other social praxis – that is, *mola*-making, beadwork, basketry, and woodcarving – are the transformation of an internal/invisible relation with animals into an external/visible relation with both human and non-human beings.

Perhaps, then, it is not entirely precise to translate *kurkin* as ‘brain’. As noted above, *kurkin* is one’s intelligence. This suggests therefore a notion of the brain not as a given biological organ, which grows and develops during a person’s life, but as a relational feature, moulded through social action. The mediatory nature of *kurkin* is transformed, thanks to designs, into communication after birth. Amniotic designs are the visible manifestation of the relation with animals, which is then transformed into social praxis. We can thus say that if *kurkin* is design, then design is praxis for Kuna people.

Conclusions

My aim in this article has been to show the importance of the external visual appearance of the body of newborns in Kuna life. The category of ‘design’ (*narmakkalet*) is central to the definition of humanity among Kuna people. Design and bodies are born together and they are fundamentally inseparable. Design not only contributes to fabricating the body, it also enables the body to be made human.

On the one hand, amniotic designs enable communication with animals. On the other, they are the first form of communication between babies and adult people. As suggested by Taylor, we shall consider the intersubjective nature of the self for Amerindians as ‘primarily a matter of refraction: it takes its source in the sense one has of others’ perceptions of self’ (1996: 206). In line with this consideration, the importance of the visual appearance of newborns’ bodies, which conveys the first image of their selves to their adult kinspeople, is even more evident. This first image will then form the basis for the creation of babies’ future subjectivity.

Kurkin, as amniotic design and praxis, plays the role of rendering visible the inner duality of human beings. Designs are the visual manifestation of the interactive capacity of human beings, animals, and other cosmic entities. To be seen is already to enter into the affective and nurturing dimension of human social life; not to be seen is to remain ‘turned inward’, and requires an additional effort to create equilibrium between the cosmic and the social forces that a young seer embodies in his own person. To become visible, a shaman needs to develop his shamanic skills, which, once available to help his kinspeople, will make up for the invisibility of his designs at birth.

My argument has been that design is not conceptually separated for the Kuna from the surface upon which it appears. This point had been made by Lévi-Strauss (1972) and further analysed in Amazonian studies by Gow (1989; 1999a; 1999b) and Lagrou (1998; 2007). As demonstrated above, design is an attribute of *kurkin*, and therefore by extension it is an attribute of the human person. My point is that design, for the Kuna, provides persons with visibility in social life through the development of praxis. Personal qualities of newborns, defined by their relationship with specific animals, might (or might not) be visible through amniotic designs; during life they become further visible. As Gow (1999a) noted for Piro women’s skill at painting with designs, developing such a skill takes a lifetime to be achieved. From childhood onwards, what Kuna boys and girls do is often read by adults as the manifestation of their predispositions for specific activities enabled by a particular design on their *kurkin* at birth. Therefore, it is important to encourage children to develop their own skills and to enable them to ‘turn

their predispositions outward', to borrow an expression used by Strathern (1979: 248). Being 'beautiful' (*yer tayleke*) means to show designs at birth and to develop one's capacities in the course of one's life cycle. Kuna women are 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 *kurkin*.

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.

NOTES

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¹ I use the system of transcription of Kuna language adopted by Sherzer (2003).

² I wish to make clear that the concept of humanity that I use does not imply a separate concept of nature. Kuna people, like other Amerindians, conceive human beings as one of the multiple natures populating the cosmos, with which they constantly interact. My aim here is not to discuss the implications of Amerindian socio-cosmologies for the Western divide between nature and society, for which I refer to the work of Descola (2005).

³ See Londoño Sulkin (2005) and Kohn (2007) for a discussion on intra-specific relationships among, respectively, the Muinane and the Runa.

⁴ The noun *narmakkalet*, which indicates all forms of 'geometric' designs and also writing, derives from the verb *narmakket*, related to the verb *makket*, 'to do', 'to pierce', and 'to stab'.

⁵ Kuna ethnography shows the central role of the production of *mola* designs in the everyday life of women (Salvador 1978; 1997; Tice 1995) and in kinship (Margiotti 2008).

⁶ I use the adjectives 'geometric' and 'figurative' not as a translation of Kuna categories, but as a shortcut to give a visual image of these types of design to a Western reader.

⁷ Kuna people told me that in the past women used to weave hammocks decorated with designs. Now they buy them from Colombian traders.

⁸ Ritual specialists are botanical experts (*ina tulekana*), curing chanters (*api suakana*), midwives (*muukana*), and seers (*nelekana*). See Howe (1978) for a discussion of the role of political chiefs and ritual specialists among the Kuna.

⁹ For the translation of *kurkin* as 'brain', 'intelligence', 'skill', and 'hat', see Nordenskiöld (1938: 363-8); while Severi suggests associating *kurkin* with 'person' and 'individuality' (1981: 72). I will take this latter point and develop it throughout this article.

¹⁰ In Kuna literature, reasonable attention has been paid to the concept of *purpa* in the study of illness and personhood, usually translated as 'soul', or 'double' (Chapin 1983; Nordenskiöld 1938; Severi 1981; 1987; 1993).

¹¹ *Muu* (sing.) means 'grandmother', MM or FM, as well as 'midwife'. Used in therapeutic chants it means 'womb' (cf. Holmer & Wassén 1947; Lévi-Strauss 1972).

¹² Chapin notes that *Muu*, the grandmother of *muukana*, 'is responsible for the spiritual development of the foetuses of all land animals and humans born on earth' (1983: 404).

¹³ It is interesting to note that the Cashinahua use the word *xankin*, 'uterus', as root for the verb *xankeikiki*, 'to weave designs' (Lagrou 2007: 113-14).

¹⁴ See also Chapin (1983: 394-8) and Martínez Mauri (2007: 271-82) for a description of taboos regarding marine species among the Kuna.

¹⁵ My personal explanation during fieldwork was that these designs are created by the mixture of pre-natal liquids and substances being deposited on the head of newborns.

¹⁶ I also heard that in some cases babies may be born with the remains of the amniotic sac hanging around their neck like a collar (*wini*). In such cases the baby is said to be 'on the snake side' as well. I was also told once of the possibility of being 'on the side of the shark' (*nali sikkit*), or 'on the side of the thunder' (*mala sikkit*), implying the risk of being hit by lightning.

¹⁷ This would suggest that the Kuna conceive these as intra-species relationships. Following the same logic, Kuna adult men, in order to increase their hunting capacities, undergo periods of seclusion during which they bath with water infused with perfumed plant medicines. This makes them attractive to the animal species they decide to hunt. An interesting comparison could be established with what Kohn defines as 'hunting soul' among the Upper Amazonian Runa, which is what 'allows men to be aware of prey in the forest' (2007: 9).

¹⁸ The lack of skills of animals seems connected to their lack of kinship and their jealousy towards human beings. Margiotti (2009) relates that whereas for Kuna people most animals lack *pinsaet* in the form of 'love' and 'memory' for their kinspeople, a few animals have *pinsaet* in the form of intentionality, which often is manifested as a form of predation towards human beings.

¹⁹ See Lagrou (2007: 193-201) for a similar myth among the Cashinahua.

²⁰ In the course of this article I will use the masculine form when referring generically to Kuna seers. This is in line with the ideal type of seer: that is, for the Kuna, one who is so by birth, and this is the case only of male seers, as I was often told. For a discussion of how Kuna women become seers in the course of their life, see Fortis (2008).

²¹ Nordenskiöld, following the translation of the 'Song for curing *Nele* when he has a headache', made by his Kuna informant Ruben Pérez Kantule, writes that

it is told how *Mu* had perfumed *Nele's kurgin* with certain plants and had made it fine as well as how *Mu* gives *kurgin* to *Nele*, so that he can have the power of seeing the animals which are his friends, among which can be noted saw fish, rays, turtles of different kinds, alligators, sea lions, sharks, dolphins, etc. (1938: 542).

²² See Chapin (1983), Margiotti (2009), and Reverte Coma (1967) for more details on Kuna practices around childbirth.

²³ I was told of a man who had the illness of *nia* (madness) but was eventually cured. After the cure he became incredibly skilled in woodcarving, and people's comment was that he learned how to carve in dreams.

²⁴ Although the word *poni* may be used to indicate any illness caught during a person's life, in this case it is used to refer to the more general, and constitutive, relationship between a person and an animal, which is the object of this article.

²⁵ Viveiros de Castro describes that among the Araweté of Middle Xingu (Brazil), small children are made to undergo a shamanic ritual that 'seals off their body', in order to prevent contagion from the parents of the child, often caused by the eating of game meat (1992: 183).

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La naissance du dessin : une théorie du corps et de la personnalité chez les Kuna

Résumé

L'auteur explore ici le concept de « dessin » (*narmakkalet*) chez les Kuna du Panamá. Il montre que le concept indigène de dessin et sa relation avec le corps humain sont essentiels dans les idées des Kuna concernant la personnalité. Le principal argument est que le dessin est un attribut du corps permettant la création de personnes par la transformation de leur relation avec des entités animales. En analysant le cas particulier des « dessins amniotiques » (*kurkin narmakkalet*) parfois visibles sur la tête des nouveau-nés, l'auteur montre que les dessins donnent une représentation visuelle de la relation entre humains et animaux font partie intégrante, en tant que tels, de la constitution des personnes chez les Kuna. Pour comprendre l'esthétique des Kuna, l'auteur suggère d'examiner la manière dont les Amérindiens conçoivent la personne, la manière dont les corps sont créés et la relation que les êtres humains entretiennent avec les animaux.

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