



# IDENTITY IN KUNA SOCIETY

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*\* Dad Neba means «Grandfather of the Plain»  
in the indigenous Kuna language.*

**T**he Kuna people, like other indigenous populations in the world, have preserved their history, medicine, beliefs, spirituality and cultural identity.

Kuna therapeutic songs are one of their age-old practices that are still being seen.

We get better and recover through these songs. There are songs for specific diseases and treatments. Today, there is still a wide range of *Igargan* or healing treatises that are called therapeutic songs, including *Absoged Igar*, *Gammu Igar*, *Muu Igar*, *Sabdur Igar*, *Gurgin Igar*, *Akualer Igar*, *Agduk Igar*, *Niga Onakued Igar*, *Sia Igar*, *Ablis Wiloed Igar*, *Sigu Igar*, *Sergan Igar*, *Gabur Igar*, *Masar Igar*, *Burwa Igar*, *Nia Igar*, *Nibar Igar* and *Biseb Igar*, among others.

Patients are healed through these songs or treatises. The singer goes in search of the spirit that has been abducted. These songs are sung for four hours under the hammock of the patient; *Masar Igar*, for example, is sung for 18 hours. The Kuna people think that every living being in the universe has a spirit, something difficult to believe in the Western (non-indigenous) society. This work aims to facilitate the understanding of and respect for the identity of the Kuna people.

We human beings have spirits within us; all the parts of our body have spirits, including the spirit of the nail, the liver, the stomach, the heart and so on. And if another spirit steals of the spirit of a part of a person, it will negatively affect his/her health and get sick. The *Neles*, who are very important spiritual leaders—clairvoyant

men and women born with a gift so strong that sometimes their mothers die during delivery—, consider the spirit as "the essence" of a phenomenon, which makes an animal be an animal, a person be a person, or a thing be a thing.

The spirit may also be considered conscience. Creatures, trees, rocks and things have a conscience of their own, similar to our human conscience.

These treatises are a religious practice or pragmatic religion. The sense of unity they provide does not negate the identity of different phenomena.

The Kuna hold that the universe is composed of eight layers, which make up the so-called underworld in other cultures.

*Neles* activity is based on ideas about space; although the everyday world is imbued with spirits, there are other worlds to which *Neles* have to travel.

After years of training, the *Neles* learn songs to cure diseases and act as mediators in nature-man conflicts. *Neles* guess when a sacred place has been violated by man, know what remedial action the community should take, and also diagnose diseases in patients.

We Kuna know that there are all kinds of spirits in a different world and we are aware that they can affect our health and livelihoods. We believe that, when these things are troubling someone, that someone can well be a *Nele*. The knowledge of therapeutic songs should travel to the world of spirits to convince them to act in a different, benevolent way. 