

## CUNA INDIAN BELIEFS CONCERNING THE AFTERLIFE

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During the summers of 1950-51-52 I studied the Caribe-Cuna Moon-children<sup>1</sup> of San Blas, with special reference to heredity, morphology, physiology and behavior. The first year there was much hostility from these Indians noted for their big, golden nose rings, colorful blouses, primitive animistic beliefs, strange customs, and exotic devil appeasement ceremonies. The second year I made many friends among them and was permitted to land on most of the palm-fringed, off-shore atolls that these people inhabit. The third year much of their suspicion of me had worn off and I was usually considered as an old friend. For this reason I was able to record many of their interesting beliefs and folkways.

It may be said that no part of the Cuna culture is more interesting to the anthropologist than the ideas of these people concerning the afterlife, and because civilization from Panama and the Canal Zone is rapidly transforming them, many of their customs and traditions will soon be lost if they are not recorded at once. As a matter of fact, only a few old men know the traditions today. Chief Ikwanktipipi alone appears to be able to draw pictures well in the traditional manner, although numerous medicine men still sketch pictograph symbols to record medicinal and religious chants.

This paper describes in particular three pictures<sup>2</sup> of the life beyond the grave that I induced Ikwanktipipi to draw and explain.

### HEAVEN BOUND CANOE

The Cuna Indians tell me that the soul does not leave the body at the time of death. Indeed, it may linger several days in the grave, because it is tired from its last illness and the death struggle. It may also be reluctant to depart from the earth.

When it has rested, it collects the spirits of the many votives that were placed in the grave, packs them into the ulu ikko or votive canoe already afloat in the near-by river.<sup>3</sup> It unties the mooring string and paddles up the river, making its way eastward toward the Rising Sun. After a number of days the spirit in its votive canoe reaches the summit of the sacred mountain, Tarkarkuna, "at the end of the earth." Then bravely paddling onward, it takes off into the air, and ascends higher and higher with steady strokes.

<sup>1</sup>Researches supported by a grant-in-aid from the Rockefeller Foundation.

<sup>2</sup>Original pictures exhibited at a meeting of the Georgia Academy of Science held April 24, 1953, in Macon, Georgia. Illustrations reproduced here are retouched photostats.

<sup>3</sup>Medicine men have special canoes; the hot pepper chanter has a kapur ulu, the cocoa bean chanter has a sia ulu.

As the soul progresses it glances back from time to time and notices that the earth is becoming smaller and smaller. The last that it observes clearly is the view of its friends and relatives who are grieving for it. Smaller and smaller the world becomes until in the final glance over its shoulder the soul sees the "tiny earth rocking back and forth like a coconut husk upon the ocean waves." The soul now forgets its reluctance to leave the world and presses on with but the one thought of reaching heaven. At length it moors its bark at "Pap Kastipir" the "wharf of Heaven."

But the difficulties have only begun. Stepping out of its canoe and going forward on foot, the spirit soon comes to a fork in the road. There it must choose the right or the left. To the left is the Road of Flowers and to the right, the Road of Thorns.

The left road is the one that the evil Piler took, "who behaved wickedly toward his sister, his mother and his aunt" (presumably sex offenses). Because of his wickedness the flowers disappeared and he soon found himself in the midst of thorn bushes that tore his flesh. Then he came to mud and swamps in which he floundered and became exhausted. After that he had to go through fire that burnt him, the sugar cane mill that crushed him, and past the eagles that rent his body with beak and talons. But this was not all. After the eagles, Piler stumbled through the horrible land of the Snakes, frightened, and poisoned by serpent bites at every step. Then the land of the Alligators that injured him further, then the land of Wild Beasts through which he had to fight fearful battles with horrible creatures that crippled him badly. Then because he mistreated the Iet woman who officiates at the hair-cutting ceremony of the girls, he was cut in two by an enormous pair of shears. At last he came to the gate of Heaven only to learn that he must suffer many more years of torture before being allowed to enter the City of God. Those who have been wicked on earth always choose the Path of Piler in the land above.

The good always choose the Thorny Road to the right that leads directly to the City of Heaven. If the person has pretended to have learned the magic art of hypnotizing snakes, alligators and other savage creatures he must demonstrate it. He will suffer many times if he lied and really cannot do it correctly. Near the City of Heaven is the Great Judge, Olowikpalele, with the records, who tries the soul, and gives it free entry to heaven if blameless or condemns it to delays, anxieties, or increasing punishments, according to the degree of sins the person committed in the flesh. One tantalizing punishment, the Indians told me, is to be allowed to disembark at the Pier of Heaven but be forced to remain on the pier for ten or twenty or thirty years.

In the City of Heaven one stops to see his father and his relatives. He delivers special messages given to him while lying in the death hammock and distributes the gifts, especially of food and cloth, sent by relatives on earth to those already in heaven. After resting from his long journey he goes to visit Olowaipipilele (The Great Father; literally The Little Golden Chanter Clairvoyant). The soul observes heaven to be the most beautiful city that can be imagined. There it

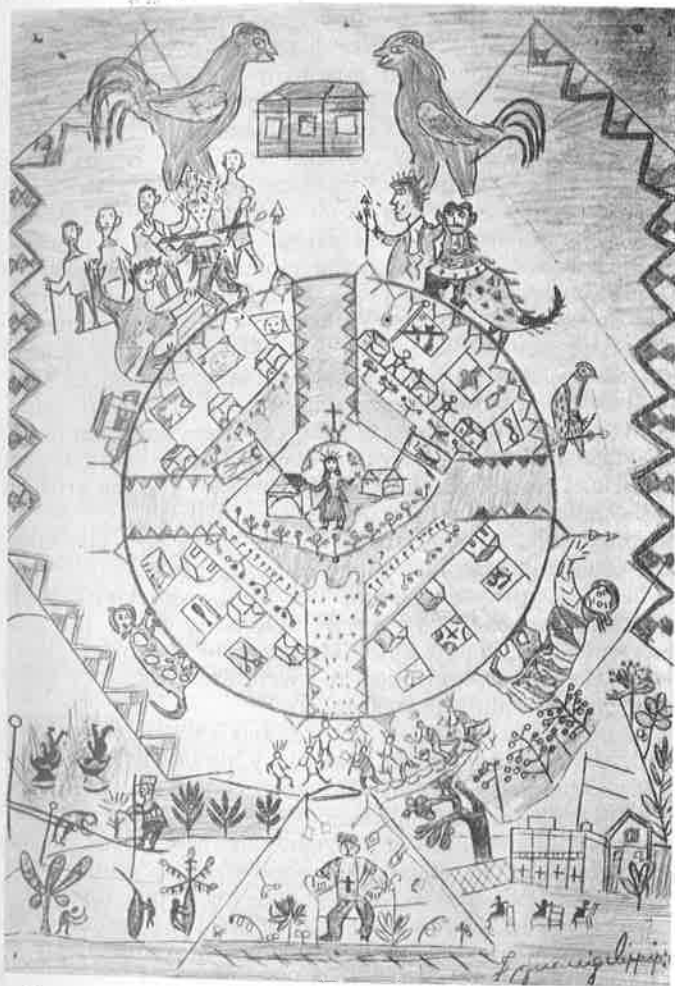
lives in a wonderful house, takes delightful excursions in the Sunboat, and finds pleasures forevermore.

HEAVEN

"Would you be interested in what the Indian believes about Heaven?" asked my friend, Saikla Ikwantippi, of Ailigandi.

"Indeed, I would be!"

Nothing could have pleased me more than to learn concerning the Cuna religious beliefs, and most of the Indians who knew them



thoroughly had been reticent to talk to me about them. To hear of them at the feet of Chief Ikwantippi was double good fortune, because he of all the Cuna tribe knows their traditions best. Indeed,

he studied Kantule (chanting for the sacred feast of the debutante) during seven years and massar (chanting for the dead) for many years longer. He learned from the ancient Supreme Chief Colman and the highly famous Supreme Chief Nele Kantule.

"It would be difficult to explain to you about heaven directly," continued the chief, "so I shall draw you a picture. I shall draw it as my teachers taught me."

That was the opportunity of a lifetime! I quickly provided paper, pencils and colored crayons, and the Saikla set to work. Off and on for two weeks he bent over the task and I went to his cane-and-thatch house a number of times to observe the progress.

The astonishing allegory that resulted is reproduced as figure 1. For a man who can neither read nor write<sup>4</sup> Ikwaniptippi shows an amazing native skill with pencils. His drawing exhibits design, balance, proportion, action, and an excellent choice of colors. But more remarkable than all these artistic qualities is its sense of foreshortening, its conception of distance! I wondered why the figures of animals and men at the top of the page are huge and detailed but then gradually decrease in size on down to tiny symbols at the bottom, save for the picture of the Great Judge who sits with the records. He is represented as being exceptionally large because of his great importance. As a matter of fact, I studied this point for some time before it dawned upon me that Ikwaniptippi's concept was correct. He was looking up to heaven as he drew, and to view it his picture should be held horizontally above and in front of one's head, with the upper portion nearest one's eyes. Then, and then only do the figures appear in perfect perspective commensurate with their distance.

Of course, I wanted an analysis of "Heaven" and the artist proudly supplied the following information:

"Heaven is circular with beautiful zig-zag walls. The streets are directed toward the cardinal points of the compass."

At the top of the picture we find Manikwiskapilele and Olopiiailele, two eagles (sulepak) who examine at the gatehouse those persons desiring to enter heaven. The examiners were once people as you and I who sinned and were punished, after which they were assigned this duty in heaven.

The guard of the gate (Ikar opantur saikla) stands with a spear in his hand, and a terrible dragon (achu) by his side to help him. "Even a Kantule Chanter for the Inna ceremony cannot get past this guard," the Saikla said, "unless he has dedicated his life to noble purposes." A good bird (sikwi nueti) sits at the right hand gate that is guarded by a second dragon (achu). A group of good Indians, who are not to be punished, blow upon their reed flutes with joy as they disembark from their canoes at Pap Kastipir (the Pier of Heaven) and enter the City of God, ready to parade triumphantly up its beautiful streets. A third dragon (achu) guards the left hand gate, where a gatehouse is also depicted.

<sup>4</sup>Ikwaniptippi's son, Jóse, has taught him how to draw his name for signing documents.

At the upper left of the picture are six celestial policemen with their cane symbols of office, and a horrible dragon named Devil Nopenta, who see that a punishment is carried out. Here a young man is being cut up with gigantic scissors because, after starting to carry water for a girls' puberty ceremony, he quit the job and ran away. Two men, at the lower left are being punished for murder by being roasted in cauldrons over the fire. Another man is being crushed in a sugar cane press for some unstated crime. Three who had intercourse with strange women during their pregnancy are condemned to be placed on top of trees from which they can never descend. As shown from left to right these will be placed on top of an Ule tree, a Kwipa tree and an Urtak tree, respectively.

Below center is Olowikalele, the Great Judge. He sits in his seat of judgment with the personal reports at hand, and has Nakkrus symbols on his clothing. Flowers grow in profusion about him. Lights (presumably electric light bulbs!) hang from the ceiling.

At the lower right one sees a detention house. There several Indians sitting on chairs await the trial of their particularly difficult cases. Ikwanktipippi said that their cases come under the classification of "Trees," that is: either they (1) met an unnatural death by a tree falling upon them so that it is difficult to say what the final score would have been had they continued to live and later to have died a natural death, or (2) they stole things off trees, such as coconuts, mangoes, calabashes, bananas, etc.

About the throne of Olowaipipilele (The Great Spirit) are lawns filled with beautiful flowers. Ikwanktipippi uses the term Tiolele (the One Above.)<sup>5</sup>

Preceding clockwise about this residence one sees houses for various categories of talented people, each bearing an appropriate identifying flag. These are (1) Inna Ceremony Chanters (flute and rattle), (2) medicine men (neles), (3) Chanters who know the hot pepper chant (kapur ikar), (4) men who know about the bird that eats snakes, (5) men who know the nakkrus chant, (6) men who know the cocoa bean chant (sia ikar), (7) women who sew well, (8) women who are good hammock makers, (9) diviners of the Inna feast (diviners hat), (10) men who know about nature and living things, while (11) and (12) are reserved for men who know "other things."

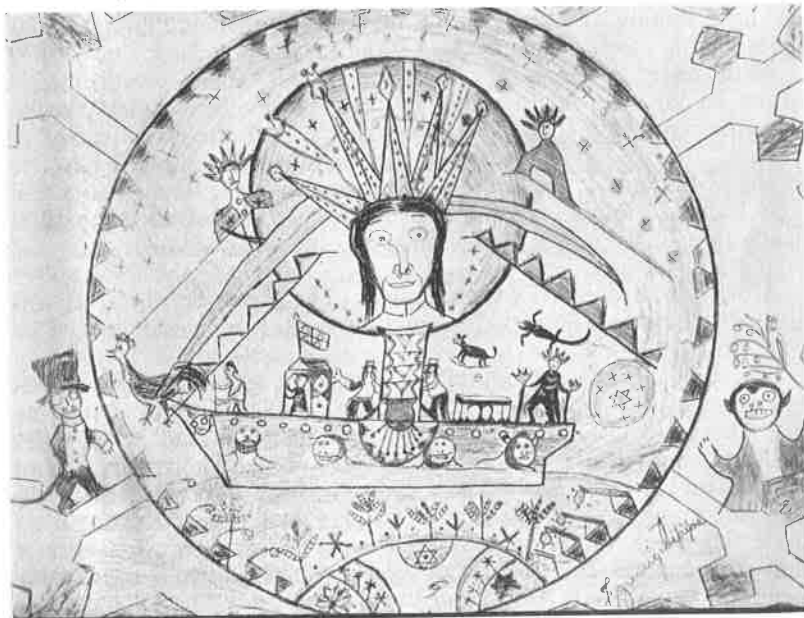
The centrally located Olowaipipilele sits on his elaborately decorated throne. Ikwanktipippi said that the nakkrus symbols on his clothing and about him are not Christian symbols at all, but were used by the Cuna Indians long before the coming of Columbus, and indeed, the early Spanish explorers found so much among the Indian religions suggestive of Christianity that they declared that St. Thomas had visited Central and South America. Olowaipipilele has two houses filled with "protection." The one on the left is an arsenal stocked with bows and arrows. That on the right contains many dragons (jaguars, or dogs).

<sup>5</sup>The name Pap Purpalet (The Great Father on Earth that can be seen) is also employed.

Ikwaniktippi's picture of Heaven simply whetted my appetite! It made me greedy. I must have two more pictures to illustrate the Cuna afterlife! I knew that old Neles described a "Sunboat" in which the redeemed take pleasure excursions and I knew that the soul may hover in the grave with the body for several days, but that eventually it must set out in a canoe for a long and perilous trip to the sun.

#### SUNBOAT

I bargained with the artist and he promised. Almost a year went by with no results because Ikwaniktippi had become deeply involved in politics, ceremonies, chants and money making. At last, under the pressure of gifts, money and the urgings of his son, J6se, he functioned once more and produced the "Sunboat" (Fig. 2), on the wrong side of the same piece of drawing card that I had mailed to him the year



before. Most of it was drawn while he was at Karti chanting ceremonially about the Cuna traditions.

Dominating the Sunboat scene is Olowaippilele who resides in the sun and who is depicted in all his majestic splendor. He wears a headdress of feathers. To his left, bearing epaulettes and nakkrus badges is Ikwaokinyappilele, the archer, who with his keen shafts has just slain the devils of disease that are seen floundering in the water about the Sunboat. To his right, one may observe Putur, the construction engineer, who is about to "make something" such as houses or other buildings in heaven.

In full view of the Sunboat are beautiful rivers, trees and flowers. A number of stars are anchored to mountains at the periphery of the

large circle, and Ikwaniptippi identified number one as Sunip, number two as Oler, number three as Wikaler. "Wikaler," said he, "is the Nukwelokinaita or "mother of the stars," . . . number four is Olopurkaliler, which represents a great constellation.

The occupants of the Sunboat are as follows: Kanir Ikwatuinkipe (the rooster) is a lookout. He not only peers ahead for trouble, but he also wakes up the passengers in the morning. Then there is Kiwikinya, who is equipped with a long pole. His duty is to probe the water for dangerous coral reefs. Ikwapiékinya is the pilot. In front of the smokestack is Olosookikilli, wife of the engineer, Olosookikinya, who Ikwaniptippi said was down in the engine room. But by the time the picture was finished he had come up on deck and may be seen leaning against the smokestack in a very tired fashion. Up in the air are a sloth named Olopanalir, the medicine man of the outfit, and an iguana called Olopiskakwa, who is second in command and who "never smiles." Surprisingly enough, the Captain of the Sunboat turns out to be Nia Tummati (the Big Devil)! Offside to the right is "No nana," the toad mother. Her name is Kwelopunyai and she is the wife of Olowaippilele, the Great Spirit. Offside to the left is Olopatikinya (a Sulu monkey) who is really the son of Kwelopunyai by another husband.

Not being able to get any farther with Ikwaniptippi in depicting the adventurous journey of the soul from the grave to the Sun, I tried Mastapeppi, a very old resident of Mulatupu. His contribution was disappointing. He produced a Sunboat which is merely a modern American battleship (such as he had seen in the Panama Canal) save that the big guns are replaced by searchlights.

#### JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

Nine months after producing the Sunboat, Ikwaniptippi was again prevailed upon by flattery, pleadings, and monetary inducements to undertake a picture of the travels of the soul in its ulu ikko or spirit boat. Some items of the picture show celestial details already mentioned above, but because they are part of Ikwaniptippi's explanation of his picture (Fig. 3), I shall repeat them here.

The picture story starts off at the lower right corner with a cemetery scene having buildings (civilized style, with flags flying instead of the thatched huts of the Cuna graveyard). At the wharf in the near-by river a coconut boat rather than a canoe is moored, waiting for the spirit of the deceased one. Apparently nothing happens of importance in the vast stretches of upper air between the sacred mountain, Tarkarkuna, and the Pier of Heaven, and for that reason Ikwaniptippi does not separate the graveyard scene from Pap Kastipir. The City of God is hidden from Pap Kastipir by mountains and clouds.

Once arrived in the Upper World, the spirit, Dante-like, passes through the kingdom of animals where it is accosted by a bird named Kaymattar that says: "Once I, too, was a human being, but because of my wickedness on earth, I became a useless bird. I am eating worms

and raw fish now." In the snake world a man who thought he was walking along the flowery road, suddenly is surrounded by thorns, and because he has the heart of a snake, he is punished by being bitten by a snake. In the alligator world a man is being chewed up because he has been bad.

Then comes a deep gulley and the famous fork in the road already described (just above the alligator's head). The flowery branch road



that bad people always choose (to the left) is soon choked with thistles, and here one finds pergatorial punishments for sex offenses. On this road hangs an enormous pair of shears (molsikke). Here a man is being punished by the big shears for (1) "using little girls as though they were women," (2) sexually insulting the Iet woman who cuts the girl's hair ceremonially, (3) attacking the wives of the Kantule chanter of the Inna feast, (4) abusing the women who gather



reeds for the feasts and those who tie the gourd rattles for the Inna feast.<sup>6</sup> For these offenses the giant shears cut men up.

Then the soul comes to the land of the eagle.

After this he sees a crowd of pretty girls under an immense, magic urtukku tree. With lascivious desire the wicked man (identified by



yellow buttons on his clothes) will make a rush to seize one of the girls (identified by a sarong) only to have the huge arms of the tree, "that acts like a human being," grab him and put him on its topmost branches. From there he falls down and is injured so badly that he

<sup>6</sup>I do not understand this statement because it is usually a man, Kamsuet, who collects the reeds and ties the gourd rattles.

does not think about the girls any more. Then comes the sugar cane mill, after which those insatiable men who attacked "old ladies and grandmothers" fall headfirst into an enormous hole in the ground. Very wicked persons are then cast into Sosaikla, the Lake of Fire<sup>7</sup> where they flounder for years and sometimes for eternity. The average person will get past this horrible place safely. After this there is a grove of saptur trees, used by the Indians for painting the skin of babies and girls ceremonially. A strong wind passes through these trees, and the fruits (filled with indelible, black juice) fall on the passersby.

At last, the wandering soul reaches Pap Yapi, the Gate of the City of Heaven, (the place where the keys are kept) but the gate is locked. Here Ikwaniktippipi has depicted two tables at which stand Paliwittur and Niawenyo<sup>8</sup>, great servants of God and The Big Devil, respectively. Both have a copy of the personal records of conduct. Between them stands the soul of a man who wants to enter Patto Tiolele Neka, the City of Heaven. The stick in the man's hands indicates that he is bad and will not be allowed to enter. "He has fought, and was mean."

The servant of God is hoping that the man's record will be good; the servant of the Devil hopes that he can get him. If his record turns out badly, the servant of the Devil will laugh at him mercilessly. If he is saved, the servant of God will rejoice. In the insets are Mother Olonuptili (left) and Mother Olokwater (right), two women who wait anxiously for the verdict upon the man at the gate. Many souls are gathered there to be judged and punished as there are two more punishments inside the gate of the City of Heaven.

The servants, (Piliwitule and Paliwittur) are preaching a sermon to the men newly arrived. "You are alone, and nobody will help you. You alone will receive the consequences of your deeds. You have come alone to this world (heaven) and alone you shall go to death and your punishments! For the good it is good in heaven, but it is bad for those who do not walk straight. So treat each other honestly and do not be selfish. Think of others and treat your neighbor as a friend . . . The world is full of bad men, but you must be good! This is the way to God's heaven, the heaven of rest."

Then the servants await anxiously to find out where the soul of the man will go.

<sup>7</sup>Sosaikla, the Lake of Fire, is kindled by Olosokikili, Manisokikili and Ikwanai. The only one who can extinguish it is Olosokintili.

<sup>8</sup>Paliwittur means "one that protects." Niawenyo (one who teaches to steal) is also called Nianopenta (one who causes jealousy) and Niatiopili (one who confuses).