

## THE BURIAL OF A CUNA INDIAN GIRL

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The primitive Cuna Indians of San Blas Province in Lower Panama have fought off civilization during four hundred years. And well they might, because following Balboa, the Spaniards nearly exterminated their once numerous tribe. Today, without special permission, foreigners are not allowed after dark upon any of the fifty palm-fringed atolls that these suspicious people inhabit, while most island towns receive no visitors at all.

As one might suspect, American tourists, with their desire for the colorful, strange and exotic, have had a great urge to visit the Cuna Indians because of their big, golden noserings, colorful, applied cotton blouses, primitive animistic beliefs, weird customs and frequent devil appeasement ceremonies.

For three summers I have lived with these people, many of whom have lost all fear of me and have become my friends, while I studied their albinistic Moon-children on a grant-in-aid from the Rockefeller Foundation. They gave me the name of Kilupippi (the little uncle).

I expressed an interest in recording all phases of the Cuna culture, and especially those basic human events that are common to all mankind, such as birth, marriage, and death. Accordingly, my Cuna friends responded by letting me in on the mysteries of life as they conceived them, and even those customs associated with the tragedy of death that few foreigners have ever been permitted to witness.

Let me describe my experience with the Cuna burial ceremony. It is the rainy season. Savage bolts of fire, an hundredfold, rip jaggedly across the blackness of night to illuminate the landscape, while our island shakes violently before stupendous rolls of thunder. The heavens open and great torrents of water pour down the palm thatch. Then come malaria mosquitoes and the hand of death is laid heavily upon the Indian village.

One after another, children of the village are stricken with high fever and pain, and are laid in their hammocks while their fearful mothers constantly drench their delirious heads and burning, restless bodies with cold water in which has been placed magic leaves. Crude, red nakkrus crossmarks are smeared on their foreheads and chests to ward off the demons that cause disease. A box containing the forty wooden idols of the home is dragged up under the head of the hammock. Douching with cold water continues and, as a result, pneumonia sets in to belabor the breathing. The fever mounts to impossible heights and a Kapurtule medicine man, or chanter, is called.

This specialist sits all night on a low stool beside the hammock of



Fig. 1. The Cocobean Chant against the diseases of childhood.

the sick one, stirring and fanning his "ka," or hot-pepper incense, in its clay incense pot. The pungent, choking smoke rises and fills the house. Passersby in the narrow street gag and cough because of its fumes. By means of his powerful medicine chant the Kapurtule sends the spirits of the "uchu mimmi" idols and hot pepper far underground, perhaps to the fifth of eight levels beneath our world, to search for the spirit of the sick child that has been stolen by devils. The disease chanter instructs his idols with these words:

This is singing to the little child.  
Here you are in your hammock sick.  
Here you are in your hammock sick.  
You have lost your spirit.  
You have lost your spirit.  
You are lying motionless in your hammock.  
Now you are shivering,  
Your hammock strings are vibrating,  
You dream of Uncle [poetic name for disease].  
Do not dream of Uncle any more!  
Neles [wooden idols] beneath the hammock,  
Come close to this child!  
They will seek out your spirit  
In the earth, and bring it back to you.  
Here, little spirit, they come  
Into the earth to find you!  
Ka! [hot pepper incense] give forth  
Smoke through their clothes,  
And make them [the devils] cough!  
The evil spirits cough—  
The evil spirit that has your spirit coughs, too!  
Neles! go into their houses!  
Tear down their houses, look for them!  
Uchu [wooden idols] -Ka-go underground now!

His efforts are in vain and finally the tortured little body and heaving chest lie still.

A sister quietly slips between the cane-walled houses to the home of the "massartule," or death chanter. Loudly the family express their lamentation to the corpse both day and night as they sit in their hammocks crowded about the small body. A calabash shell is placed over the child's head to keep evil spirit-birds from pecking at it. His pot of cocoa-bean incense before him, the massartule sings a twenty-four hour death chant while against the hammock strings lean four painted and plumed massar sticks with their white notches and red spirals. Other massars are stuck in the ground in a row on either side of the death hammock. Into these the massartule prays good spirits to protect the child on its road to heaven.

After dark, Claudio (the young native missionary of Mulatupu) and I hasten through a cold drizzle to enter the death house of a little girl without a name who was our friend. We stand for several moments with heads bowed among the mourners that are gathered about the child's hammock, quite uncertain of our welcome. We extend our sympathy to Densi Chak, the father, who straddles a nearby hammock mute with the shock of it all. By the light of a flickering "kwallu," he is fumbling with a crumpled fragment of paper



Fig. 2. Diagram showing arrangement of body, possessions, votives and roof of burial chamber.

that says: "Nacio una nina el 28 dia del mes de . . . ." It is a certificate improvised by some literate Indian on the proud day of her birth, and her father is trying to learn just how old his little daughter was when she died. But because he cannot read, and know nothing about calendars, we figure it out for him.

A widow tells the dead child to please take a message to her husband, and a little girl drops some cloth into the death hammock to be delivered to a departed playmate.

We go to the other side of the hut where lies her little brother on the point of delirium, attended by their grandfather, Olopiaite, the famous Inna Kantule, who sings the most sacred long-chant for the Coming Out Ceremony of the Debutante.

Yes, it is weleket (malaria), too, and with tears in his eyes, the old man, whose medicine chants failed to save his granddaughter, gladly accepts the white man's metaquinin that we offer, and he promises to follow instructions.

Exhausted though they are, the family of the dead child and their close friends prepare abundant food and food drinks for the funeral, because burial is an all-day event and the many friends and relatives must be fed at the cemetery and the gravediggers must be feasted.

They arrange their canoes to go to "uan," the cemetery. While being conveyed to the graveyard in a canoe, the cloth-wrapped corpse is bound with a rope of braided fibers. It lies in its hammock, surrounded by veiled women mourners who continue their chanting. A shotgun is fired as "uan" is approached, some believe to frighten away devils, others say to notify the town.

The graveyard is on the mainland, up the river near the farm plots. It is actually a village of palm-thatched huts where the gravediggers have already been at work carving an elaborate sepulchre in the red clay. The death hammock is hung up in a nearby hut where the mourners continue their lament up to the moment of interment.

On the hot sunny afternoon that Olopiaite's granddaughter was buried, Claudio, Ignacio the Chanter against Sadness, and I wandered up through the cemetery carrying a couple of .22 caliber Winchester rifles on a hunting trip. We came upon the burial party and the stricken father thanked us on behalf of his wife and himself for our kindness in coming to visit his little daughter in her hammock the night before. This gave us assurance because we did not know how that visit had been received. We again expressed our sympathy, and the father said sadly: "We have no bird for our little daughter to take to heaven with her. Won't you please shoot a bird for our daughter?"

Because the tropical heat was intense and I was not armed, the father asked me to rest on a seat with the mourners while Claudio and Ignacio searched the trees of the vicinity. Later, the father inquired if I had ever seen an Indian funeral and, at my negative reply, he invited me to stand on a little hillock from which I could view all that went on.

A huge terra cotta censer is lowered into the grave for a few minutes to sanctify it, and Cocobean incense puffs up in great clouds.



Fig. 3. "Uan," the Cemetery.

After this act, a gravedigger arranges dishes and cups in a small, low-vaulted antechamber carved in the side of the sepulchre wall on the right hand side of the corpse. In another small antechamber at the head of the tomb, he places a covered sewing basket containing money, jewelry, and other prized possessions of the deceased child. He adds a tiny, woven fan bearing an Indian swastika for good luck, and a spirit boat (*ulu ikko*) equipped with paddles for the Journey to the Upper World. Four yellow-plumed massar sticks or spirit ladders (*masar arsan*) are stood up in the corners and the others are placed with the child in its hammock. There is an *olokwilotupa*, or braided cord, to serve as a spirit bridge. A dozen short (*ukkurwar*) splints with a little banana-leaf bundle of chicken meat (*purkwet suar masi*) at each end are arranged on the floor, together with similar splints bearing little bundles of cloth (*suar ki purkwet mas anwalet*). These accompanying objects are thought to become enlarged in the afterlife (Keeler, 1954). The chicken meat is for the journey, and to give a taste to the relatives who have gone before. The bundles of cloth are often presents for specific relatives.

All afternoon my friends popped at parakeets and banana birds in the tall palm and mango trees without success, but just before the covering of the sepulchre, Claudio brought down a white-faced parrot to accompany the little girl. This act of kindness was greatly appreciated by her parents, because it is considered as a good omen for the arduous voyage to *Apya* or Heaven in the Sun that the child's spirit had before her.

Finally, the little hammock is suspended in the sepulchre with its face directed to greet the rising Sun, that Glorious Grandfather of the race to whom its spirit must return.

At this point a strange procedure is carried out. The little brother, though very ill, has been brought along to "uan." Screaming with fright lest he be buried alive, he is lowered into the sepulchre and forced to sit and then to stand for a short time upon his sister in the death hammock. Upon inquiry, I was told that this is done so that he will not forget where his sister is and commit the horrible error of some day asking: "*Pia punolo?*" ("Where is my golden sister?"), because this act will bring about misfortune for her journey to the Sun.

After this ceremony, the calabash on the child's head is quickly removed, smashed and thrown away. A ceremonial string of red and white cotton threads is tied lengthwise and around the death hammock. Thick rails are rapidly fitted into a ledge of clay at the top of the sepulchre to form a roof over the grave. The white wrapping cloths are laid upon the sticks and then the extra clothing of the child is spread above that. Over these is packed clay which is trampled down solidly. When the interment has been completed, there is laid upon the grave a fresh, green banana leaf about which the grave diggers sit on low, wooden stools to eat their feast of rice, chicken, and food drinks.

A symbolic animal's foot is woven from basket reed and inserted

into the earth above the grave in company with the skull of a howler monkey to scare away the devils. A string is stretched from the grave to a miniature canoe afloat on the river ready for the long trip to Apya. (The canoe in the grave is a spare in case something happens to the one on the river.) A second strand is strung from the grave to a tree across the river. This forms a spirit bridge by which the ancestors' spirits, who cannot cross water, may come to commune with the newly departed, because the soul may be tired or reluctant to leave the body and may linger a number of days in the grave before setting out upon its journey.

Wooden seats, food, drink, and possessions may be left on the grave for use by the occupant or its ancestors' spirits. An old lantern may be lighted from time to time above the grave for a year.

Finally, a hut is built over the grave if it is not dug inside an already existing family burial house, or uaneka.

From time to time during the day, the uncle of the little girl fires a shotgun into the air to scare away evil spirits and a final shotgun blast announces to the village that the burial has been completed.

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