

AHORA TODOS SOMOS PANAMEÑOS: KUNA IDENTITY AND PANAMANIAN
NATIONALISM UNDER THE TORRIJOS REGIME, 1968-1981

By

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To the indigenous peoples of Latin America, who daily fight against injustice
to preserve their lands and cultures.

In particular, I dedicate this project to the Bribri people of Costa Rica, who first
opened my eyes to the indigenous struggle
and to the Kuna people of Panamá, whose tenacity never ceases to inspire me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Full Name	Abbreviation
Archivo de la Intendencia	AI
Bernal Castillo Díaz Collection	BCD
Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna	CGCK
Congreso General Kuna	CGK
Instituto Panameño de Turismo	IPAT
Instituto para la Formación y Aprovechamiento de Recursos	IFARHU
Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario	MIDA
Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna	MJK
Mónica Martínez Maury Collection	MMM
Partido Revolucionario Democrático	PRD
Rubén Kantule Collection	RK

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Panama has a complex and controversial history, and since its inception, Panama has struggled to forge a nationalism that reflects cohesion and autonomy. A US traveler to Panama in 1919 wrote,

A Panamanian cart, loaded with English tea biscuit...driven by a Hindu wearing a turban, drove up in front of a Chinese shop. The Jamaican clerk...the San Blas errand boy...a Spanish policeman...that is Panamá every day.¹

This quote represents the ethnic diversity of Panamanian citizens, but throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Panamanian government fought this influx of foreigners, believing that only homogenization could unify the nation. The presidencies of the Arias brothers (1932-1936, 1940-1941, 1949-1951, 1968) prioritized the promotion of a unique Panamanian nationalism. Immigration policies varied from forced assimilation, segregation and discrimination, demonstrating how the elite defined "the Panamanian" as an individual with a Hispanic heritage, excluding other races and ethnicities.² However, these policies shifted after World War II, particularly with the beginning of military rule in 1968, and multiculturalism became a crucial tenet of Panamanian national identity.³

¹ Peter A. Szok, *La última gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century Panamá* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2001), 47.

² Michael Conniff, "Panama Since 1903," in *Cambridge History of Latin America*. Vol. 7, ed. Leslie Bethel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 622.

³ Lynn Horton, "Contesting State Multiculturalism: Indigenous Land Struggles in Eastern Panama," *Journal for Latin American Studies* 38 (2006): 838.

In Panama, indigenous people comprise 10% of the population total, and the Kuna are the second largest of the indigenous groups.⁴ However, only the Kuna have enjoyed relative autonomy, beginning with their rebellion against the Panamanian state in 1925. Today, the Kuna maintain a distinct internal law in their region, the comarca of San Blas, and they control all economic ventures, practice bilingual education, and regularly hold traditional congresses.⁵ This transformation began to occur under the military regime of General Omar Torrijos as his pluriethnic nationalism projects sought to include the Kuna and other marginalized groups into the national imagination. As the populist practices of the Torrijos era increasingly integrated the San Blas comarca into the Panamanian state, the Kuna utilized state institutions and nationalistic discourse to consolidate comarcal authority, increasing Kuna autonomy.

The Comarca of San Blas is an archipelago of over 360 islands, east of Colón near Panama's Caribbean coast (see Figures 1 and 2). There are 49 communities, with only 10 located on the mainland. The others occupy single islands, and the Kuna utilize small boats to travel between islands. Kuna towns utilize territory on the mainland for agriculture to grow plantains, bananas, coconuts, rice, yucca, and sugar cane.⁶ Throughout the colonial era, the Kuna remained independent despite Spanish efforts at acculturation, and they openly

⁴ Anayansi Turner Y., *El derecho de autodeterminación de los pueblos indígenas de Panamá* (Panamá: Universidad de Panamá, Instituto de Estudios Nacionales, 2008), 48.

⁵ In 1998, The Panamanian government renamed the comarca from the Spanish name of San Blas to the Kuna term for the region, Kuna Yala at the request of the CGK. However, during the era studied in this paper, the region still retained the former name, and for simplicity's sake, I will refer to it as San Blas.

⁶ Miguel Alberto Bartolomé et Alicia Barabas, "Recursos culturales y autonomía étnica: la democracia participativa de los Kunas de Panamá," *Amérique Latine Histoire et Mémoire* 10 (2004): 2. <http://alhim.revues.org/document127.html> (accessed 10 July 2011).

traded with many of the Atlantic world powers, primarily the British.⁷ However, when Panama gained independence from Colombia in 1903, the new national government sought to assimilate the Kuna into the mainstream population, issuing two laws, in 1908 and 1912, respectively, that authorized the government to civilize and latinize the indigenous populations.⁸ Because Panama had no standing army, governmental policy centered on forced cultural assimilation rather than violent coercion.



Figure 1. Map of Panama
 Source: <http://geology.com/world/panama-satellite-image.shtml>
 (accessed March 6, 2012)

⁷ David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 174-176.

⁸ Ley 59 de 31 diciembre 1908; Ley 56 de 28 diciembre 1912.

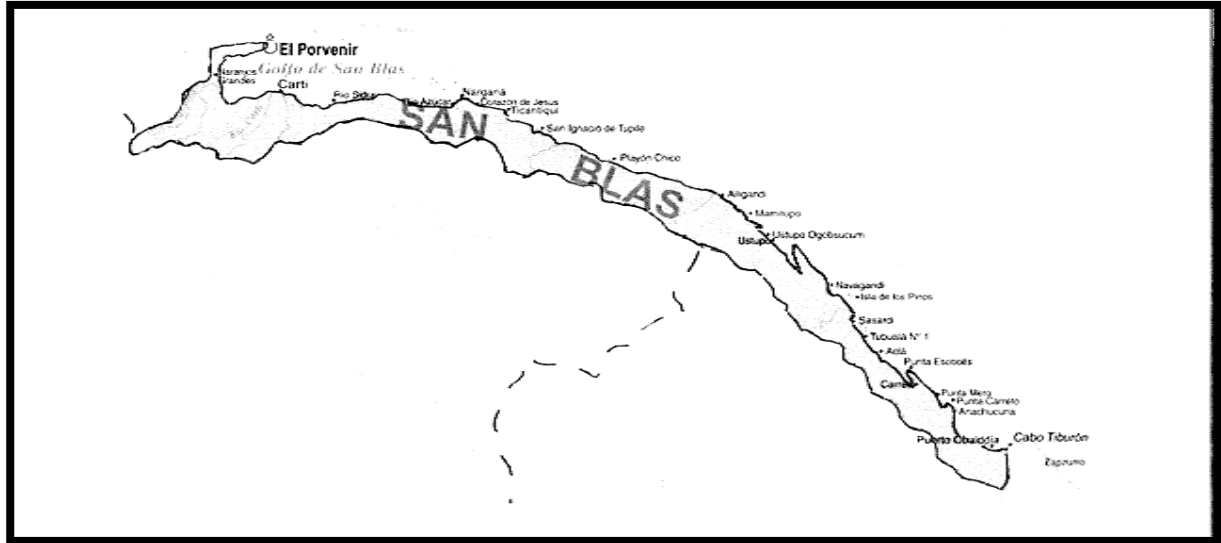


Figure 2. Map of San Blas

Source:

[http://mapsof.net/uploads/static_maps/kuna_yala_\(san_blas\)_panama_political_map.jpg](http://mapsof.net/uploads/static_maps/kuna_yala_(san_blas)_panama_political_map.jpg)
(accessed February 27, 2012)

The Kuna did not respond passively to this governmental attempt at ethnocide. In 1925, the Kuna successfully rebelled against Panama, and through US mediation, formed a treaty with the Panamanian state, achieving regional autonomy for the Kuna.⁹ In 1938, the region was officially recognized as a Kuna comarca, which is a political division of territory governed by indigenous authorities and institutions.¹⁰ However, the law designated an intendant as the maximum authority in the comarca, charging him with overseeing the traditional governance.¹¹

⁹ James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, The United States, and the San Blas Kuna* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998). James Howe has conducted ethnographical and historical research with the Kuna for over forty years, and this book is a remarkable compilation of both the archival record and oral histories pertaining to the 1925 rebellion.

¹⁰ *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, 23 septiembre 1938, No. 7873, Ley 2 de 16 septiembre 1938; Gilberto Marulanda y Bernal D. Castillo, *Ciudadanía y participación política indígena en Panamá* (Panamá: Centro de Investigaciones Políticas, Sociales, Económicas, 2009), 18.

¹¹ Ley 2 de 16 septiembre 1938.

Finally, in February 1953, the Panamanian government passed *Ley 16*, or the Kuna's *Carta Orgánica*, which institutionalized the comarca's boundaries, prohibiting foreigners and non-Kuna Panamanians from owning land within the comarca's boundaries. The Kuna used the *Carta Orgánica* to justify their claims to territorial autonomy, and while the law did prohibit individuals from encroaching onto comarcas land, it maintained that the government could promote mining, tourism, or other profitable ventures in the region, justifying that the land remained part of the Panamanian state and thus could be used for the betterment of the Panamanian nation.¹²

The *Carta Orgánica* also officially recognized the authority of the traditional Kuna congress, the Congreso General Kuna (CGK). In San Blas, every community elects a *sahila*, who is the head of the community. The national law provided a small salary for these individuals, but beyond this stipend, *sahilas* receive no other privilege; their role is to advise the community and represent the community in the larger congresso meetings.¹³ The CGK chooses three *sahilas* to be the head *sahilas*, the highest traditional authority in the comarca. This appointment lasts until the *sahila* either resigns or passes away. The CGK meets at least twice annually to evaluate the status of the comarca. This organization protects Kuna culture and traditions, collects community funds and allocates them to work projects, and submits reports to the Intendant.¹⁴ While the *Carta Orgánica* did give legitimacy to the *sahilas* and the CGK, it maintained that the national government's representative, the Intendant, was the

¹² *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, No 12.042, 7 abril 1953, Ley No. 16, 9 febrero 1953.

¹³ Everildo Viva y Mirna Villarreal, "La Comarca Kuna: funcionamiento económico y perspectivas," (Thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1991), 68.

¹⁴ Eladio Arias Robinson, Yolanda Elivia Pinzón Broce, y Flaviano Iglesia López, "Estudios socio-económico de la migración Kuna hacia la ciudad de Panamá," (Thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1988), 35; for a thorough study of Kuna governance see James Howe, *The Kuna Gathering: Contemporary Village Politics in Panama* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

highest authority and prohibited the CGK from creating internal laws that violated national legislation. Local sahilas regularly submitted reports to the Intendant regarding the status of their respective communities. In addition, they also reported any issues with government personnel, individual citizens, or any requests for government funding, to the Intendant.¹⁵ The Intendant, during this era, was the primary link the Kuna had to the nation; the region remained isolated and largely ignored by the rest of Panamá, allowing a strong ethnic identity to develop.

This project aims to study the relationship between the Kuna and the Torrijos government, focusing on issues of ethnic identity and nationalism. With regards to the literature on nationalism, Panama is a unique Latin American case because independence was achieved a century later than most Latin American countries, thus the international stage, overarching ideologies, and power relations were drastically different. In terms of indigenous movements, the Kuna are exceptional; unlike larger and more prominent indigenous populations, the Kuna have achieved regional autonomy and have obtained active representation within the Panamanian national government. This project illustrates the challenges that ethnic identity plays in a state's efforts to formulate a single nationalism as unifying projects often result in the increased expression of ethnic or regional identities.

A broad definition of nationalism is that it is “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation.”¹⁶ Therefore, nationalism is an

¹⁵ The Archive of the Intendancy is replete with examples of communication between the local community sahilas and the Intendant. The following documents are examples that portray the cited relationship: AI, CGK, Legajo entitled 1950s/1960s; Sahila of Narganá to Intendente Barragán, El Porvenir, 4 marzo 1966; Sahila, Ailigandí to Intendente Barragán, El Porvenir, 15 marzo 1966; Felipe Martínez, Ustupu, to Intendente Barragán, El Porvenir, 31 marzo 1966.

¹⁶ Anthony P. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 73.

ideology and a manner of behavior.¹⁷ One major debate in the field is whether nationalism is a modern or a primordial construction. Primordialists emphasize historic ethnic roots as the organization for modern nations, while modernists disregard ethnic ties, believing nations to be formed through modern institutions, such as capitalism or mass education.¹⁸ Modernists argue that nationalism is a creation of a societal elite.¹⁹ In Panamanian nationalism, it is clear that elites created many elements but that the multiple ethnic groups present in the state influenced ideological development. Scholars are beginning to recognize the issues that these populations pose to the creation of a state nationalism and national identity.²⁰

Joel Sherzer, a linguist who studies the Kuna, defined an ethnic group as "a recognizably distinct group of people substantially embedded in a larger society whose inventory of culturally distinct traits has been produced to a significant extent by interaction with other sectors of society."²¹ Because of the indigenous population in Latin America, the integration of ethnic groups and their role in the state is an unavoidable concern in Latin American nationalism. Rebecca Earle's work, *The Return of the Native*, examines elite rhetoric and the role of the Indian in forming 19th century Latin American national identities. Initially seen as instrumental to the formation of a national past, by mid-19th century, elites

¹⁷ James G. Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 2^d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 27.

¹⁸ Craig Calhoun. *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism*, 67.

²¹ Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer, "Indians, Nation-States, and Culture," in *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America* ed. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 131.

considered the indigenous barbarous and uncivilized.²² The problem of the Indian emerged, which Earle defined as “the belief that a large indigenous population weakened the state and impeded the development of a national identity.”²³

Thus, the “Indian Question” was linked to the national agenda in two main ways: first, through the structure of citizenship and second, through the role that indigenous populations play in the creation of national identity.²⁴ Because states deemed ethnic homogenization as necessary for modernization, they largely ignored the incorporation of multiple ethnic elements into national identity.²⁵ Richard Adams identified four categories for methods the Latin American state employed during the 19th century in dealing with ethnicities: annihilate through superior military force, exclude from the national agenda, control through economic measures, or integrate into the larger state.²⁶

By the 20th century, this stance was not as harsh, but as Stefano Varese argued, indigenous rhetoric could only be incorporated into the nationalist program as long as it did not challenge the hegemony of the state elite.²⁷ Lynn Horton argues that through the late 20th century, Latin American states shifted nationalism ideologies away from ethnic

²² Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native, Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁴ Nancy Grey-Postero, “Indigenous Movements and the Indian Question,” in *The Struggle for Indigenous Rights in Latin America* ed. by Nancy Grey-Postero and Leon Zamoso (Brighton, Great Britain: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 6.

²⁵ Héctor Díaz Polanco, *Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: The Quest for Self Determination*, trans. Lucia Rayas (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 88.

²⁶ Richard N. Adams, “Strategies of Ethnic Survival in Central America,” in *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, ed. by Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 187-190.

²⁷ Stefano Varese, “Dialectic Denied,” in *Witness to Sovereignty: Essays on the Indian Movement in Latin America* (Copenhagen, Denmark: International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2006), 131.

homogenization and toward “state-sanctioned multiculturalism.”²⁸ Torrijos adopted this approach in his effort to consolidate his power through gaining the support of Panama's diverse populace. At the same time that these pluriethnic programs include indigenous populations, they often provoke a reaction against unity, and the resulting indigenous movements challenge the unity that nationalism strives to achieve. Indigenous populations, such as the Kuna, assert themselves as citizens who deserve rights, and “not relics of the past but contemporary socio-cultural groups within national society,” and often these movements call for resurgences in ethnic identity and cultural preservation.²⁹ This paper seeks to examine a case where this challenge to nationalism is present and evident, exploring the delicate balance between ethnic and national identity that the Kuna have achieved as they preserve elements of their culture while actively engaging in Panamanian politics and society.

In this paper, I utilize documents from the *Archivo Nacional de Panamá* and the *Biblioteca Nacional*, secondary sources and thesis papers from the *Universidad Nacional de Panamá*, collections from the *Fundación Omar Torrijos Herrera*, and the personal papers of Ruben Pérez Kantule, former secretary of the Intendant in San Blas. However, in addition to these sources, I also heavily use archival materials from the *Archivo de la Intendencia de San Blas*, a poorly preserved archive that has rarely been used in anthropological or historical work. This archive, once located at the seat of the Intendancy in El Porvenir, San Blas, has now been relocated and distributed amongst Kuna leaders, with the majority of the surviving documents housed in the CGK office in Panama City. This archive is in disarray; decaying documents are haphazardly thrown in trash bags and filing cabinets with little organization.

²⁸ Horton, "Contesting State Multiculturalism," 832.

²⁹ Díaz Polanco, *Indigenous Peoples in Latin America*, 88.

However, these primary sources enabled me to access the Kuna voice and perspective, thus allowing me to understand the nuanced and sometimes differing Kuna responses to governmental action. Kuna historian Bernal Castillo Díaz, graciously allowed me to study the documents from this archive that are in his possession, and Dr. Mónica Maury Martínez shared photocopies of documents from the archive that she gathered during her fieldwork in San Blas that I was unable to locate at the CGK. The location of each document is noted in the citation information. Through utilizing these sources, I hope to provide a balanced approach to this era, critically studying the developments from both the national and the Kuna perspective.

This paper is organized chronologically, bounded by the duration of Omar Torrijos' time in power, which ended suddenly with his death in 1981. Chapter 2 explores the initial changes in the comarca during the first three years of military rule, defining Torrijos' project of pluriethnic nationalism and progressive integration programs. The 1972 Constitution and the structural changes it implemented in the comarca are the themes for Chapter 3, highlighting the exacerbated tensions between traditional Kuna governance and national institutions. Chapter 4 continues unfolding this debate, discussing the causes and the effects of the CGK's rupture in 1976, the Kuna response to the Canal Treaty Plebiscite in 1977, and the reunification of the CGK in 1978. In conclusion, Chapter 5 explores how the Kuna utilized their equal status as Panamanian citizens to consolidate their power and further preserve their ethnic identity. Through the course of the Torrijos years, national integration measures challenged Kuna autonomy, resulting in serious polemics and even rupture within the comarca. Through contesting and negotiating these issues of identity and nation, the

Kuna utilized their inclusion in the national collective to further consolidate their control over the San Blas comarca, thus creating institutions to preserve their ethnic identity.

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF PLURIETHNIC NATIONALISM: 1968-1971

Introduction

On January 9, 1962, violence erupted between the National Guard and residents of Río Tigre, San Blas over contraband trade with Colombians. The Kuna argued contraband trading was the only way they could obtain basic material needs at reasonable prices as the Panamanian markets in nearby Colón charged exorbitant rates. The National Guard, desiring to end this illegal trade, launched a surprise attack at Río Tigre's dock, bringing this debate to national attention. Interestingly, the Major in charge of Panama's Atlantic Zone National Guard was none other than Omar Torrijos Herrera, and in the aftermath of the rebellion, he worked with Kuna leaders to restore order to the comarca.¹

The Río Tigre incident added to the existing tension between the Panamanian National Guard and the Kuna that stemmed from the 1925 rebellion. However, when General Torrijos came to power in late 1968 through a military coup, this complicated history between the Kuna and the Panamanian National Guard shifted as Torrijos abstained from the forcible subjugation many of his predecessors employed. Rather, Torrijos instituted a nation-building program designed to integrate the entirety of Panama's diverse populace into a unified notion of a citizenry, including the Kuna, for the first time, into the national imagination.

¹ "Nuevos choques entre Indios y Guardias," *Crítica*, 11 enero 1962, 1; "Los sucesos de San Blas," *Crítica*, 11 enero 1962, 4; "Versión indígena de los sucesos del día 9," *Crítica* 11 enero 1962, 8; "Detenidos los Cabecillas," *Crítica*, 12 enero 1962, 1.

General Torrijos Comes to Power

In 1968, Panamanians prepared for presidential elections as the two candidates, Arnulfo Arias Madrid and David Samudio Ávila launched aggressive campaigns. San Blas pledged its support to Arias, stating that he seemed genuinely concerned about the comarca's well-being.² Thus, when the National Guard overthrew Arias' government only eleven days after his inauguration, the Kuna wondered if their history of actions against the National Guard and their support of the deposed President would have repercussions with the military government. However, Torrijos made it evident that he intended to foster cooperative relations in the San Blas region; instead of forcibly subjugating the Kuna, he intended to create a unified nation, and as part of this project, Torrijos determined to progressively integrate the Kuna into the Panamanian nation-state through peaceful programs.

General Omar Torrijos Herrera remains a controversial figure in Panamanian history. Born in 1929 in Santiago, Veraguas province, Torrijos spent his childhood in the poorest city in Panama's poorest province. His parents were both teachers, and due to their steady income, Torrijos received a university education, attending the *Academia Militar* in San Salvador.³ Many Panamanians revere Torrijos as the leader who finally brought sovereignty to Panama, who esteemed and incorporated the masses, and who forged a new Panamanian identity based upon unity. However, others label Torrijos as an incompetent, immoral, corrupt leader who initiated the darkest two decades in Panamanian history.⁴ Regardless of

² "La voz de la juventud Kuna del P. Panameñista," *Crítica*, 29 abril 1968, 14; "Mañana va Arnulfo a San Blas," *Crítica*, 30 abril 1968, 16; "Arnulfo Arias obtuvo amplio respaldo en San Blas," *Crítica*, 3 mayo 1968, 20.

³ "Rascos biográficos de Omar Torrijos," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov. 1981).

⁴ R.M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez, *In the Time of Tyrants* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1990). R.M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez represent this viewpoint, debating Torrijos' heroic and idealistic image in their scathing critique of Panama's military dictators, highlighting the corruption, forced disappearances and assassinations, and abolishment of the freedom of the press and political parties.

the interpretation of Torrijos' military government or his personal motivations, his official discourses and narratives portray an image of a united Panama that values the unique contributions of each ethnic population, and he repeatedly used the phrase "now we are all Panamanians" to exemplify this national vision.⁵

In Panama, past administrations did little to incorporate the Kuna into the nation. Very rarely was a governmental presence felt in the comarca, and any official visits usually coincided with elections, as did Arias' visit in May 1968.⁶ However, in a 1977 newspaper article reflecting on the coup, a spokesperson from the *Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna* (MJK) wrote:

The politicians of the oligarchy came to San Blas only for the political campaigns to offer liquors, gifts so that they (the Kuna) would vote in favor of them. Without a doubt, when they arrived in power they forgot the Kunas. All of this indicates that there wasn't a mutual understanding between the Kuna people and the national government. On October 11, 1968, a new government arose. The political and economic structures of the country changed...the indigenous had the opportunity to actively participate in the political life of the country, now they have voice and vote in the Assembly. This indicates that we have progressed some with this government.⁷

As this quote demonstrates, a fundamental change occurred in Panamanian nationalism under the Torrijos regime as the military government attempted to incorporate the entire populace,

⁵ Juan Antonio Tack, ed., *Nuestra revolución: discursos fundamentales del General Omar Torrijos Herrera, Jefe del Gobierno de la República de Panamá* (Panamá: Lotería Nacional de Beneficencia, 1974), 99; Original text: "Ahora todos somos panameños."

⁶ "Mañana va Arnulfo a San Blas," *Crítica*, 30 abril 1968, 16; "Arnulfo Arias obtuvo amplio respaldo en San Blas," *Crítica*, 3 mayo 1968, 20.

⁷ "El movimiento de la juventud Kuna dirá SI rotundo," *Matutino*, 22 oct. 1977, 8-A; Original text: "Los políticos de la oligarquía venían a San Blas solamente por las campañas políticas a ofrecer licores, regalos para que voten a favor de ellos. Sin embargo, cuando llegan al poder se olvidan de los kunas. Todo eso indica que no había un entendimiento mutuo entre el pueblo kuna y el gobierno nacional. El 11 de octubre de 1968 surge un nuevo gobierno. Se cambian las estructuras políticas y económicas del país...los indígenas tuvieron la oportunidad de participar activamente en la vida política del país, ahora ya tienen voz y voto en la Asamblea. Eso indica que hemos progresando algo con este gobierno."

including the Kuna, into the nation, making multiculturalism a crucial tenet of Panamanian national identity.⁸

Review of Nationalism Theory

Benedict Anderson defined a nation as "an imagined political community."⁹ This broad definition emphasizes the psychological elements of the nation by suggesting that a nation only exists when a populace maintains membership and self-identifies with this community. Especially in post-colonial societies, it is necessary to define the nation in psychological terms rather than political or economic ones as these societies are often the product of centuries of contestation between differing systems. Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism is "the principle of homogenous cultural units as the foundations of political life, and of the obligatory cultural unity of rulers and ruled."¹⁰ To achieve this homogeneity in a state comprised of many ethnicities, each with unique histories and cultural practices, nation-builders must create an overarching identity that blends the regional and ethnic identities into a homogenous fusion. The resulting national culture, therefore, transcends the palpable and incorporates intangible elements such as values and beliefs.

Establishing a nation requires creativity; nations simply do not evolve but are the product of what Hobsbawm calls invented traditions.¹¹ States develop a national history, devise national traditions, construct national symbols, and forge an overarching national

⁸Horton, "Contesting State Multiculturalism," 838.

⁹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Canto ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

identity to unite heterogeneous populations.¹² While it is obviously impossible to determine whether each individual adheres to a national identity over other identities, historians can use narratives and discourse in verbal, written, or performative forms to argue that subpopulations within a state identify with the official version of nationalism.¹³

In postcolonial states, boundaries often reflect their colonial counterparts rather than ethnic divisions. As a result, many states have multiple ethnic groups within the populace. Clifford Geertz examines variable of ethnicity, arguing that in many postcolonial states, individuals often feel the strongest allegiance to their ethnic bond rather than their created nationality, thus weakening the prospect of unifying the populace under a single national identity.¹⁴ One scholar who emphasizes the importance of ethnicity in studies of nationalism is sociologist Craig Calhoun. Calhoun's framework for studying nationalism emphasizes discursive formation, and he considers not only official discourse but he also highlights its everyday forms because in these one can witness the way citizens within a territory connect to each other, to past events, and to customs and traditions.¹⁵ As historians study how ethnic groups assert their multiple identities and navigate within the nation-state, the ambiguity and

¹² Examples of this creative process of nationalism are rampant in Latin America. For example, see Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930*; Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in this Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965*; Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*; Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco Peru, 1919-1991*; Consuelo Cruz, "Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Past and Make Their Futures."

¹³ I define narrative as a one-way line of communication, such as a speech or published article, and I use the term "discourse" to refer to a dialogue, discussion, or debate.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Free Press, 1963), 110.

¹⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism 3*. Calhoun defines discursive formation as "a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions."

complexity of nationalism, both in official discourse and in quotidian interaction, become evident.

The field of nationalism needs to consider the effects of multiple prevalent identities as factors like regional or ethnic identity affect an individual's level of commitment to their national identity. As states, like Panama, strive to build internal cohesion centered on one national identity, these variables often impede progress. Torrijos recognized the diversity within the state, and rather than ignoring this social reality, capitalized on its exceptionalism. Instead of forcibly homogenizing the populace, Torrijos created a new national identity that celebrated "the Panamanian" as a mixture of the state's subcultures.

Omar Torrijos and Pluriethnic Nationalism

Torrijos claimed that he did not seek personal fame or wealth. Rather, he famously said, "I do not want to enter history, I want to enter the Canal Zone."¹⁶ This ambition of recovering the Canal was the first of the revolutionary government's two fundamental goals, the second being to "convert a caricature of a country into a nation."¹⁷ Only a unified Panamanian nation could accomplish these goals, and Torrijos knew that unifying the diverse population would require significant revision of Panamanian nationalism. Torrijos' government sought to redefine the national imagination through modifying the way the populace defined Panamanian culture by creating a pluriethnic nationalism.

¹⁶ Diogenes Cedeño Cenci, *Omar Torrijos Herrera y su concepción de Panamá como un estado docente*, (Fundación Omar Torrijos, Panamá, 2000), 5; Original text: "Yo no quiero entrar en la historia; yo quiero entrar en la Zona del Canal."

¹⁷ Neiva Moreira Afoth, "Entrevista al General Torrijos," *Cuadernos del Tercer Mundo*, 41 (Mexico, 1981), 15, quoted in *Ideario: Omar Torrijos* (Panamá: Fundación Omar Torrijos Herrera, 2006), 25; Original text: "convertir una caricatura del país en una nación".

Until this time, elites dominated the national imagination, defining a Panamanian as a Spanish-speaking individual with an Iberian heritage. This narrow vision excluded Panama's vast immigrant population and indigenous population from the vague concept of national identity.¹⁸ Immediately upon seizing power, Torrijos began reshaping this national identity, shifting the concept of the Panamanian nation from one of physical homogeneity through common language and ancestral lineage to a pluriethnic nationalism, albeit physically diverse, united by the common goal of territorial sovereignty. Reina Torres de Arauz, a notable Panamanian anthropologist and close friend of Torrijos', wrote, "Torrijos always had a clear understanding that we are a pluricultural and pluriracial republic, and that all of us together compose a nation."¹⁹ The Torrijos regime believed that by proclaiming every citizen, despite race or culture, as Panamanian, the government could achieve the unity and support necessary to successfully negotiate the return of the Canal Zone. This accomplishment could subsequently unite the populace under this shared history and usher in an era where individuals would first identify as Panamanian rather than with an ethnic or transnational identity. Therefore, Torrijos redefined a Panamanian, stating, "The isthmian is the expression of the marriage of many cultures, of different races and peoples."²⁰ By establishing this definition, essentially all residents of Panama, regardless of their ethnic

¹⁸ See Peter Szok, *La última gaviota*, for a discussion of elite values and philosophy during the first thirty years of the independent republic and William Frank Robinson, *The Arias Madrid Brothers: Nationalist Politics in Panama* for further information on nationalism under the Arias brothers, who largely dominated the political scene until the 1968 coup.

¹⁹ Reina Torres de Arauz, "Omar Torrijos y su ideario de la cultura nacional," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov. 1981): 212; Original text: "Torrijos siempre tuvo bien claro que somos una república pluricultural y pluriracial y que todos juntos componemos una nación."

²⁰ Rafael Ángel Murgas G. *Filosofía del credo político de Omar Torrijos Herrera* (Panamá: Destellos, 1981), 280; Original text: "El istmeño es la expresión del matrimonio de muchas culturas, de razas y pueblos diferentes."

heritage, were considered Panamanian instead of only those citizens who shared a common Hispanic heritage.

Rampant through governmental discourse and decrees are efforts at producing and promoting this pluriethnic nationalism. Under Torrijos, Panama created a national heritage through renovating historic districts, founding museums, and emphasizing cultural events like the National Ballet, National Symphony Orchestra, folklore dancing, fine arts, and sports. The administration recognized "the diverse cultural and racial mosaic" that comprised Panamanian society and officially celebrated the unique contributions of each as an integral part of the Panamanian nation.²¹ Under Torrijos, the state fashioned a cohesive community by creating shared memories and national values, as they believed nationalism was the powerful tool with which to achieve territorial sovereignty and retain power.

The San Blas Comarca 1968-1971

In the 1970 Panamanian census, San Blas reported a population of 24,681 individuals, almost half being older than twenty-one years of age. The large majority, 97%, identified themselves as indigenous. The comarca had just over 3,000 houses, averaging eight individuals per household. Over 94% of these homes had no drinking water or electricity. Comparatively, on a national scale, each household averaged five members, with 35% of homes existing without drinking water and just 28% without electricity. The illiteracy rate in Spanish amongst San Blas residents over the age of ten was 65%, much greater than the

²¹ Nicolas Ardito Barletta, "Omar Torrijos H. y el desarrollo nacional de Panamá," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov. 1981): 170.

nation-wide rate of 20%.²² As these basic statistics demonstrate, the San Blas comarca was much less developed in relation to the rest of Panama, and the San Blas residents blamed this status on the national government's neglect.

Upon seizing power, General Torrijos sought to win public approval, particularly of Panama's lower classes. In Panama, this categorization included the indigenous populations. Torrijos travelled throughout Panama, visiting remote villages to interact directly with the people, and in these trips, he gave speeches pledging his commitment to Panama's poor and admiring these populations as the strength and core of the Panamanian nation.²³ Torrijos attributed his admiration for Panama's indigenous populations to his involvement in mediating a solution to the Guaymí uprising in 1965. Instead of violently suppressing the revolt, Torrijos recalled that he insisted upon a meeting with Guaymí chief, Samuel González, and after respectfully listening to González' grievances, peacefully resolved the issue by negotiating a treaty between the Panamanian state and this Guaymí community. Manuel Noriega wrote of the impact this event had upon Torrijos, stating, "From that moment, April 25, 1965, Omar Torrijos was conscious of the problem of the Indian, of his [the Indian] value as a human being, of his potential as a citizen, and of his wisdom as an aborigine."²⁴ Thus, Torrijos' government did not maintain a passive or neglectful approach toward Panama's indigenous populations; on the contrary, the military regime actively sought measures to integrate these peoples into the national community.

²² República de Panamá, Contraloría General de la República, Dirección de Estadística y Censo, *Censos Nacionales de 1970*, 10 mayo 1970.

²³ Tack, *Nuestra revolución*, 101.

²⁴ Manuel Antonio Noriega, "Fundamentos y evolución de un jefe," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov. 1981): 98-99; Original text: "Desde ese momento, 25 de abril de 1965, Omar Torrijos tomó conciencia del problema del indio, de su valor como ente humano, de su potencial como ciudadano, y de su sabiduría como aborigen."

Convenio 107 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) manifests the philosophy Torrijos adopted regarding the Kuna. In 1971, his government ratified this agreement, which was first signed at the ILO Convention in Geneva in 1957.²⁵ The document asserts that indigenous peoples have the right to equal opportunity, equal freedoms, dignity, and the pursuit of material well being; however, the document indirectly asserts that it is the role of the government to define how this pursuit of equality will be practiced. Little voice is given to indigenous communities but rather the *Convenio* contends that it is the responsibility of the national government to "progressively integrate" indigenous communities into the nation. Article II of the document specifically prohibits the use of force or coercion in the integration programs. Likewise, Article V and VII suggest that national governments collaborate with local indigenous representatives in developing these projects, allowing the indigenous to protect their own customs and values as long as they do not undermine national laws or the objectives of the programs.²⁶

During the Torrijos administration, the Panamanian government institutionalized many programs of integration in San Blas, ranging from infrastructure initiatives, to tourism and education projects. One historian labels the Torrijos decade "the retrocession of the Kuna culture" because of the sheer number of western organizations that maintained a presence in the comarca during this time, serving to extend Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalist project onto the Kuna.²⁷ During the first three years of the military regime, the comarca of

²⁵ *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, 17 marzo 1971, No 16.812, Decreto de Gabinete No. 53, 26 febrero 1971, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁷ Alan Yuri Hernández Porras, "El Surgimiento del Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna en 1972," (Thesis, University of Panamá, 2002), 29; Original text: "el retroceso de la cultura kuna."

San Blas underwent significant political, economic, and sociocultural changes that began Torrijos' project of the progressive integration of the Kuna into the Panamanian nation.

Political Changes

One critical change in the comarca affected the internal governance of San Blas. At the time of the 1968 coup, the three sahilas, or caciques, were Yabiliginia, Olotebiliginia, and Estanislao López.²⁸ However, in 1969, Yabiliginia resigned as first sahila, and just seven months later, Olotebiliginia retired, both citing old age and health concerns as the reason for their resignations. Thus, in 1970, Estanislao López, Ceferino Colman, and Kawidi were the three head sahilas for the comarca.²⁹ For the Congreso to lose two of their key leaders during an era of change and challenge only exacerbated the building tensions as the traditional leadership began to debate the government's progressive integration programs imposed upon the comarca.

A second significant political change occurred in the first month of Torrijos' regime and established San Blas as politically independent from the province of Colón. In this decree, the government stated that San Blas "has a special and independent administrative regime and is not a territorial part of the Province of Colón." This change also brought electoral independence to the region.³⁰ Accompanying this autonomy was a plan for electoral reform as the Torrijos administration accused past governments of electoral fraud in rural regions, particularly in San Blas. The reform consisted primarily of re-documenting

²⁸ Rodelick Valdés, "La evolución histórica de los Congresos Generales Kunas" *Revista Lotería*, (Sept-Oct 2008): 11.

²⁹ Mónica Maury Martínez, "De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala: mediación, territorio, y ecología en Panamá, 1903-2004," (Doctoral Thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2007), 118.

³⁰ *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, 7 nov. 1968 no. 16.235, Decreto de Gabinete No. 21, 23 oct. 1968; Original text: "tiene un régimen administrativo especial e independiente, y no es parte territorial de la Provincia de Colón."

Kuna citizens to ensure that each individual only had one identification number. The project divided the comarca into five sectors, creating a system of inspectors to carry out the work. As part of the laws pertaining to the civil registry, each Kuna had to register with a first and last name, parents were responsible for registering children, and marriages had to be legally documented. The process began in January 1970, abolishing former identification numbers and completely re-registered all San Blas residents.³¹

To fulfill this reform, the national government partnered with the CGK, attending meetings to discuss the requirements of registration. The Tribunal Electoral translated the decree, which outlined this process, into Kuna and also played a recording of the decree in Kuna during this meeting to ensure that all attendees, whether bilingual, literate, or not, could understand both the process and the goals of the reform.³² In every community, the government hired auxiliary registrars and paid them to complete the process in their respective community. One letter from Javier Pérez, of Sasardí Mulatupu, to the Intendant, accepted this position with much pride, stating, "I have accepted, as a good Panamanian citizen, a direct contract with my country and the Revolutionary Government Junta."³³ Not only did this program signify the government's interest in eliminating electoral fraud in San Blas, but it also established a precedent of Kuna involvement and the creation of jobs to accomplish government programs in the region.

³¹ "No usar nombres supuestos recomiendan a indígenas," *Crítica*, 13 junio 1969, 22; "Vasto proceso de cedulação se iniciará muy en breve en San Blas," *Crítica*, 26 junio 1969, 28; "Anuladas..." *Crítica*, 28 junio 1969, 21.

³² "El tribunal electoral observará congreso indígena," *Crítica*, 9 julio 1969, 9; "El tribunal electoral estará presente en Congreso Kuna," *Crítica*, 26 julio 1969, 2.

³³ Javier Pérez, Sasardí-Mulatupu, to Luis N. Salazar, El Porvenir, 16 nov. 1970, AI, CGK; Original text: "He aceptado como buen ciudadano panameño una contracción directo a mi país y a la Junta de Gobierno Revolucionario."

During the early years of the Torrijos regime, the Kuna experienced significant internal and external political changes. The retirement of two of the head sahilas shifted power and authority in the CGK at a time when increased national attention to the comarca through political independence from Colón and electoral reform increased the government presence in the comarca.

Economic Changes

A major part of Torrijos' plan of progressive integration involved economic development. The motives for economic aid to underdeveloped regions such as San Blas are debatable, as critics of the regime declare that Torrijos wished to maintain his popular support base and portray himself as the nation's hero, a staunch provider for the poor. In fact, during this era Panama's debt per capita was the highest in the world, and Panama also boasted the worst ratio of debt to revenue.³⁴ Regardless of this polemic, the development funds allocated to San Blas did bring various projects to fruition and brought internal debate regarding the supposed benefits of modernization.

One smaller, though critical project was the renovation of the airplane runway on the island of El Porvenir, the seat of the Intendancy. The government not only hired Kuna workers at a wage of \$2 per day but also reimbursed all expenses for the project. Upon its completion in 1971, this project provided government officials and Kuna delegates alike more opportunity for quicker communication between the national capital and the San Blas comarca.³⁵

³⁴ Koster and Sánchez, *In the Time*, 122.

³⁵ Legajo "Documentos sobre reconstrucción del aeropuerto Porvenir 1971," AI, CGK.

A nation-wide initiative that also affected San Blas was Torrijos' health care reform. In 1970, the Minister of Health called for all communities to participate in the programs, which included establishing health committees in every community.³⁶ While perceived by many Kuna as a positive development, as preventable disease caused 127 fatalities in 1970, this modern healthcare did challenge traditional Kuna medicine, thus translating into a challenge for Kuna culture.³⁷

Two large-scale projects, mining and an oil pipeline, caused much debate amongst the CGK as Kuna leaders feared that these proposed initiatives threatened Kuna territorial autonomy and the environment. In 1966, Francisco A. Torre, director of Panama's Department of Mineral Resources, sent Intendant Barragán a letter informing him and the CGK that the national government authorized civil engineers to enter the comarca to develop plans for possible mining concessions. This letter demonstrates that while the Kuna had some degree of territorial autonomy, the Panamanian government retained final authority over the comarca.³⁸ Between 1969-1972, the government conducted explorations for mineral deposits, locating copper, gold, zinc, and silver on the Río Pito, in the southernmost sector of the comarca.³⁹ The CGK remained concerned and skeptical about these projects, despite the profit share the government promised to the comarca because the initiatives would relocate outsiders to the region and could have deleterious effects upon the environment.

³⁶ República de Panamá, Decreto de Gabinete No. 401, 29 dic. 1970.

³⁷ Congreso General Kuna, Contribución de la dirección de estadística y censo de la Contraloría General al Congreso General Kuna," (Rio Cidra, San Blas, 1972); Arnulfo Prestán, "Etnomedicina Kuna y su resistencia al cambio," *Boletín de la academia panameña de la historia* No. 39-40 (jul-dic. 1984): 31.

³⁸ Francisco A. Torre P., Ministerio de Agricultura, to Juan B. Barragán, El Porvenir, 12 enero 1966, AI, CGK.

³⁹ Lic. Fernando Manfredo Jr, Ministro de Comercio e Industrias, to Luis Napoleon Salazar, DM No. DP-1804-N-75, 24 junio 1975, AI, CGK.

Similarly, the CGK raised objections to an oil pipeline the government wished to build through the comarca. In a 1970 report that the project's overseeing official, Dr. Eduardo Tejeira, submitted to the national government, he outlines the concerns the CGK voiced: first, the pipeline would harm San Blas' coconut plantations, a key revenue source, second, it would pollute their waters, third, it would bring mainstream Panamanian civilization to the comarca, and fourth, the company had not agreed to exclusively hire Kuna workers.⁴⁰ While neither the mining project nor the oil pipeline commenced during the military dictatorship, both provide examples of development proposals during this era that challenged the comarca's territorial autonomy and marked an increased governmental presence in the region.

Increased tourism in San Blas occurred as the military government proposed new projects in the region, but the issue of tourist ventures was nothing new to the comarca. The islands were a popular stopping point for Caribbean cruise ships and Kuna women typically canoed to greet the ships, selling their molas and other handicrafts.⁴¹ As the government began to recognize the potential for significant profits in the region through tourism, the state ministry, *Instituto Panameño de Turismo* (IPAT) began giving permits to North Americans to open tourism companies. These permits, given without the consent of the CGK, caused much distress in the comarca. Prior to Torrijos coming to power, IPAT awarded US citizen, Thomas Moody, a permit to conduct a study in San Blas for a potential tourist center.⁴² Moody constructed and operated a hotel on the island of Pidertupu, violating the law that

⁴⁰ Eduardo Tejeira, "Informe especial en relación con el Congreso General Extraordinario de los Indios Kunas para tratar la conveniencia de los estudios preliminares del proyecto oleoducto trans-Panamá" (Panamá: Ministerio de Comercio e Industrias, 1970), AI, MMM.

⁴¹ "El trasatlántico Oceanic hizo visita a San Blas," *Crítica*, 22 feb. 1968.

⁴² Pedro A Díaz, Gerente de IPAT, Panamá, to Juan B. Barragán, 23 nov. 1966, AI, CGK.

prohibited foreigners from residing in the comarca without CGK permission. The Torrijos government continued to support tourism projects like Moody's hotel, and in 1968, John Mann partnered with Panamanian tourist company, *Enfoque de Panamá*. Mann served as an intermediary between *Enfoque* and the island of Cartí-Sugdub by transporting tourists by boat to the island, giving them tours, and taking them to a local restaurant where they ate food provided by the travel agency but did purchase drinks. Mann received \$5 per tourist while the community only received \$0.50.⁴³ A third example of foreign tourism incursions occurred through Barton Enterprises, under the ownership of North American William Barton. In 1969, a group of 500 Kunas objected to his hotel, Hotel Islandia, because Barton refused to pay them fair wages as the labor code required. Panama's Inspector General of Labor intervened, ordering Barton to pay all back wages and revise his worker policies.⁴⁴ The CGK, like the government, recognized the potential profits in tourism but feared the foreign influences tourists and entrepreneurs brought to the region. Also debated was the role the national government played in tourism development. Many Kuna argued that the CGK, not the national government, should allot permits and receive taxes and direct profits from tourism projects.⁴⁵ Therefore, in January 1969, the CGK created a resolution that demanded that Mann and Moody leave the comarca. The resolution also stated the disapproval that the CGK had regarding the national government's involvement in San Blas tourism development. It argued that because of the transition in comarca leadership, with the retirement of two head sahilas and the changing of the Intendant, the government did not

⁴³ Ricardo Falla, *Turismo en San Blas: un estudio socio-político de sus efectos en la población Kuna (Panama)* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios y Acción Social Panameña, Ago. 1975), 9-10.

⁴⁴ "Norteamericano debe 10.000 balboas a 500 kunas," *Crítica*, 22 marzo 1969, 1.

⁴⁵ Hernández Porras, *El Surgimiento del Congreso General*, 30.

obtain permission from the Kuna but rather bypassed the CGK and directly issued the permits.⁴⁶ Neither Mann nor Moody left San Blas, and these issues continued to plague relations between the CGK and the Panamanian government.

The increase in tourism also affected San Blas' economy. Prior to the surge in tourism, the Kuna predominantly practiced subsistence agriculture and internal trading, and the small external trade that existed was illicit, consisting of trading coconuts with Colombians for material products. However, the increase in tourism drew the Kuna into a cash economy. Men began to work as boat drivers or tour guides and no longer participated in communal work projects like agriculture or construction. Kuna began to open small stores and restaurants in their communities to serve tourists, and many women began supporting their families through mola production, allowing the men to leave the comarca in search of jobs in the capital, on banana plantations, or in the Canal Zone.⁴⁷ This integration into the cash economy subsequently drew San Blas more directly into the national economy, thus reducing the comarca's self-sufficiency.

Sociocultural Changes

The process of progressive integration intended to change the sociocultural landscape of the comarca through introducing elements of popular Panamanian culture. One major channel the Torrijos government used to introduce these acculturating elements was the education system. As a critical component of the Revolutionary Government, Torrijos' regime prioritized the education of the indigenous and all of Panama's rural populations in the Educational Reform.

⁴⁶ Falla, *Turismo*, 25.

⁴⁷ Hernández Porras, *El Surgimiento del Congreso*, 36; Falla, *Turismo*, 31.

Torrijos nearly doubled the budget of Panama's Ministry of Education during his first three years, allocating B/49,460,875 to this governmental office.⁴⁸ Likewise, the number of new schools and new teachers also augmented by percentages of 19% and 52%, respectively.⁴⁹ In 1970, the national government created the *Instituto de Educación Rural* (INSTER), which specifically focused on education development in indigenous and rural sectors of Panama.⁵⁰ Specifically in San Blas, between 1968 and 1974, there was a 55% increase in primary school enrollment, 49% increase in the number of school buildings, and a 59% increase in education personnel.⁵¹ In addition to improving access to primary education in San Blas, the Torrijos regime also allocated scholarships for higher education to Kuna students. The *Instituto para la Formación y Aprovechamiento de Recursos* (IFARHU) created indigenous scholarships, asking the provincial directors of education to select top students in the region to receive these scholarships to study either at the University of Panama or abroad.⁵²

The historical record suggests that most Kuna would favor these changes in the comarca. A series of documents from 1966 between the sahila of Río Tigre and the Intendant record the frustration the local government felt at some parents' refusal to send their children to school. The local secretary and the Director of Río Tigre's school sent the Intendant a list naming these parents, calling them irresponsible and requesting that the

⁴⁸ Cedeño Cenci, 10. Panama's currency, the Balboa, is pegged 1:1 to the US dollar.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gaceta Oficial, 28 abril 1970, No. 16.693, Decreto de Gabinete No. 93, 23 de abril 1970.

⁵¹ Miñoso Arias González, *Cien años de educación en Kuna Yala* (Panamá: Instituto de Investigación Kosgun Galu, 2003), 33-34.

⁵² Legajo "1970 - Educación," *San Blas circular letter*, 31 oct. 1969, AI, CGK.

Intendant intervene and force them to send their children to school.⁵³ Another document, from Río Sidra and Mamartupo, records the local junta's decision to require the attendance of all school-aged children. The resolution establishes a system of fines to punish parents who refuse to comply and states that these individuals will also be refused any type of permits to visit other communities.⁵⁴ Thus, the efforts of the Torrijos regime at increasing educational opportunities fulfilled these communities desire to see the children educated; it is likely, however, that the Kuna also hesitated to embrace the Education Reform because of the assimilation that the state curriculum brought to the comarca.

In *New World of Indigenous Resistance*, Noam Chomsky engages with over twenty scholars from the Americas to discuss educational homogenization. Chomsky remarks upon the socialization aspects of education, and indigenous educators echo his assertion, saying that states often use education as a manner to homogenize the masses. Two Kuna teachers, Reuter Orán Bodin and Kikadir Yadira Orán participated in this project, and they argued that the Panamanian state, like so many Latin American states, saw indigenous cultures as "obstacles to development and a danger to national unity...the Latin American countries developed their educational systems and converted education into an instrument of domination."⁵⁵ These sentiments explain why the Kuna warily viewed the state's Educational Reform. During this era, the national government did increase access to education at all levels for the Kuna, but the schools served the dual purpose of not only teaching students the fundamental subjects of western education but also educated them about the Panamanian

⁵³ Sahila de Río Tigre to Intendente, El Porvenir, 24 abril 1966, AI, CGK.

⁵⁴ Sahila, Río Sidra to Intendente, El Porvenir, 30 abril 1966, AI, CGK.

⁵⁵ Reuter Orán Bodin and Kikadir Yadira Orán, "Reading Noam Chomsky from an Educational Experience of the Kuna People in Panama," in *New World of Indigenous Resistance*, Ed. by Lois Meyer and Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010), 234.

nation. The governmental school system ensured that Kuna students would learn to speak Spanish and would spend the majority of the day conversing in this language. It also indoctrinated students on Panamanian history and culture while minimizing Kuna tradition. While increased opportunities for primary and secondary education could translate into more employment opportunities, the state education program threatened to undermine Kuna culture.

With the surge in educational opportunity came increased organization and involvement of the Kuna youth. In 1970, Kuna youth founded the *Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna* (MJK), which took an active role in comarca politics.⁵⁶ Within the organized youth, however, two ideological factions emerged, which scholar Alan Yuri Hernández Porras labels the progressivists and the traditionalists. The progressivist youth tended to be more acculturated into mainstream Panamanian culture and desired to bring modernization to the comarca. They asserted that development projects and Torrijos' progressive integration programs brought positive growth, and Kuna culture must adapt to conform to Panamanian society. The rival faction, the traditionalists, first and foremost defended Kuna culture, seeing development as potentially detrimental to the comarca. While not opposed to comarca changes, the traditionalists believed that the priority of the Kuna leadership must be the preservation of cultural values and traditions, and only projects that did not impede these elements should be allowed in the comarca.⁵⁷ The Kuna youth, both the progressivists and the traditionalists, revised the power structure in the comarca, because those who traditionally had a political voice were the elders. Because of increased educational

⁵⁶ Geodisio Castillo Díaz, "Técnicas agroforestales - perspectivas para Kuna Ayala," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov.-Dic. 1985): 152.

⁵⁷ Hernández Porras, *El Surgimiento del Congreso*, 29.

opportunities, many Kuna youth left the comarca for a period of time to receive a university education, something few elders ever obtained. Those that returned to the comarca often acted with authority based on their educational achievements, thus challenging traditional authority and the power structure in the CGK.

The CGK determined that the comarca needed a separate authority specifically designated to protect and preserve Kuna culture in the face of increasing assimilation, and so in 1971, at the meeting in Tubualá, it established the *Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna*, which convened for the first time in September 1972.⁵⁸ However, this organization had little legitimacy on the national level, and during this era, it became little more than an avenue for Kuna to voice their objections to governmental policies. Because of the varying factions and opinions within the CGK, the MJK, and Kuna society in general, no unified voice existed within the comarca as individuals began to navigate through the changes that threatened their Kuna identity, encouraging them to place their primary allegiance with the Panamanian nation.

Conclusion

General Torrijos, in order to gain approval for his revolutionary government, enacted social and development programs throughout Panama in an effort to unite the populace. Within San Blas, these programs initialized myriad changes in a short period of time, giving Kuna leadership and society little time to process the effects of these reforms. Mixed reactions materialized amongst the Kuna regarding the nature of Torrijos' programs as some saw the potentially pernicious effects such reforms could have upon the preservation of Kuna culture. As this debate arose, the CGK no longer maintained a unified voice and even its

⁵⁸ Hernández Porras, *El Surgimiento del Congreso*, 69.

legitimacy within the comarca was threatened as governmental institutions and even Kuna youth began to maintain a stronger presence in the comarca. The 1972 Constitution would only further exacerbate this tension, leading to a crisis within the comarca.

CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF INCOMPATIBLE IDENTITIES: 1972-1975

Introduction

The *Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna* (CGCK) first met in May 1972, just a few months prior to Panama's constitutional revisions.¹ This organization represented the dilemma facing the Kuna after the first three years of the Torrijos regime. While the Kuna often wanted governmental funding and development programs, they also recognized the threat of acculturation that an increased governmental presence would bring to the community. Torrijos' government explicitly stated that one of the state's central priorities was the unification of the Panamanian populace under a single identity, but submitting to this goal would jeopardize the Kuna's ethnic identity. In 1972, the Kuna were beginning to recognize this dilemma and thus created the CGCK to address issues relevant to Kuna tradition. However, the comarca's leadership failed to design a unified response. The 1972 Constitution, while giving the Kuna more political voice, revolutionized the politics in the San Blas comarca by establishing a parallel system of governance that often contradicted and challenged traditional structures, further exacerbating this tension between conflicting identities.

¹ Harry Castro Stanziola, "Los congresos de Kuna Yala," *La Prensa*, 19 mayo 2002, 14b.

The 1972 Constitution

On October 11, 1971, three years after the revolutionary government took control of Panama, the Torrijos regime created a commission to reform the Constitution.² Presented a year later in 1972, this Constitution institutionalized Torrijos' vision of pluriethnic nationalism by legally protecting the representations of Panama's distinct cultures and by defining Panamanian culture in terms of this diversity. In the Constitution's fourth chapter, entitled *Cultura Nacional*, the government defined Panamanian culture as "made up of the artistic, philosophic, and scientific manifestations produced by the Panamanian through the centuries."³ The chapter continues to state that the government will protect archaeological sites and historical documents, promote folklore traditions, conserve and study Panama's indigenous languages, and respect the ethnic identity of indigenous communities.⁴ For the first time in Panamanian history, a Constitution recognized the value of indigenous communities, pledging to study and conserve indigenous language and tradition. Regardless of the national government's intentions or commitment to this decree, the Kuna gained political leverage through this legislation to protect their ethnic identity in the face of acculturation programs.

The 1972 Constitution established reserves and education programs for indigenous community, overtly stating that the goal of such programs was "promoting their economic,

² República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria del Tribunal Electoral de Panamá a la Asamblea Nacional de Representantes de Corregimientos*, 1973, 1.

³ República de Panamá, *Constitución Política de la República de Panamá*, 1972, art. 76. Original text: "está constituida por los manifestaciones artísticas, filosóficas y científicas, producidas por el hombre en Panamá a través de las épocas."

⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 80, 82, 83, 85.

social, and political participation in the national life."⁵ While the Constitution did protect indigenous land from private expropriation, it allowed the national government to reclaim the territory if necessary for the national good.⁶ The Kuna used this law to protect the comarca from private business interests, but government projects, such as mining and state-sponsored tourist development, continued to threaten the comarca. With regards to education, the Constitution promised education programs in all indigenous areas and also legalized bilingual education. Again, this tension between national and ethnic identity exists in the legislation. While the Constitution clearly pronounced that the goal of state education programs was "achieving their active participation in the citizenry," by sanctioning bilingual education, the Constitution also gave legitimacy to utilizing the national schools in the comarca to preserve Kuna language and tradition.⁷

In addition to mandating constitutional reform, Torrijos' government also created the *Asamblea Nacional de Representativos* (National Assembly of Representatives), a legislative body with 505 representatives directly elected by each *corregimiento*, or municipality. This legislative body revised and passed the 1972 Constitution, and Marcelino Jaen, the Commissioner of Legislation, wrote:

This constitution was not manipulated by the economic or politically dominant groups, nor by national or transnational companies, it is the authentic expression of the national reality and the legitimate interests of all Panamanians. It is a constitution made by the Panamanians for the Panamanians.⁸

⁵ Ibid., art. 113. Original text: "con el fin de promover su participación económica, social y política en la vida nacional."

⁶ Ibid., art. 45, 116.

⁷ Ibid., art. 83, 102. Original text: "a fin de lograr su participación activa en la función ciudadana."

⁸ Marcelino Jaen, "Las instituciones de la nueva patria," *Revista Lotería*, (Nov. 1981): 121. Original text: "Esta constitución no fue manipulada por los grupos dominantes, en lo económico y político, ni por empresarios nacionales ni de las transnacionales, es la expresión auténtica de la realidad nacional y de

Therefore, because the Constitution was framed as a product of the Panamanian people, the Kuna utilized this legislation to their benefit to enjoy the privileges allotted to them as citizens but also to claim that the government had a direct responsibility to uphold Kuna culture.

Beyond defining indigenous rights, the 1972 Constitution decentralized the national government through the creation of a statewide bureaucratic structure that wielded considerable decision-making power at the local level. Because the government had granted San Blas electoral independence from Colón, the comarca directly elected four representatives to serve in the National Assembly, each representing a corregimiento (see Figure 3). Three of the corregimientos corresponded to the traditional divisions in the CGK as each sector elected one chief *sahila*. The fourth corregimiento, Puerto Obaldía, remained outside the jurisdiction of the CGK and answered directly to the Intendant. While part of the comarca due to its geographic location, Puerto Obaldía was not a Kuna community; its population of 491 was all non-Kuna.⁹ Panamanians directly elected their representatives on August 6, 1972, marking the first free elections under the military regime. To ensure that all Panamanians, regardless of literacy, could vote, the ballots were color-coded according to each candidate.¹⁰ In the three Kuna corregimientos, Pedro Sánchez won Corregimiento No. 1 of Narganá, Plácido Tejada won Corregimiento No. 2 of Ailigandí, and Arcadio Martínez won Corregimiento No. 3 of Tubualá. The representative of Puerto Obaldía was Sixto

los intereses legítimos de todos los panameños. Es una constitución hecha por los panameños para los panameños."

⁹ República de Panamá, *Censo Nacional de 1970*.

¹⁰ República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria del Tribunal Electoral de Panamá a la Asamblea Nacional de Representantes de Corregimientos* (1973), 1, 45.

Sotomayor.¹¹ For the first time, the Kuna directly elected indigenous representatives to the National Assembly, and this act symbolized Kuna inclusion in the Panamanian nation.

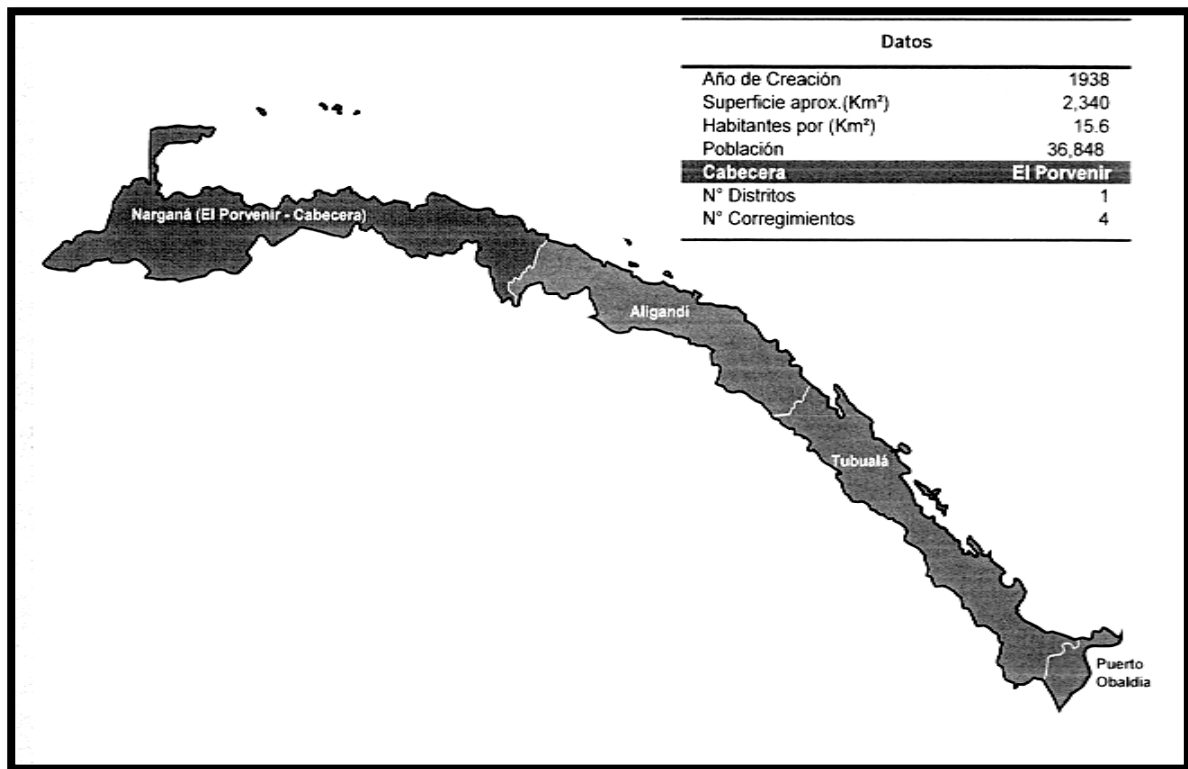


Figure 3. Map of San Blas Corregimientos

Source: <http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/dec/sinamp/pdf/kunayala.pdf> (accessed 2.27.12)¹²

The 1972 Constitution significantly altered local level governance throughout Panama with the creation of *consejos provinciales* and *juntas comunales*. Each junta comunal corresponded with a corregimiento, and these organizations worked to bring development to the communities through identifying and allocating governmental funds to

¹¹ República de Panamá, *Constitución Política de la República de Panamá*, 1972.

¹² Statistics included in this figure were obtained from the 2000 census.

various projects, such as education, infrastructure development, and healthcare.¹³ In San Blas, the leadership of the junta comunal consisted of the corregimiento's representative and four citizens. In every community, a junta local existed, which was comprised of individuals directly elected by the community. The juntas locales sent a *vocero*, or spokesperson, to the meetings of the juntas comunales.¹⁴ Finally, at the comarcal level, the 1972 Constitution created the *Consejo Provincial de Coordinación* (CPC), which anthropologist Mónica Maury Martínez defined as "the organization that allocates the public funds amongst all the corregimientos and communities to promote infrastructure development."¹⁵ Members of this organization included the representatives, an officer from each agency, organization, or ministry operating within the comarca, the Intendant, the chief of the military zone, and the three head *sahilas*.¹⁶ Other community leaders could attend these meetings and often did participate, but they did not have the right to vote for decisions. Interestingly, only the first *sahila* could vote, thus minimizing the influence of the CGK upon the Consejo Provincial's decisions.¹⁷

This new bureaucratic structure paralleled the traditional Kuna governance in the comarca (see Figure 4). The 1972 Constitution and the resulting organizations gave governmental representation and powerful positions to the Kuna that they could use to assert themselves more visibly within the national context. It also provided frameworks and

¹³ Ascario Morales Guerra, "Estudio comparativo de las organizaciones tradicionales políticas kuna con la estructura del poder popular panameño," (Thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1984), 82-86.

¹⁴ *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, 24 oct. 1973 no. 17.458, Ley No. 105, 8 oct.1973.

¹⁵ Maury Martínez, *De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala*, 113. Original text: "...el organismo que repartía los fondos públicos entre todos los corregimientos y comunidades para promover la construcción de infraestructuras."

¹⁶ *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá*, 15 julio 1973, no. 17.389, Ley No. 50, 26 junio 1973.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

legislation that the Kuna could use to justify their desire to preserve their culture. Simultaneously, however, this parallel system of governance undermined traditional authority. Although it did not delegitimize the CGK, the 1972 Constitution weakened the authority of the CGK and the local congresos by mandating that only the CPC could designate funds, and by authorizing the CPC as the official branch of national government within the comarca. These rapid changes also resulted in confusion at the local level as Kuna citizens struggled to understand the multiple layers of official and traditional governance and questioned to which organization they should give allegiance. This issue transcended a simple question of comarcal authority, once again challenging the notion of conflicting identities. During the two years after the implementation of the 1972 Constitution, the divisions amongst the Kuna over the issue of governance and cultural autonomy caused deep fissures in local governance.

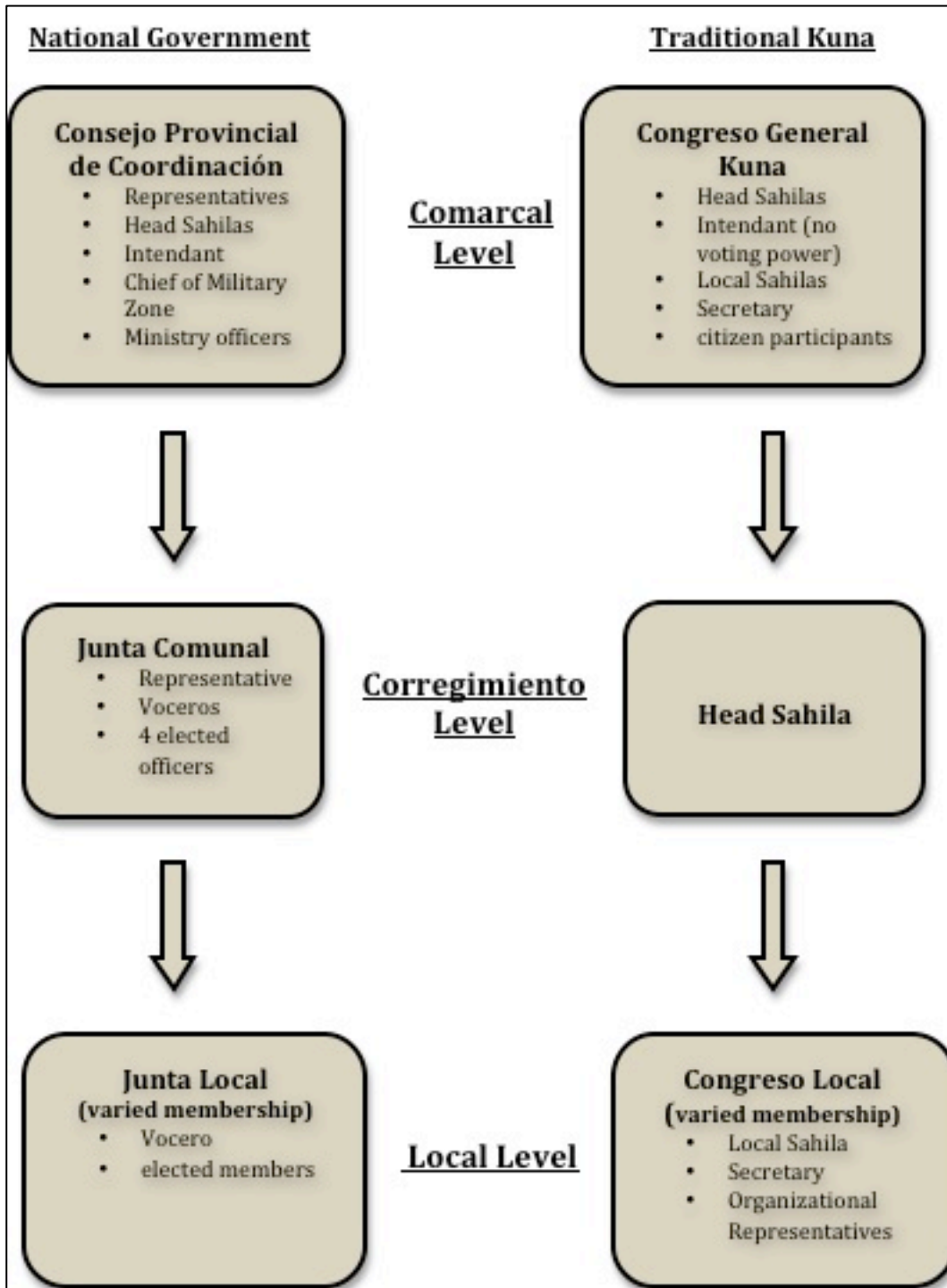


Figure 4. Parallel Governance Structures in the San Blas Comarca, 1972.

Manifestations of Conflicting Identities

Maury Martínez conducted an interview with Miguel de León, who was elected to the National Assembly as a Kuna representative in 1978, where he expressed his viewpoint that the Kuna citizens never fully understood the function of the representatives. Unlike the *sahilas*, the representatives did serve as decision makers in the meetings of the National Assembly, voting on laws without consulting the entire *comarca*; however, he asserted that most Kuna understood the representatives to be solely messengers to the national government and therefore, directly accountable to the Kuna people. However, the representatives understood their role to be one that acted independently of the populace albeit in the best interest of their constituency. Therefore, while indirectly accountable to their *corregimiento*, the representatives did not request authorization from the CGK or the Kuna people for every decision rendered in the National Assembly. These differing notions of accountability caused miscommunication between the Kuna and the representatives. When the National Assembly did not pass legislation that the Kuna populace desired, they reacted by blaming the representatives, but they failed to understand that the representatives from the San Blas *comarca* only had four votes within the 505 delegates. Likewise, the representatives voted and participated in the National Assembly without consulting their constituents regarding every decision. Many Kuna viewed these actions as violating and disrespecting traditional governance and communal participation in politics.¹⁸

Beyond misunderstanding the structure of the National Assembly and the functions of the representatives, the Kuna citizenry began to debate the *comarca*-level development projects proposed and realized during this time. Until now, most of the national

¹⁸ Maury Martínez, *De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala*, 115.

government's projects focused on community level needs, such as education and health care. However, with this increased bureaucracy and governmental presence that the 1972 Constitution dictated, the CPC, rather than the CGK, began mandating and prioritizing comarcal level projects.

Mining continued to be an economic venue the Torrijos regime sought to exploit. In 1974, the CPC passed a resolution declaring that there were many unexploited natural resources in the comarca, and since the national government wanted to develop this resource, the CPC would allow a private business, Braztecnica, to conduct a feasibility study for mining these resources. The resolution stated that the comarca's residents and authorities would fully cooperate in this venture.¹⁹ This decree manifested the law in the 1972 Constitution that the comarcal lands were reserved solely for Kuna use unless the national government needed them for Panama's development. In addition, it also emphasizes a change in authority as the CPC, not the CGK, allocated this permission. This integration into the national governance thus threatened Kuna autonomy and identity by threatening to disempower the traditional authority within the CGK.

Prior to the Torrijos government, local sahilas petitioned the Intendant for governmental funding for local-level projects. For example, a letter sent from the community of Ustupu to the Intendant in 1966 requests additional funds to repair the zinc roof of the school. Often, communities competed amongst themselves for supplies and funding.²⁰ Another letter from 1966 indicates that the community of Ailigandí was upset when a carpenter and supplies were sent to repair the roof in Ustupu, and they wrote to the

¹⁹ "Resolucion No. 2, 26 ago. 1974 del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," Legajo "Resoluciones enviados del Consejo Provincial y correspondencias recibidas," AI, CGK.

²⁰ Felipe Martínez Ustupu, to Intendente Barragán, El Porvenir, 31 marzo 1966, AI, CGK.

Intendant claiming that they had petitioned for this governmental aid months prior to the request from Ustupu but had not yet received any type of assistance with their project.²¹ However, once the 1972 Constitution established the Juntas Locales and the CPC, representatives from government agencies and community representatives determined how and where governmental aid should be allocated, not the Intendant. In addition to considering community-level projects, these institutions began to fund larger comarcal-level projects.

In the first meetings of the CPC, each representative gave an account of the completed and ongoing projects in his corregimiento. Initially, most of these continued to focus on healthcare and education. For example, in a June 1973 meeting, each representative reported that their respective region desired for schools to be enlarged, listing the specific number of classrooms each community requested. They also identified a need for health centers, in particular maternity centers, and aqueducts for communities to have better access to fresh drinking water.²² In August 1973, the representatives reiterated several of these projects, but the CPC also decided to develop projects that dealt with transportation, agriculture, and fishing.²³ By April 1974, the CPC began to focus on developing "profitable social and economic projects" by developing a provincial plan that prioritized projects and created phases for their completion.²⁴ While the CPC still allocated funding for local-level

²¹ Ceferino Colman, Ailigandí to Intendente Barragán, El Porvenir, 15 marzo 1966, AI, CGK.

²² "Acta no. 1, Reunion de la Junta Técnica de Coordinación," 23 junio 1973, Legajo "Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Actas y Resoluciones del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," AI, CGK.

²³ "Reunión de la Junta de Coordinación de la Comarca de San Blas," 23 ago. 1973, Legajo "Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Actas y Resoluciones del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," AI, CGK.

²⁴ "Seminario Dictado por Lic. Guillermo Medina a los miembros del Consejo Técnico de Coordinación de San Blas," 22 abril 1974, Legajo "Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Actas y Resoluciones del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," AI, CGK.

projects, future meetings focus more on these comarcal-level projects. This refocus also explains the Kuna citizenry's assertion that the representatives ignored community needs in favor of profitable projects.

One comarcal level project that quickly became a priority of the CPC was the construction of the Llano-Cartí highway, which would connect the comarca to the Pan-American Highway, which led to Panama City. Without this road, the comarca could only be accessed by sea or by air, allowing the region to remain in relative isolation. Construction of the highway began in 1952, but failed due to a lack of funding, and at the behest of the CPC, the project resumed in 1974.²⁵ The CPC rationalized this project in several ways. First, they argued that the highway would increase communication between the comarca and the rest of Panama and would also facilitate easier and cheaper transportation between the capital and the comarca. Transporting materials to San Blas communities for development projects would be easier with the completion of the road and perhaps most profitable, the highway would increase tourist visits to the comarca.²⁶ Despite unrest about the potentially negative influences the highway would allow to penetrate the comarca or environmental concerns, the CPC prioritized this project, and at a July 1975 meeting of the CPC, the engineer for Panama's Ministerio de Planificación (Ministry of Planning) applauded this decision.²⁷ The highway project elucidated the fact that the CPC was willing to jeopardize Kuna culture for

²⁵ Maury Martínez, *De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala*, 122.

²⁶ "Acta No. 5, Reunión de la Junta Técnica de Coordinación Provincial de la Comarca de San Blas," 8 junio 1974, AI, CGK.

²⁷ "Acta No. 8, Reunión del Consejo de Coordinación Provincial de la Comarca de San Blas," 17 junio 1975, AI, CGK; Rosalba Ríos de Martínez y Benilda E. Caballero M., "Incidencia de la deforestación e identificación de alternativas para la conservación de los recursos forestales de la comarca de Kuna Yala," (Thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1999); "Reunión Extraordinario de la Junta Técnica," 7 julio 1975, AI, CGK.

the sake of economic development in the region and that government officials, both Kuna and non-Kuna, would make decisions such as this without consulting the Kuna populace or the CGK.

As discontent at the local level emerged, those opposed to the CPC's agenda often framed this development in terms of assimilation, asserting that the continuance of these programs would destroy Kuna culture and tradition by bringing westernizing influences to the region. This discourse directly linked these development issues to Torrijos' pluriethnic identity that he proposed for Panama, arguing that if one accepted governmental aid and projects, then one also accepted the notion of a Panamanian identity, thus forfeiting one's Kuna identity.

However, despite these objections, many Kuna sought to participate in Torrijos' project of pluriethnic nationalism. Particularly in the education sector, indigenous populations received targeted attention from the Torrijos regime. In a national convention of educational employees, Torrijos issued a resolution that reiterated the 1972 Constitution's mandate to study indigenous language and culture. Therefore, he resolved to create a governmental agency to study indigenous communities and establish educational programs for Panama's indigenous zones that would incorporate the local community's values and culture into the mainstream curriculum.²⁸ Many Kuna youth received higher education due to the opportunities the government agency of IFARHU provided through the indigenous scholarship program.²⁹ Schools in San Blas began to submit requests to the Intendant for

²⁸ República de Panamá, Asamblea Nacional de Representantes de Corregimientos, "La revolución y la reforma educativa," 1974.

²⁹ "Resolución No. 4, Consejo Provincial de Coordinación," 5 marzo 1975, AI, BC.

Panamanian flags, indicating their desire to identify with the nation through voluntarily displaying this national symbol.³⁰

A newspaper article from 1974 portrays a visual example of pluriethnic nationalism, including photos of Kuna participation. The article describes a parade that occurred in Panama City for Carnival, and it identifies the different cultural expressions of the diverse Panamanians who participated in the event. First, the article discusses the *polleras*, or large skirts, worn by Hispanic Panamanian women, then it describes the dances that Afro-Panamanians performed, and finally, it depicts Kuna women, in traditional dress, also participating in the parade. This article expresses the nationalism purported during this decade by expressing each of these cultures as an integral part of Panama, and the resulting combination defining the nation's identity. Through this cultural inclusion, Torrijos hoped to gain the allegiance of these disparate groups to the Panamanian nation first and foremost, rather than to their respective communities.³¹

Nothing better illustrates the internal tension in the comarca between the conflicting notions of identity than the debate surrounding tourism. Prior to the military coup, tourist development began to be a controversial issue in the comarca, as illustrated through the examples of Thomas Moody's hotel on the island of Pidertupu, William Barton's tourist projects, and John Mann's tours. In addition to these North American entrepreneurs, the Panamanian national government sought to develop tourism in San Blas, and in 1972, the *Instituto Panameño de Turismo* (IPAT) proposed an enormous project that consisted of a tourist resort built on an artificial island close to the community of Río Sidra. This resort,

³⁰ Avelino Ortíz, Cartí-Tupile, to Intendente Salazar, El Porvenir, 14 julio 1973, AI, CGK; School in Arritupo to Intendente Salazar, El Porvenir, 1 mayo 1973, AI, CGK.

³¹ "La pollera engalanó nuestras calles ayer," *Crítica*, 25 feb. 1974, 1.

approximately 90,000 square meters large, would have 250 rooms, several beaches, pools, a dance center, and restaurants.³² To facilitate transporting tourists to the island, the resort would also manage a small landing strip and dock. This center, named Cayos Crullos, would be owned by the government so the profits would benefit the national government, not the comarca, although the increased numbers of tourists and employment opportunities would boost the local economy. IPAT agreed to mandate that 50% of employees would be Kuna.³³ Some Kuna leaders shared this belief that the comarca needed this type of development, and Arnulfo Robinson, the assistant representative from corregimiento No. 1 voiced that tourism was a necessary economic stimulus to Kuna communities, providing the funding to complete local infrastructure projects.³⁴ While the national government and IPAT tried to frame this project as a huge benefit for the comarca, scholar Alan Yuri Hernández Porras explained the counter position of this project, writing, "In that time, for the government, the Kuna culture was simply a way to attract tourists."³⁵

Despite the controversial nature of this project, the three head sahilas, along with the Intendant and the three representatives, gave written permission to IPAT to conduct a feasibility study and begin preliminary plans for the project in 1973.³⁶ However, when IPAT engineers arrived in the region, they met stiff resistance from the local community,

³² Maury Martínez, *De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala*, 124.

³³ Ricardo Falla, *Turismo*, 41-42.

³⁴ "Acta No. 4 de Consejo Provincial de Coordinación," 30 mayo 1974. Legajo "Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, Intendencia de San Blas, Actas y Resoluciones del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," AI, CGK.

³⁵ Hernández Porras, *El Surgimiento del Congreso*, 35. Original text: "en ese tiempo, para el gobierno, la cultura kuna es simplemente un medio para atraer turistas."

³⁶ Falla, *Turismo*, 47.

particularly the sahila of Río Sidra, who refused to allow IPAT's commission to conduct any work, revoking the prior permission.³⁷ In April 1975, the CGK convened to discuss this issue, and the head sahilas, local sahilas from Río Sidra and surrounding islands, IPAT officials, the representatives, and the Intendant attended. The IPAT official began the meeting, stating that San Blas was one of the national government's four target areas for tourism development. He stated that IPAT had properly requested permission to conduct feasibility studies in the comarca, and while this was initially granted, the local community later revoked the permission. Río Sidra's sahila responded, admitting to revoking the permission. He declared that neither his community, nor those nearby, had been consulted about the project nor they did not realize the magnitude of the proposed tourism center until the engineers arrived to begin the study. The sahila stated that the presence of IPAT and the potential project created substantial disturbances within his community, as residents feared the negative influences tourism would bring to the community. He asserted that tourists practiced all sorts of immoral behavior, such as wearing bikinis, behaving promiscuously on the beaches, giving inappropriate attention to Kuna women, smoking marijuana, and drinking excessively. While this local sahila opposed the current IPAT plan, he clearly stated that he did not disapprove of tourism; rather, he thought that it would benefit the comarca if this project was delayed until the Kuna youth, who were studying business at the university, could graduate and return to the comarca to oversee the project. This, he was certain, would ensure that the evils of tourism were minimized and Kuna culture protected.³⁸

³⁷ Julio Brenes, Río Sidra, to Rubén Pérez Kantule, Jr., Secretary of the Intendant, El Porvenir, 4 dic. 1973, AI, CGK; "Acta No. 1 de Congreso General Kuna," 4-6 abril 1975, Achutupu, AI, BCD.

³⁸ "Acta No. 1 de Congreso General Kuna," 4-6 abril 1975, Achutupu, AI, BCD.

What occurred after this sahila's speech indicates that the tourism issue was only a manifestation of the ongoing negotiation regarding the internal structure of comarcal governance. The CGK entered a debate questioning whether local sahilas could deny permissions that the head sahilas, representatives, and Intendant had already allotted. In the past, the CGK convened to discuss comarcal decisions, ending the debate with a popular vote. No sahila's vote counted more than another nor did the head sahilas have autonomous decision-making power or the right to veto. By signing this permission outside the context of the CGK, the head sahilas, representatives, and Intendant violated the statutes of Kuna governance, indicating that their legal status as head authorities, given to them by the 1972 Constitution and the national government, supplanted Kuna governmental structure. The representatives responded to this accusation, stating that it was true that they signed this permission, along with the head sahilas, in Panama City. However, they asserted that as elected officials, it was their duty to support projects that could bring benefits to the Kuna populace now and in the future. Likewise, the head sahilas stated that the Carta Orgánica gave them the right to allot permission, but one head sahila, Ceferino Colman, indicated that he did not fully understand the contents of the document because he could not read. This confession led other participants to begin claiming that the representatives were taking advantage of the head sahilas because of illiteracy and because of their elderly age. However, after further discussion, which the record unfortunately did not document, the CGK voted to extend permission once again to IPAT to conduct feasibility studies for the Cayos Crullos tourism center.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid; José Rogelio Arias, Jr., IPAT, Panama City, to Intendente Salazar, El Porvenir, 10 abril 1975, AI, MMM.

The local *sahilas* from the Río Sidra region did not end the struggle against IPAT. Realizing they could not foster support from the CGK, they wrote to the National Legislation, the President of the Republic, the ministers of the various governmental branches, and even General Torrijos to express their concern. In this letter, the *juntas locales* from Río Sidra, Mamartupu, Isla Máquino, and Nusatupu expressed their desire to preserve and protect their ancestral lands, asserting that large-scale tourism would threaten both the eco-system and their daily life. They complained that the Consejo Provincial has not responded to their request, so they implored these high officials, "as the eyes and ears of the Revolution," to recognize their anxieties and end this project.⁴⁰ However, their pleas went unresolved as the CPC continued discussing this potential project at the August 1975 meeting. At this time, the CPC determined that the project would appeal to cultural tourism and that the resort would be a mixed business with both Kuna and government ownership, with the goal of replacing all non-Kuna employees during the first eight years.⁴¹ While the project, in the end, never came to fruition, the discord it created resonated throughout the comarca, causing many Kuna to question the new governmental structure in the comarca. The failure of the national government to respond to the request of the local communities also signified that the national government prioritized economic development over Kuna culture, and Kuna began to link support of the Torrijos regime with a willingness to compromise Kuna identity.

⁴⁰ Juntas Locales of Río Sidra, Mamartupu, Isla Máquino, and Nusatupu, Comarca de San Blas, to Consejo Nacional de Legislación, Honorables Representativos, Excelentísimo Presidente de la República, Excelentísimos Ministros de Estado, Excelentísimo Brigadier General Torrijos, Panama City, 16 abril 1975, AI, MMM.

⁴¹ "Acta No. 9, Reunión del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," 19 ago. 1975, Corazón de Jesús, AI, CGK.

In addition to the decisions regarding tourism, debates in the August 1975 CPC meeting illuminated the growing rifts in Kuna leadership throughout the comarca. In this meeting, the *Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna* (MJK) presented a resolution that attacked the representatives and the CPC. They stated that their representative, Pedro Sánchez, was never present in the local communities, insinuating that he spent all his time in Panama City, they asserted that the Junta Comunal in Corregimiento No. 1 was inoperable, and they complained that the only legal apparatus of government was the CPC, stating that "the Congreso General Kuna loses strength before this organization."⁴² Representative Arcadio Martínez replied that the two organizations needed to stop arguing and start cooperating. He also framed the issue in a national context, arguing that the MJK was not harming the representatives through raising these issues but rather was challenging the government of General Torrijos. By framing this debate in nationalistic terms, the Kuna established this issue as a dichotomy between Kuna values and national values.

Conclusion

The 1972 Constitution established a parallel system of governance in the comarca of San Blas that quickly obtained more political legitimacy than the traditional structures, such as the CGK. New projects, most notably the Llano-Cartí highway and tourism ventures, brought a threat of cultural assimilation. As the representatives, CPC, and even the head *sahilas* made decisions that would affect the future of the comarca without consulting all the traditional Kuna leadership, divisions amongst communities, generations, and individuals surfaced. The progressivist Kuna and traditionalist Kuna became increasingly polarized due to these issues, thus creating causal links between support for the Panamanian national

⁴² Ibid., 3. Original text: "el Congreso General Kuna pierde la fuerza ante esa organización."

government and loss of Kuna culture. During this era, it became impossible to be a Kuna Panamanian because comarcal leadership framed these two identities as completely incompatible. Traditionalist Kuna interpreted Torrijos' attempts at creating a pluriethnic nationalism as yet another governmental attempt at cultural eradication. This faction became increasingly unsupportive of the Torrijos government and also its representatives in the comarca, as demonstrated from the discourse in the 1975 meetings of the CPC and CGK. The resulting comarcal political environment, due to the governance changes the 1972 Constitution introduced, presented the Kuna with only two possible choices of allegiance, either identification with the Kuna nation or with the Panamanian nation.

CHAPTER IV

CRISIS IN THE COMARCA: 1976-1978

Introduction

The Comarca of San Blas endured significant changes under Omar Torrijos' military regime. Development projects brought westernizing influences, such as electricity and modern healthcare, and most notably, tourism caused many Kuna to worry about the threat of acculturation penetrating the comarca. Ricardo Falla quotes Rogelio Arias, a Kuna leader, as describing how during this decade, women abandoned traditional fabrics for those imported from Japan, people began wearing clothes from the United States called "Fruti of Then Loom," and islands had hotels surrounded by barbed-wire security fences.¹ In addition, the 1972 Constitution created a new governance structure in the comarca that many Kuna perceived as undermining the traditional authority of the Congreso General Kuna (CGK). This polemic between the progressivist and traditionalist factions within the Kuna leadership surfaced in the early 1970s, leading to a crisis in comarcal leadership in 1976. After this division manifested itself through the 1977 Canal Treaty plebiscite, the national government negotiated with the Kuna to revise comarcal governance, finally identifying the desire of the Kuna to maintain cultural autonomy while simultaneously participate in the Panamanian nation.

¹ Ricardo Falla, *El Tesoro de San Blas: serie el indio panameño* (Centro de Capacitación Social: Panamá, 1979), 136, quoted in Alan Yuri Hernández Porras, "El Surgimiento del Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna en 1972," (Thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 2002), 40-41.

Comarcal Crisis

The issues in the comarca over the legitimacy of traditional governance gained the national attention in May 1976 when Panamanian newspapers began reporting on the conflict. An article in *Estrella de Panamá* explained how the representatives failed to recognize the CGK as the highest authority, instead autonomously making decisions in the juntas comunales without consulting the local sahilas.² The *Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna* (MJK) met in August 1975, and their resulting resolutions exposed the contradictions within the comarca's governance. They explain how these divisions weakened the Kuna community and blame these issues on the new government's failure to incorporate and respect traditional power. The MJK suggested that the representatives, in particular, should be directly accountable to traditional institutions and that all of the officials elected to the juntas comunales and locales should be appointed during CGK sessions.³ Likewise, Kuna students at the University of Panama organized and met to discuss both the political situation in San Blas and also in Panama, demonstrating their desire to both retain their Kuna identity while simultaneously participate in national affairs.⁴ Despite these calls for cooperation between the official and traditional governance structures, the fissures only deepened during the next two years.

In March 1976, a criminal investigation commenced in the comarca when a father sexually assaulted his daughter. Typically, the traditional governance structures managed any type of criminal infractions unless they were of a more serious nature, as was this case.

² "El poder popular en la Comarca de San Blas," *La Estrella de Panamá*, 13 mayo 1976, 6.

³ *Tercer Congreso de la Juventud Kuna*, 11 ago. 1975, Playón Chico, AI, BCD.

⁴ "Se reunen los estudiantes universitarios kunas, hoy," *Crítica*, 9 julio 1976, 13.

Therefore, the Intendant presented the case to the appointed judge in the comarca.⁵ Meanwhile, Leonidas Valdés, the local sahila of Cartí, wrote to the Intendant to inform him that he had already investigated the case and found the father guilty of rape. In this letter, Valdés asserts that since he is the local sahila, he is the authority in the local community and thus it within his power to pass this ruling. He cites the Carta Orgánica in making this statement.⁶ By claiming that the traditional authorities already closed the case, Valdés negated the need for the national government to interfere. However, a few days later, Enrique Obaldía, the government's judge appointed to the comarca, replied to Valdés in a heated letter that accused the sahila of interfering in governmental matters. In a demeaning fashion, Obaldía informs Valdés that the local sahila has no power in this situation. He accuses Valdés of failing to cooperate with the National Guard and the government's legal representatives. Finally, he juxtaposes the position of the local sahila with that of the representative, writing, "Stranger still is that the Representative of the Corregimiento has not given you any instruction with respect to your function," both belittling Valdés and insinuating that the representatives held more power than the local sahilas and needed to educate them about their proper place within the new governance structures.⁷ This offensive letter reaffirmed the tension within the comarca between the traditional and official governance, reiterating to Valdés and other Kuna leaders that the official governance held legitimacy from the national government, and that the subordinate position of the traditional leadership could jeopardize Kuna identity.

⁵ Rubén Pérez Kantule, El Porvenir, to Enrique Obaldía, Narganá, 16 marzo 1976, AI, CGK.

⁶ Leonidas K. Valdés, Cartí Sugtupu, to Luis Napoleón Salazar, El Porvenir, 20 marzo 1976, AI, CGK.

⁷ Enrique Obaldía, Narganá, to Leonidas Valdés, Cartí Sugtupu, 24 marzo 1976, AI, CGK.

Only one month later, in April 1976, a series of events caused the CGK to split into two rival factions, and Leonidas Valdés, the disenfranchised local sahila from Cartí, was named as the comarca's new secondary head sahila. Valdés' local congress, in Cartí Tupile, met from April 15-18 to express their frustration with the representatives. In their resolution, they state that their forefathers had left a legacy in the comarca of always struggling to protect Kuna traditions and land, but the representatives had done nothing for the advancement of the comarca. The congress makes clear that they are supportive of the revolutionary government, which they admire for improving the nation, but they assert that "we are all tired of their [the representatives] absurd ideas and of their lies, which have brought anxiety to San Blas and we consider them injurious for the interests of the Kuna people."⁸

Just one week later, the CGK met in Ustupu, and the resolution this congress emitted echoed the sentiments expressed by the local congress in Cartí Tupile. Second head sahila, Ceferino Colman, presided over the meeting due to the absence of Estanislao López. In the proceedings, the delegates decided to retract their recognition for the representatives, stating that these three men had only brought "conflicts between the San Blas communities." Furthermore, the CGK delegates accused the representatives of developing comarcial projects without receiving popular support, persecuting the Kuna youth and MJK, criticizing San Blas in the media, and lacking cultural awareness. Utilizing national laws, the CGK asserted that these actions violated the Carta Orgánica, and therefore, the CGK could strip the representatives of their authority to operate in the comarca. Like the local congress from

⁸ Pablo Solís, "Kunas en desacuerdo con representantes," *Crítica*, 21 abril 1976, 22. Original text: "Todos estamos cansados de sus absurdas ideas, de sus falacias, esto ha traído inquietud al pueblo de San Blas y que consideramos lesiva para los intereses del Pueblo Kuna."

Cartí Tupile, the CGK of Ustupu made clear that this issue did not affect Kuna loyalty to the revolutionary government but rather hindered the Kuna from effectively participating in Torrijos' vision of popular power.⁹ By framing their rationale in this manner, the Kuna leaders effectively utilized Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalism to defend their right to participate as equal members in the Panamanian nation.

Interestingly, the second and third head sahilas, Colman and Kawidi, were present at the CGK meeting in Ustupu. According to newspaper reports, Colman and Kawidi supported the resolution. However, two days later, the same newspaper, *Crítica*, published another statement from the three head sahilas denouncing the events from the Ustupu congress. They state that a small group, led by Kuna youth and educators, namely Federico Smith, the Provincial Director of Education, stirred up discord and anxiety at the meeting, leading to the disavowal of the representatives. The meeting, they claim, was not held in the traditional manner, and therefore, Colman and Kawidi were unable to direct the course of the conversation and were thus forced to sign the resolution. In this public declaration, the three head sahilas claim that the resolution is invalid and violates the basic precept of popular power of the Torrijos government. The head sahilas call for all Kuna to support the national government's representatives and structures within the comarca and castigate those who provoked the denouncement of the representatives.¹⁰

Scarce documentation exists in the *Archivo de la Intendencia* regarding this event. Resolutions emitted before and after April 1976 allow for analysis of the causes of this rupture, but unfortunately, meeting minutes for the CGK in Ustupu are not available, thus

⁹ Pablo Solís, "Kunas desconocen a 3 representantes," *Crítica*, 28 abril 1976, 1.

¹⁰ "Sorprendieron buena fe del Gran Congreso Kuna," *Crítica*, 30 abril 1976, 1.

making it impossible to understand the nuances and dialogue surrounding the rupture. Newspapers provide information regarding CGK proceedings, but because the Torrijos regime limited the freedom of the press, it is impossible to gain an unbiased perspective of these events through this source. In the aftermath of the Ustupu congress, *Crítica* published another extensive article praising the efforts of the representatives, highlighting the development projects realized in the comarca and portraying the opposition as only a few disparate groups within the comarca.¹¹ However, prior CGK meetings demonstrated the disputes and divisions in the comarca, and events in the months following the April 1976 meeting indicate that many Kuna did not respond to the three head sahila's charge to support the representatives but rather joined the traditionalist faction in the comarca.

At the beginning of May 1976, Intendant Luis Napoleón Salazar retired, and instead of naming a new person to the position, the national government named the head sahilas and the representatives as sectoral intendants. Therefore, primary sahila Estanislao López and Representative Pedro Sánchez were the intendants for the first corregimiento, second sahila Ceferino Colman, and Representative Plácido Tejada were the intendants for the second corregimiento, and third sahila Kawidi and Representative Arcadio Martínez were the new intendants for the third corregimiento. Puerto Obaldía, the non-Kuna corregimiento, fell under the direct supervision of the military chief of the Atlantic Zone. While the representatives and head sahilas received no compensation for this new position, this appointment radically shifted comarcal authority and met severe criticism from other Kuna leaders, exacerbating the disagreements surrounding the role of the representatives.¹² As

¹¹ "Kunas de Tupile se pronuncian," *Crítica*, 30 abril 1976, 21.

¹² República de Panamá, Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, *Resolución No. 117*, 13 mayo 1976, AI, RK.

manifested in the Ustupu congress, many local sahilas and other Kuna members in both the CGK and the CPC felt that the representatives already misrepresented the comarca by operating autonomously in the National Assembly. Kuna leaders often felt that the representatives manipulated the elderly head sahilas and prioritized national development over preservation of Kuna culture. The head sahilas, supposedly the highest traditional authority in the comarca, were now government representatives with this new role of sectoral intendant, and the Kuna leadership reacted by questioning how the head sahilas could properly represent Kuna interest in this new role.¹³

On May 20th, some communities met in Isla Tigre, but the newspapers reported that a large majority of communities refused to participate, thus this event could not be an official CGK meeting. The head sahilas and representatives asserted that the Kuna who called this congress did not send out any communication regarding this event, thus not providing ample time for the Kuna leaders to make plans to attend. Therefore, the head sahilas and representatives refused to attend in order to delegitimize the congress since they, as the sectoral intendants, were the highest authority and their presence was required at all official CGK meetings.¹⁴ At this meeting, the attending delegates voted to depose the head sahilas, electing three different men to fill this important post. The new primary sahila was Enrique Guerrero, the secondary sahila was Leonidas Valdés, and the third was Armando González.¹⁵ This congress issued a resolution claiming to be "the loyal interpretation of power," and it stated that those who denounce this congress, such as the original head sahilas and the

¹³ Maury Martínez, *De Tule Nega a Kuna Yala*, 117.

¹⁴ Pastor Muñoz Garrido, "Puede fracasar Congreso Kuna," *Crítica*, 19 mayo 1976, 8.

¹⁵ Congreso General Kuna, *Resolución No. 7*, 19-21 mayo 1976, Isla Tigre, AI, CGK.

representatives, are only creating conflicts for their personal benefit.¹⁶ A few days after this meeting, the community of Cartí Sugdupu held a celebration to honor Leonidas Valdés' appointment as the new second head sahila.¹⁷ In the following months, two sets of head sahilas and two Congresos Generales Kunas coexisted in the comarca, manifesting the division between the progressivist and the traditionalist factions within comarcal leadership.

At the end of July, Kuna leaders requested that the national government send an arbiter to mediate this dispute. Panama's Vice President, Gerardo González came to the comarca to inaugurate an airport at Tupile, and he met with Kuna leaders to express his desire that the comarcal leadership unify through their culture and traditions.¹⁸ His comments assert that the Panamanian government did not want to eradicate Kuna culture but rather believed that through their common ethnic identity, the Kuna could unify and fully participate in the government.

In August, Panama's Minister of Government and Justice, Jorge Emilio Castro, met with the head and local sahilas, other comarcal leaders, and members of the MJK to negotiate a solution to the crisis. After three hours of discussion, the Kuna leadership agreed to hold a CGK meeting at the end of September.¹⁹ Unfortunately, neither the newspapers nor the archives contain a record of the September congress, if it was held. However, the newspaper, *Matutino*, published a series of articles regarding a congress held in Narganá from November 26-28. At this meeting, the CGK annulled all the resolutions issued at the Ustupu, Río Tigre,

¹⁶ Congreso General Kuna, *Resolución No. 9*, 19-21 mayo 1976, Isla Tigre, AI, CGK.

¹⁷ José Tejada, Cartí Sugdupu, to Rubén Pérez Kantule, hijo, *El Porvenir*, 23 mayo 1976, AI, BCD.

¹⁸ Luis Castilla Bravo, "Cisma en San Blas," *Crítica*, 31 julio 1976, 1.

¹⁹ "Solución a conflicto samblasino," *Matutino*, 16 agosto 1976, 12b; Miguel Ángel Rodríguez II, "Celebran Congreso Cuna," *Matutino*, 23 agosto 1976, 3b.

and Cartí Sugdup congresses from the previous spring, stating again that these congresses were illegitimately held because insufficient notice was given to the delegates and none of the head sahilas or the Intendant was present.²⁰ Therefore, this meeting reiterated that López, Colman, and Kawidi were the head sahilas as well as sectoral intendants. In addition, it affirmed that the CGK gave full support for the representatives, once again recognizing their position within comarcal leadership.²¹ On December 10, an article appeared in *Matutino* expressing the viewpoint of the dissidents. This group protested the CGK held in Narganá because only 15 communities attended, not even a third of those comprising the CGK. Once again, this rival faction reproaches the representatives for spending too much time in the capital and for not understanding the issues facing the comarca. This group reiterates that they do not oppose the national government or development in the comarca, but to date, the representatives approved and undertook projects without popular consent. The representatives, need "to discard this narrow colonialist mentality of 'what is good for me is good for them'."²² Finally, in June 1977, the full CGK met, reinstated López, Colman, and Kawidi as head sahilas, and made Guerra, Valdés, and González regional sahilas.²³ Around this time, the national government also designated a new intendant, Constantino Romero, to San Blas, thus negating the need for the sectoral intendants.²⁴ While it appeared that the

²⁰ "Congreso General Kuna anula resoluciones," *Matutino*, 2 dic. 1976, 11a.

²¹ "Congreso Kuna reconoce como autoridades máximas y legítimas a los Caciques López, Colman y Kawidi," *Matutino*, 1 dic. 1976.

²² "En San Blas no estan de acuerdo con resoluciones de un Congreso," *Matutino*, 10 dic. 1976, 14a. Original text: "...desechando la mentalidad estrecha y colonialista de 'que lo que es bueno para mi, es bueno para ellos'."

²³ Valdés, "La evolución histórica," 12-13.

²⁴ "El intendente llama ingratos a los indios," *Crítica*, 28 nov. 1977, 1.

crisis was resolved, the division continued to plague the comarca, manifesting itself through the Kuna actions surrounding the 1977 Canal Treaty Plebiscite.

Canal Treaty Plebiscite

After the 1968 military coup, the Torrijos government prioritized regaining the canal and canal zone for Panama, justifying its policies and ideology on this central goal. Thus, the 1977 plebiscite would judge whether the government had successfully organized the diverse Panamanian populace under this unifying cause, and at a more personal level, had successfully created a single Panamanian identity. All citizens, 18 or older, were eligible to vote, and ballots were color-coded for voters who were illiterate.²⁵ The national government launched a massive propaganda campaign leading to the October 23 plebiscite, framing the issue as one of national allegiance and duty (see Figure 5).

²⁵ República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria del Plebiscito*, 23 oct. 1977, 1; Ibid, 25.

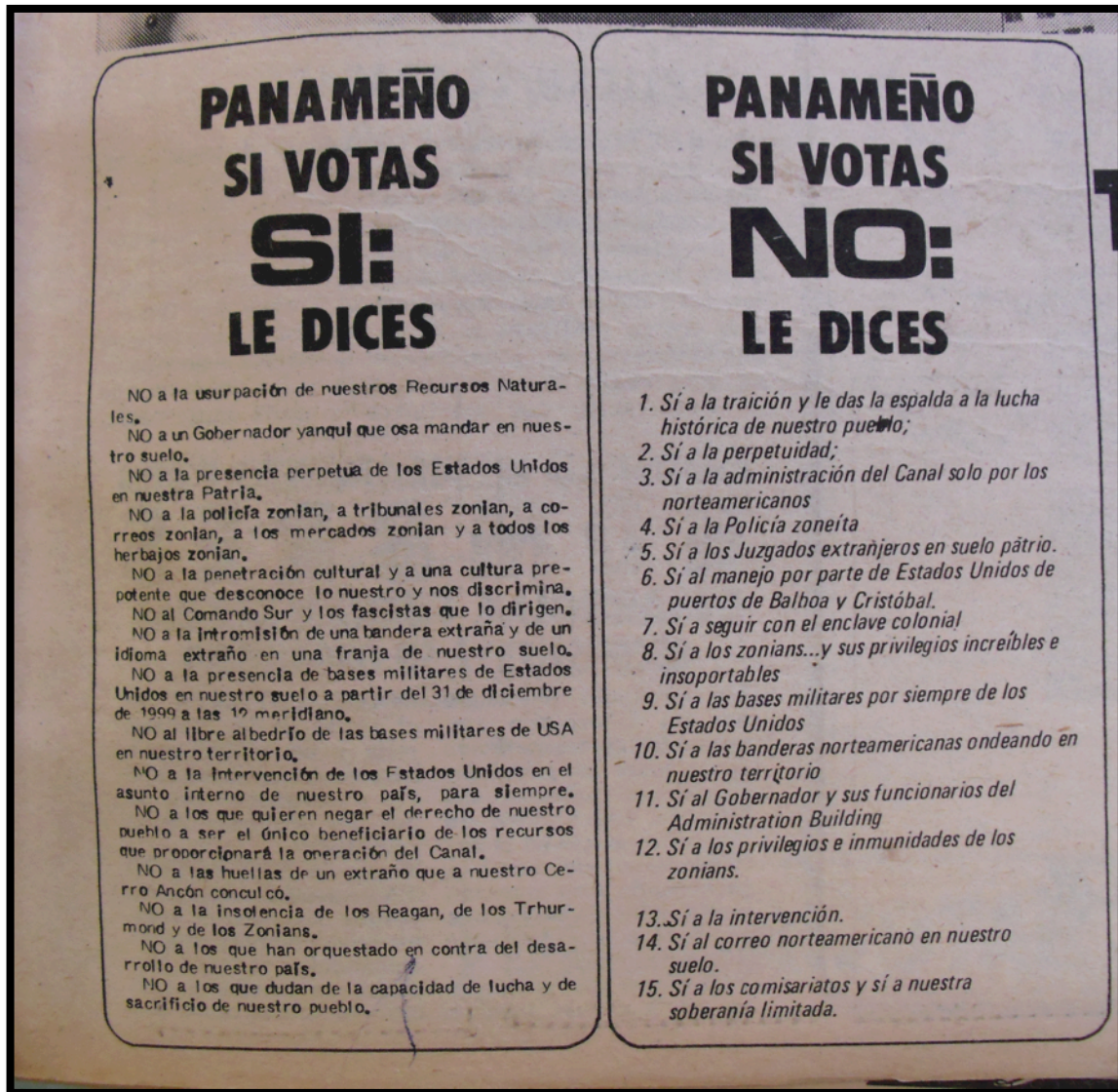


Figure 5. Plebiscite Propaganda. *Crítica*, 22 oct. 1977.

The Kuna leadership pledged their support for the Canal Treaties on several occasions, even emitting official resolutions that stated this position. During the midst of the comarcal crisis, at the controversial 1976 CGK meeting in Narganá, the participants produced a resolution that promised Kuna support in the struggle for Panamanian sovereignty.²⁶ On October 4, 1977, the CGK met in El Porvenir, and the three head sahilas,

²⁶ "Congreso kuna respalda solidariamente la lucha soberanía en la Zona del Canal," *Matutino*, 1 dic. 1976, 16b.

along with the local *sahilas* and *voceros* from 48 communities signed a statement that supported the Panamanian struggle for sovereignty and pledged the *comarca's* support for the Torrijos government on the day of the plebiscite.²⁷ An article a week before the plebiscite stated that the Kuna understood the treaty and had pledged to vote in favor of ratification. The government expected high voter turnout in the *comarca* due to an increase in voting centers.²⁸ The MJK also held a meeting in Panama City to meet with Kuna students and workers in order to discuss the plebiscite, and this organization also fully endorsed the treaties. The author of the article, a member of the MJK, appealed to the Kuna youth to vote in favor of the treaty because it annulled the Bunau-Varilla Treaty that was not signed by any Panamanians, it eliminated the clause of perpetuity, it returned the canal to Panamanian jurisdiction by 2000, it removed colonialism from the nation, and it provided Panama with economic development. In addition, he asserted that the Torrijos government, unlike former governments, included the Kuna in national politics by providing funding and giving them direct representation in the National Assembly. Voting for the plebiscite would demonstrate Kuna gratefulness and allegiance to Torrijos, and he urged all Kuna to make this decision and vote in favor of the new canal treaties.²⁹ Therefore, on the eve of the plebiscite, it appeared that the Kuna fully endorsed the canal treaties.

On October 23, 1977, just over 97% of the eligible population voted in the Plebiscite, and 66% voted in favor of the treaties. However, in the *Comarca* of San Blas, 53% voted

²⁷ "Resolución por la cual se apoya el Nuevo Tratado del Canal de Panamá," 4 oct. 1977, *El Porvenir*, AI, CGK; "Caciques y *sáhilas* apoyan el Tratado," *Crítica*, 7 oct. 1977, 19.

²⁸ Victoriano King Colman, "El pueblo kuna dirá si al Tratado," *Crítica*, 13 oct. 1977, 12.

²⁹ "Kunas invitan," *Crítica*, 1 oct. 1977, 16; "El movimiento de la juventud Kuna dirá SI rotundo," *Matutino*, 22 oct. 1977, 8a.

against the treaties, and two of the three Kuna corregimientos voted against the treaty. The only other province in the state that had more than 10% of the corregimientos vote 'no' was Bocas del Toro, where 53% of the corregimientos also voted against the treaty (see Table 1).³⁰ In San Blas, Puerto Obaldía and Tubualá voted in favor of the treaties, while Narganá and Ailigandí voted against them. As established in the previous chapters, Puerto Obaldía's population was not Kuna, but overall, the comarca's indigenous population was 97%. The corregimientos from Bocas del Toro that voted 'no' were 83% indigenous, according to the 1970 census.³¹ While this project focuses on the San Blas region, and therefore will analyze the possible explanations for this result, the fact that the Bocas del Toro region also experienced a negative response to the Plebiscite in predominantly indigenous areas reflects the possibility of a failed pluriethnic national identity. In these regions, a large percentage of people participated in the voting; however, they chose to vote against the treaty, possibly indicating their unwillingness to support the Torrijos regime. Because the government framed this vote as an issue of allegiance to the nation, by voting against ratification, indigenous communities could manifest their struggle against the assimilating nature of government programs.

³⁰ ³⁰ República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria del Plebiscito*, 23 oct. 1977, 55-56.

³¹ Ibid.; República de Panamá, *Censo Nacional de 1970*. The Guaymí (now called Ngöbe-Buglé) live in the province of Bocas del Toro, and are Panama's largest indigenous group. At the time of the plebiscite, they did not have a legally defined comarca; therefore, the census did not measure this population separately from the entire province. However, the index of the census provides population figures of indigenous vs. non-indigenous populations for each town in Panama, and through using this information, I calculated the percentage of indigenous people living within the eight corregimientos in Bocas del Toro that voted against ratifying the treaties.

Table 1. Distribution of Corregimientos in the 1977 Plebiscite.

Province	Total Corregimientos	Corr. that voted yes	Percentage	Corr. that voted no	Percentage
TOTAL	505	464	91.9	35	6.9
Bocas del Toro	15	7	46.7	8	53.3
Coclé	39	38	97.4	1	2.6
Colón	40	39	97.5	1	2.5
Chiriquí	101	87	86.1	10	9.9
Darién	19	18	94.7	1	5.3
Herrera	40	37	92.5	3	7.5
Los Santos	73	69	94.5	3	4.1
Panamá	98	91	92.9	6	6.1
Veraguas	76	76	100	0	0
Comarca de San Blas	4	2	50	2	50

Source: República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria de Plebiscito*, 23 oct. 1977, 55.

In the Comarca of San Blas, there are multiple explanations for the plebiscite results. However, intrinsic to all explanations is an underlying explanation of ethnic identity versus national identity. On the day of the plebiscite, individuals in one prominent Kuna community, Ailigandí, actually raised several American flags in protest of the treaties (see Figure 6).³² The Kuna had an important history with the United States, had several men working in the Canal Zone, and also equated support of the treaties with support of the Torrijos regime, but through this event, both the national government as well as the rest of Panama's populace began to understand the deeper issues of identity plaguing the comarca.

³² "Traición a la patria," *Crítica*, 24 oct. 1977, 15.

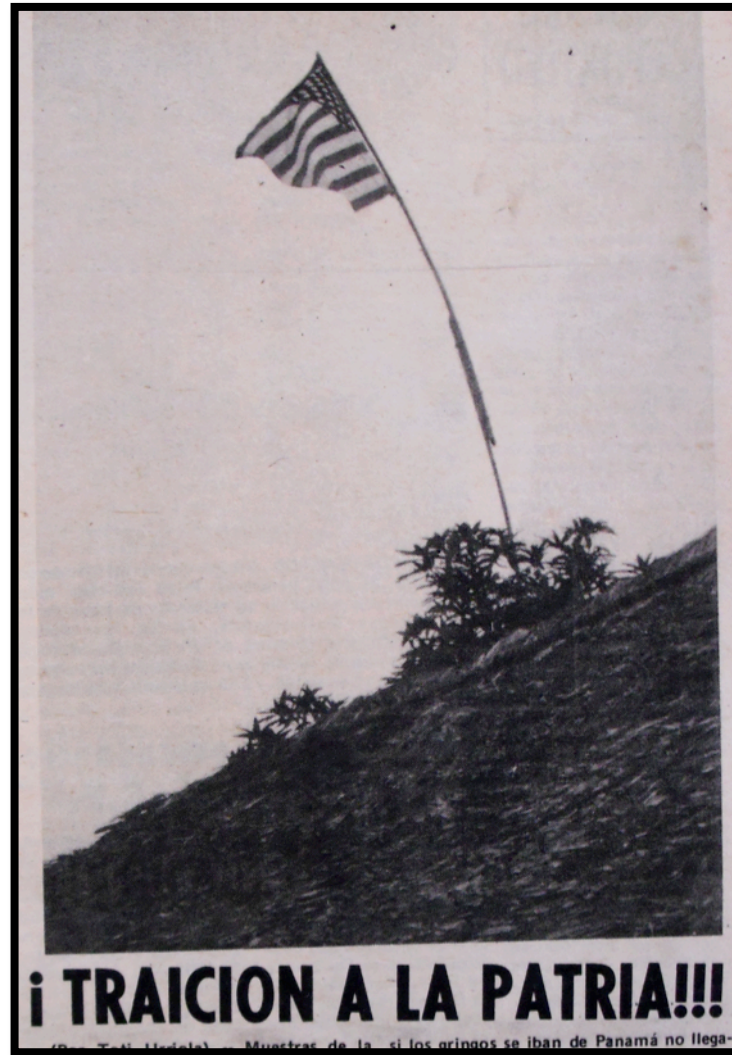


Figure 6. Flag-raising in Ailigandí.
Source: *Crítica*, 24 oct. 1977

In 1925, when the Kuna rebelled against the Panamanian government, the United States mediated the dispute and aided the Kuna in gaining comarcal status and relative autonomy from Panama.³³ Then, in 1932, the head sahilas brokered an agreement with US General Preston Brown to allow for Kuna men to work in the Canal Zone, particularly in the

³³ James Howe, *Would Not Kneel*.

kitchens.³⁴ During World War II, the US increased the number of Kuna employees.³⁵ Then, in 1969, the head sahilas successfully negotiated wage increases for Kuna employees. In February 1969, the military commander in the Canal Zone mandated that civilians could no longer reside in the Canal Zone, but the head sahilas convinced the commander to allow the Kuna men to reside in military barracks. The commander also allowed the Kuna employees to sell food products in the barracks, an act that other employees were forbidden from doing.³⁶ The Kuna employees in the Canal Zone received favorable treatment and wages from the Americans, and so many Kuna feared that if the treaties were ratified, these men would lose their jobs. This history with the United States caused many Kuna to sympathize with the Americans rather than identify with the Panamanian cause, and so it is possible that this led some to vote against ratification of the 1977 treaties.

Canal Zone employment does hold some explanatory power for the result, but in the meetings leading to the plebiscite, the head sahilas explained to the CGK that the new treaties promised better paying positions for all current employees, so no Kuna men would lose their jobs upon ratification.³⁷ Furthermore, the newspaper *Crítica* published several accounts of the flag-raising episode in Ailigandí, giving both the MJK and the Kuna leaders opportunities to explain this community's unpopular action. One article stated the Kuna students from the University of Panama came to the community and informed the people that if the treaty were ratified, all American tourists, churches, and agencies working in the comarca would also be

³⁴ Filemon Herrera, "Historia de los 3 caciques en San Blas: Yabiliginya, Olotebiliginya y Estanislao López," unpublished report, 14 feb. 1991, 1, AI, MMM.

³⁵ Henry Wassan, *Contributions to Cuna Ethnography: Results of an Expedition to Panama and Colombia in 1947* (Sweden: Etnologiska, 1949), 55.

³⁶ Herrera, "Historia de los 3 caciques," 4.

³⁷ Victoriano King Colman, "El Pueblo Kuna dira si al Tratado."

forced to leave.³⁸ However, another article, written by leaders in the MJK, stated that these opposition leaders "cleverly planted in the minds of our Kuna brothers the intrigue and doubt that they would be stripped of their most valuable ideals and that the gringo profit was better than going to look for their own legitimate identity and having to integrate all of us as true Panamanians."³⁹ Therefore, many Kuna linked support of the canal treaties with support of the Torrijos regime, which they felt threatened their ethnic identity with this notion of pluriethnic nationalism. This fear was manifested in the large quantity of votes against the treaty in the San Blas comarca and also in the raising of American flags in Ailigandí. While Kuna leaders from both the progressivist faction and the traditionalist faction condemned the flag-raising as unpatriotic and a travesty, this action visibly demonstrates that unease and discord still existed in the comarca.

Interestingly, General Torrijos blamed the results in San Blas and other indigenous zones on a failure of his government to reach an understanding with these communities. In his speeches that the newspapers summarized, he implored the Panamanian people to stop castigating the indigenous population for their opposition to the treaty and thanked the indigenous for participating in the plebiscite. Torrijos even forbade citizens from using the derogatory term "cholo" because the indigenous were the first Panamanians and thus were entitled to the deepest respect.⁴⁰ A week after the plebiscite, in addressing the National Assembly, the Vice President delivered a message from Torrijos, saying that the General

³⁸ "Traición a La Patria," *Crítica*, 24 oct. 1977, 15.

³⁹ Alan Ureña, "Kunas protestan en el caso de Ailigandí," *Crítica*, 25 oct. 1977, 24. Original text: "Ellos sembraron habilmente en la mente de nuestros hermanos de raza, la intriga y la duda de que serían despojadas de sus mas caros ideales y de que era mejor la propina gringa, a ir en busca de nuestra legitima identidad de integrarnos todos como verdaderos panameños."

⁴⁰ "Dijo Omar en divisa: 'Estoy orgullos de que no me han fallado,'" *Crítica*, 29 oct. 1977, 8.

wanted to publicly congratulate and thank the San Blas leaders for the effort that they made in bringing the Kuna to the polls. He reiterated that no community would be punished for their decision because the plebiscite was a democratic vote.⁴¹ The plebiscite demonstrated to the national government that the Kuna still struggled to find a way to both preserve their ethnic identity while simultaneously participate as Panamanian citizens in national affairs. Until this point, many Kuna saw these two options as contradictory; to accept one identity meant forfeiting the other. Torrijos realized that his pluriethnic nationalism, from the Kuna perspective, needed practical revisions if it was to function in the San Blas comarca.

Crisis Resolution

On November 10, Torrijos visited San Blas to ascertain the causes of the events in Ailigandí during the plebiscite and to learn why many Kuna expressed their dissatisfaction with the Panamanian government. Accompanying him were six U.S. senators who wished to dialogue with the Kuna about the treaties. In their meeting with the comarcal leadership, Kuna spokespeople expressed that the negatives votes were a result of internal problems, not because of the actual contents of the treaties. Torrijos pledged to give more national attention to San Blas and articulated his desire to directly negotiate with the Kuna leadership to resolve all internal problems so that the Kuna could participate as a unified group in Panamanian politics.⁴² At the end of April 1978, when the US Senate ratified the treaties, the

⁴¹ "Torrijos felicita a indígenas," *Crítica*, 29 oct. 1977, 32.

⁴² "Omar conoció verdad íntima de Ailigandí," *Crítica*, 11 nov. 1977, 1; "Mensaje de los Kunas a Torrijos," *Crítica*, 25 nov. 1977, 4.

head sahilas expressed their congratulations to Torrijos in the newspaper, declaring their gratitude for the man who regained Panamanian sovereignty.⁴³

Interestingly, after the newspapers lambasted Kuna disloyalty after the Ailigandí flag-raising incident, articles during the follow year report Kuna individuals participating in mainstream activities. The journalists label such cultural manifestations as "Panamanian," thus insinuating that the Kuna are learning how to participate in the nation. The headline of a November 1977 article read, "They want to be more Kunas and also good Panamanians," indicating three things; first, Kunas were regarded as Panamanian citizens, according to Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalism, second, these two identities did not naturally align, and third, despite their differences, a Kuna individual could manage to preserve his or her ethnic identity while still engage with society as a Panamanian citizen.⁴⁴

On Panamanian Independence Day in November 1977, the comarca celebrated with parades, Catholic masses, sporting events, and speeches. A photo in *Crítica* portrays a Kuna man and woman carrying a banner that reads, "Panamá Soberano en la Zona del Canal, Los Kunas Soberanos en la Reserva de San Blas."⁴⁵ These words compare Panama's desire to regain control of the Canal Zone with the Kuna desire to fully control the comarca's territory. By promoting the cause of Panamanian sovereignty, the Kuna identify with the nation through joining this popular struggle. However, the second phrase indicates that although the Kuna are willing to participate in Panamanian affairs, an equal priority to them is the retention of the comarca and the preservation of Kuna culture and tradition.

⁴³ "Caciques kunas felicitan al General Torrijos H." *Matutino*, 25 abril 1978, 2b.

⁴⁴ "Quieren ser mas Kunas y tambien buenos panameños," *Crítica*, 25 nov. 1977, 12.

⁴⁵ "Fiestas patrias en San Blas," *Crítica*, 9 nov. 1977, 23. Original text: "Panama Soberana en la Zona del Canal y los Kunas Soberanos en la Reserva de San Blas."

In March 1978, *Matutino* featured a front-page photograph of an urban Kuna woman, dressed in Kuna clothing, casting her vote in a local election. The woman was a resident of Santa Ana, a district in Panama City, and the woman monitoring the voting station is of African descent. This photo manifests Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalism in depicting two women, of different ethnic origins, equally participating as Panamanian citizens in the national electoral process (see Figure 7).⁴⁶

Other newspaper articles and photos depict Holy Week and Carnival celebrations in Kuna communities, Kuna students from Calidonia, a working-class neighborhood in Panama City, participating in sports, civic, and social activities, and Kuna men organizing basketball leagues.⁴⁷ These articles, while still labeling the participants as Kuna, portray them as active Panamanian citizens, thus helping to foster a resolution to the identity crisis. As Kuna leaders, with the assistance of Torrijos' government, continued to negotiate the differences between the traditionalist and progressivist factions, Kuna individuals began participating more actively in Panamanian events while still retaining elements of Kuna culture, such as language, dress, and traditional ceremonies. The divide between the progressivists and traditionalists became minimized, as the distinctions between these groups were less pronounced as the Kuna decided how to participate in the Panamanian nation.

⁴⁶ *Matutino*, 20 marzo 1978, 1.

⁴⁷ "Semana Santa in Ustupu," *Matutino*, 22 marzo 1978, 3c; *Matutino*, 10 abril 1978, 9b; "Baloncesto Kuna del Pacífico con dasfios sabado y domingo," *Matutino*, 12 ago. 1978, 8b.



Figure 7. Urban Kuna woman voting in 1978 elections.
Source: *Matutino*, 20 marzo 1978, 1.

In August 1978, Panamanians once again voted to elect representatives to the National Assembly. Recognizing the tensions that this process had previously provoked in the comarca, Torrijos urged the Kuna leadership, both official and traditional, to hold a CGK meeting and collectively select the candidates. By encouraging cooperation between all the leadership factions, miscommunication could be minimized and the Kuna could select men who retained the respect of the various leadership divisions.⁴⁸ In this meeting, Kuna leadership suggested candidates for each corregimiento, who then campaigned throughout the region in the months prior to the August election. In the comarca, 80% of eligible voters participated, electing Rubén Pérez Kantule, former secretary to the Intendant, as representative for Corregimiento No. 1, Miguel de León, a leader of the MJK, for

⁴⁸ "Congreso para seleccionar candidatos en San Blas," *Matutino*, 13 marzo 1978, 1.

Corregimiento No. 2, and Arcadio Martínez, serving his second term, as representative for Corregimiento No. 3.⁴⁹

Perhaps even more altering to comarcal leadership than the change in representatives was the appointment of a Kuna leader to the Intendancy. Beginning in the aftermath of the 1977 plebiscite, the Kuna leadership initiated a campaign to remove Intendant Romero, insinuating that he did not respect Kuna traditions, he did not bring any projects to fruition in the comarca, he never attended CGK meetings, and his presence only prevented the unity the Kuna leadership was striving to achieve.⁵⁰ The plebiscite results had manifested the comarcal discord, and Torrijos stated his intentions in further compromising with the Kuna leadership to both bring stability in the region and ensure their unified participation in the nation. By petitioning the Ministry of Government and Justice for this change in the direct aftermath of this event, the CGK managed to gain the attention of the government and achieve this significant change. When the Panamanian government did not respond immediately, the CGK pursued the issue, and in 1978, they issued a resolution that reiterated their desire to have a Kuna man serve as Intendant. They even suggested a candidate, Eligio Alvarado, for this position, stating that his university degree qualified him for the appointment. Furthermore, the CGK asserted that Alvarado understood, and was respected by, the various factions in comarcal leadership, and that this disparate group had uniformly made the decision to support Alvarado's appointment to this critical office.⁵¹ On November

⁴⁹ "Entregan credenciales en Comarca de San Blas," *Matutino*, 19 ago. 1978, 1; "Proceso electoral en San Blas," *Matutino*, 5 julio 1978, 14a.

⁵⁰ "El Intendente llama ingratos a los indios," *Crítica*, 28 nov. 1977, 1; "Intendencia de San Blas pide estudio," *Matutino*, 16 oct. 1978, 9b.

⁵¹ "Resolución #5," 27-29 oct. 1978, Tubuala, AI, RK; "Kunas apoyan a Alvarado para cargo de Intendente," *Matutino*, 8 nov. 1978, 12B; "Congreso General Kuna quiere a Eligio Alvarado como Intendente," *Matutino*, 15 nov. 1978, 9b.

20, 1978, the National Government named Alvarado as the Intendant of San Blas, and a newspaper article reported that both the government and the Kunas hoped that Alvarado could help the indigenous sector participate in Panamanian politics while also preserving Kuna cultural values because these contributed to Panama's diverse and rich culture.⁵² Both the CGK and the Panamanian government utilized the framework of pluriethnic nationalism to justify the appointment of Alvarado. The CGK claimed that a Kuna intendant was essential for the comarca to be able to unify and participate as Panamanian citizens in the national politics. Similarly, the national government claimed to value Kuna culture as an integral part of the national culture, and thus maintained that this sector's inclusion in the nation was essential for national unity. This compromise would ensure that the Kuna would cooperate with the national government but that they would not necessarily culturally assimilate with mainstream Panamanian culture. However, the Torrijos regime was not concerned with cultural homogeneity but rather with gaining support for his political regime, and through ensuring participation of the Kuna while also vocally respecting Kuna traditions, his regime could depend on their support.

Conclusion

By the end of 1978, the comarca's crisis had concluded, culminating in the appointment of the first Kuna intendant. While divisions and disparate opinions persisted, the leadership had consolidated governance structures, ensuring the equal participation of traditional and official leaders in the local decision-making processes. In the first CPC where Alvarado presided as Intendant, he pointedly stated in his opening remarks that his goals

⁵² Victoriano King Colman, "Nuevo Intendente de San Blas elogía un acto revolucionario," *Matutino*, 21 nov. 1979, 2b.

were to gain the "effective participation of all leadership, both traditional authorities and government representatives, and to prioritize comarcal level projects through collaboration of all leadership. Finally, in conclusion, he remarked that above all else, the Kuna must be concerned with cultural preservation. This speech indicates the priorities of Alvarado and the consolidation of Kuna governance within the comarca, acquired by using Torrijos' framework of pluriethnic nationalism. Finally, the Kuna leaders were singularly defining how to be a Kuna-Panamanian, and under the direction of Alvarado, the comarca would continue this consolidation process, achieving cultural autonomy while further participating as Panamanian citizens in national affairs.

CHAPTER V

BECOMING KUNA-PANAMANIAN: 1979-1981

Introduction

In 1981, the Panamanian government approved the Congreso General Kuna's petition to change the name of the comarca from San Blas to Kuna Yala.¹ Replacing the Spanish name for one in the Kuna language emphasizes the consolidated effort the CGK took in protecting Kuna culture and tradition to counter Torrijos' progressive integration programs. It also indicates the state's willingness to permit the preservation of distinct ethnic identities within national borders. The example of a territorial name change portrays the paradoxical coexistence of two identities that the Kuna defined during the later years of the Torrijos regime

The crisis that plagued the comarca in the mid-1970s had ended at the end of 1978 with the appointment of Eligio Alvarado to the office of the intendancy. Both Kuna leaders and the Panamanian populace began to recognize that the crisis was not simply one of governance but rather one of identity. As General Torrijos promoted his pluriethnic national identity through direct inclusion of the Kuna in government and society, the Kuna began to redefine their relationship to the Panamanian nation. Although the increased government presence threatened assimilation, both legislation in the 1972 Constitution and Torrijos' policies toward the Panama's indigenous populations vowed to protect their traditions, claiming them to be a valuable contribution to the uniqueness of Panama. During the later years of Torrijos' government, 1979-1981, comarcas consolidation and unity emerged as the

¹ Roberto R. Rodríguez, "Territorio Kuna Yala se llamará San Blas," *Matutino*, 1 junio 1981, 1.

Kuna collectively redefined their relationship to the state. Tourism, education, economic issues, and governance changes exemplify this consolidation, and while General Torrijos died in a tragic plane accident in July 1981, his death did not reverse any of the gains the Kuna achieved during his tenure.

Tourism

Contraband trading had been an issue in the comarca since Panama's independence from Colombia as many Kuna continued to trade coconuts for manufactured goods with small-scale Colombian merchants. During the Torrijos era, particularly during the economic recession of the late 1970s, the government tried to extend control over all economic sectors, particularly regarding taxing imports coming to the port in Colón. Due to the comarca's proximity to Colón, Intendant Alvarado met with government officials to discuss the standardization of taxes on domestically traded goods and the government also directed him to monitor and curb contraband trading in San Blas because the government received no revenue from this illicit activity. Therefore, the National Guard members and local sahilas were required to request official transit documents from all ships sailing through the comarca and to fine and order the arrest of the crew of any vessel that illegally entered Panamanian waters.²

However, in addition to slowing contraband trading, these measures also affected the entry of cruise ships in the comarca, who in the past entered illegally to avoid paying taxes to the Panamanian government. Because Kuna communities benefited from the souvenir and food purchases of these ships, conflicts emerged as local sahilas permitted the illegal entry of

² Congreso General Kuna, "Caso: Trasatlánticos: Enero 3 de 1980," Legajo *Problema de los trasatlánticos con la comunidad de Cartí Sugdupu*, AI, CGK.

cruise ships despite the Intendant's demands. The most notable case occurred in Cartí Sugdupu in January 1980, when the secretary of the Intendancy requested papers from the cruise ship, *Golden Odyssey* at the dock of Cartí Sugdupu. However, the residents of Cartí Sugdupu became angry that the cruise ship was denied entry to the community and so they began throwing water on the Secretary, and they threatened to beat him with the boat's oars. According to the local police, the sahila authorized this violence and supported the actions taken against the Secretary.³ The local sahila, José Tejada, wrote to Intendant Alvarado to express his frustration with the enforcement of these rules, and he framed his complaint within nationalistic discourse. Tejada asserted that that the Secretary, through intervening in the tourist industry in Cartí Sugdupu, was harming Torrijos' political party, the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD).⁴ Although Tejada does not explain in his letter how these actions actually harmed the PRD, it is possible that the community interpreted support of the PRD with support of all government officials, which would include the Intendancy. Therefore, because of the Intendancy's unpopular actions in Cartí Sugdupu, local membership in the PRD could decline. Alvarado immediately wrote back, insisting that neither the nation nor the Intendancy was trying to harm Cartí Sugdupu's tourism industry. However, Alvarado writes, as members of the Panamanian nation, the comarca must uphold their responsibility to monitor the entry of boats into the region.⁵ Like Tejada, Alvarado also frames the issue in nationalistic language, identifying the Kuna as Panamanian citizens and maintaining that the Kuna share the responsibility of furthering the goals of the Torrijos

³ Congreso General Kuna, "Informe del incidente entre los funcionarios de la Intendencia y los moradores de Cartí Sugdupu, 14 enero 1981, AI, CGK.

⁴ José Tejada, Cartí Sugdupu, to Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, 14 enero 1980, AI, CGK.

⁵ Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, to José Tejada, Cartí Sugdupu, 17 enero 1980, AI, CGK.

government. Only a week after the initial confrontation, the Secretary travelled to Cartí Sugdupu, stating that a central tenet of "our revolutionary government" was to solve problems through peaceful negotiation and communication.⁶

This increased use in nationalistic discourse should not be simply interpreted as ardent support for Torrijos and the PRD. In reality, these communities most likely desired to further their interests regardless of the impact their actions would have upon national politics. However, these communities understood the legitimacy of the state and recognized that the Torrijos government gave concessions for support. Thus, both at a local level and at a comarcal level, Kuna leadership learned to frame demands with nationalistic discourse in order to get positive responses from the national government. The case of the transatlantic cruises shows how both local sahilas and the Intendant, even though they maintained different stances on the issue, utilized Panamanian laws and nationalistic discourse to justify their respective actions. Tourism remained a controversial issue in the comarca, and at this point, the Kuna had still not created a standardized response to the influences that tourism had upon the comarca, and more profoundly, on Kuna culture.

However, the Thomas Moody affair demonstrated to the Panamanian nation that the Kuna would not permit foreigners to violate the comarca's internal tourism laws. Similarly, it exhibited the CGK's stance on tourism and set a precedent for the Kuna statute on tourism. As previously discussed, Thomas Moody, a US citizen and entrepreneur, opened a hotel on the island of Pidertupu, which he leased from a Kuna family, beginning in 1969. However, the CGK found the terms of the lease unfair because Moody only paid \$200 a year for the lease but charged tourists \$90 per day to stay at his resort. The CGK had not approved this

⁶ Congreso General Kuna, "Informe del incidente..."

lease agreement as was customary and legally required by the Carta Orgánica. Throughout the 1970s, the CGK emitted several resolutions asking Moody to either renegotiate the terms of the lease or leave the comarca.⁷ Likewise, they accused Moody of mistreating employees, disrespecting Kuna authorities, and allowing nudity and homosexuality at his resort.⁸ Moody neither revised the contract nor abandoned his resort, so in the middle of the night on June 22, 1981, a group of Kuna youth attacked the resort. Moody was injured and evacuated to a hospital in Panama City. A Kuna contingent of the National Guard intervened to control the situation, but the island of Río Sidra, located near Pidertupu, attacked the National Guard, injuring one and killing another.⁹ The Intendant and the CGK condemned these violent actions, stating that as Panamanian citizens, the perpetrators had violated national laws. However, Intendant Alvarado and the three representatives requested that the *Consejo General del Estado* (State General Council) revoke Moody's tourist permit because he was exploiting the Kuna. Once again, these Kuna leaders framed their demands in nationalistic terms, stating that only Panamanians, not foreigners like Moody should be able to reap the benefits of Panama's natural riches through tourism. The Consejo General agreed to cancel Moody's permit, thus demonstrating solidarity with the Kuna.¹⁰ Furthermore, the CGK capitalized on the attack to immediately issue a decree that required Jhon (sic) Mann, another US entrepreneur who regularly brought tourists to the comarca, to leave the region, and the

⁷ Congreso General Kuna, "Proyecto y resolución Congreso General Kuna de 1980," 20-22 nov. 1980, Ticantiqui, AI, CGK.

⁸ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Problemas e incidentes del Hotel 'Pidertupu'," junio 1981, AI, CGK.

⁹ Arystides Turpana, "La cuestión del territorio Kuna en la actualidad," *Cuadernos de Antropología* 1 (1991): 19.

¹⁰ "El Congreso Kuna acepta entregar implicados en asalto a Pidertupu," *Matutino*, 29 junio 1981, 1a; "Roberto Rodríguez, "Kunas denuncian maltratos contra sus tradiciones," *Matutino*, 25 junio 1981, 1a.

Consejo General supported this resolution as well.¹¹ In the funeral services for Sergeant Damaso González, the CGK esteemed the sacrifice that González, a Kuna man, made for the Panamanian nation by permitting him to be buried in a cemetery where former primary caciques were buried. Allowing González to have this sacred burial space indicates that the Kuna leadership wished to venerate his service to Panama as they honored deceased head *sahilas*.¹²

While the case of the transatlantic cruise ships demonstrated the CGK's failure to establish a unified response to foreign incursion in tourism, the Thomas Moody affair marks the beginnings of a consolidated effort by the Kuna to control tourism at the comarcal level rather than allowing each community to practice different policies toward foreign entrepreneurs in their vicinity. Once again, the Kuna demonstrated a willingness to resort to violence when the perpetrators continually violate Kuna tradition, as occurred in the 1925 rebellion and the 1962 attack at Río Tigre. However, the Kuna leadership, through utilizing the discourse provided by Torrijos pluriethnic nationalism, framed foreign entrepreneurs not only as harmful to Kuna culture, but also as detrimental to the nation of Panama. Through utilizing the political spaces that the 1972 Constitution and subsequent legislation allotted to indigenous leaders, the Kuna framed tourism conflicts in the comarca as a national issue rather than one that merely violated indigenous culture. By maintaining this nationalistic language, the Kuna managed to acquire legal means to consolidate control over touristic ventures in the region, and through these rights, use Panamanian nationalism to protect Kuna

¹¹ Congreso General Kuna, "Acuerdo entre la comunidad de Cartí Sugdup y los saylas dumad (caciques generales) en representación del Congreso General Kuna con el señor Jhon Mann, sobre el abandono de la permanencia de este último en la isla de Kuigala Dupu y dentro de Kuna Yala (Comarca de San Blas)," 23 junio 1981, Cartí Sugdup, AI, CGK.

¹² "Rinden honores militares a guardia Kuna," *Matutino*, 2 julio 1981, 1a.

ethnic identity. In 1996, the national government approved the Kuna Tourism Statute, which gave the CGK full autonomy and regulation of all tourist activities in the comarca.¹³ The CGK now utilizes tourism to gain funds for comarcal development projects, making the Kuna less dependent on governmental funding. This statute also establishes rigid guidelines for the types of businesses permitted in the tourism industry in San Blas, limiting ownership to Kuna individuals, requiring annual permits and inspections from the CGK, regulating the style of buildings to only reflect traditional Kuna construction, and requiring the employment of only Kuna individuals.¹⁴ In addition, because the CGK, not the national government, regulates tourism in San Blas, the Kuna are able to prioritize cultural preservation through establishing strict regulations on tourist behavior. Through the events in the early 1980s, such as the Moody affair, the national government began conceding jurisdiction over tourism ventures to the Kuna, and since this period, the Kuna have increasingly consolidated their control over tourism to still gain the economic benefits from this important industry, but to ensure that those benefits remain in the comarca rather than going into the national treasury.

Education

The Torrijos regime prioritized educating Panama's masses, and as discussed, the Kuna received significant funds to construct schools in San Blas. Nationally, between 1968-1978, matriculation in public schools increased by 90% and enrollment at the University of Panama increased by 180%.¹⁵ In the San Blas comarca, the school-aged population (ages 6-

¹³ Stephen G. Snow, "The Kuna General Congress and the Statute on Tourism," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 24, no. 4 (Winter 2000), <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/panama/kuna-general-congress-and-statute-tourism> (accessed June 15, 2011).

¹⁴ Congreso General Kuna, "Reglamentación de turismo," 1996, AI, CGK.

¹⁵ Ardito Barletta, "Omar Torrijos H.," 164.

15) in 1980 was 7,848, and 57% attended primary school, compared to 54% that attended in 1970. Similarly, the illiteracy rate amongst citizens age ten or older was 50% in 1980, decreased from 65% in 1970.¹⁶ As these statistics demonstrate, the number of students attending school and achieving literacy increased under the Torrijos regime.

Access to higher education also increased during the Torrijos era. Carlos Walcott writes that there was a "democratization of teaching" which permitted students of lower socio-economic status to obtain higher education through increased amounts of financial aid.¹⁷ At a 1981 Consejo Provincial de Coordinación (CPC) meeting in Ticantiki, San Blas, the regional representative for IFARHU noted that 125 Kuna students had received more than \$25,000 in scholarship money.¹⁸ IFARHU regularly sent Intendant Alvarado lists of scholarships available for Panamanian students, both for study at the University of Panama and for specific programs at international universities such as institutions in Great Britain, West Germany, Czechoslovakia, Venezuela, Italy, Mexico, Holland, and Yugoslavia.¹⁹ As more Kuna students received higher education, a new generation of Kuna professionals emerged that would continue to advocate for the protection of Kuna culture through various channels. Increasingly, non-Kuna officers for various national ministries were replaced with qualified Kuna individuals, thus helping to further unite the official and the traditional governance structures as these individuals increasingly shared a common ethnic identity.

¹⁶ República de Panamá, Contraloría General de la República, Dirección de Estadística y Censo, *Censos Nacionales de 1980*, 11 mayo 1980, Vol. 1, 180-181; República de Panamá, Contraloría General de la República, Dirección de Estadística y Censo, *Censos Nacionales de 1970*, 10 mayo 1970, Vol. 1, 120-121.

¹⁷ Carlos Walcott, "Breve historia de la Universidad," *Revista Lotería*, (Sept-Oct 1985): 24.

¹⁸ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Reunión del Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas," 25 abril 1981, Ticantiki, AI, CGK. These scholarships provided money for students to attend all levels of school, not just the university level. Of these 125 scholarships, 10 were for university-level education.

¹⁹ Legajo *Becas Comunitarias/IFARHU 1981*, AI, CGK.

One novel program that the 1972 Constitution legalized was the bilingual education movement. Although the Constitution supported the study and teaching of indigenous languages, the government established no programs for the implementation of this project. Beginning in the early 1980s, Kuna educators began restructuring curriculum to include education in the Kuna language and elements of Kuna culture. During the early 1980s, one Kuna school implemented bilingual education and Kuna education leaders, in solidarity with Panama's other indigenous populations, began pressing the government for state-sponsored bilingual education. Finally, in 2008, the national government approved a plan that Kuna educators created, which involved the implementation of bilingual education in all schools in San Blas.²⁰ This program not only included instruction in the Kuna language but also integrates the Kuna mathematical system, traditional agriculture techniques, Kuna history, and Kuna spirituality into the curriculum.²¹ Through utilizing the legal rights obtained during the Torrijos era, the Kuna were able to renovate the national educational system within the limits of the comarca to restructure education in a manner that would simultaneously promote the values of the Panamanian state but also inculcate students with traditional values.

Economic Issues

As previously discussed, the Torrijos administration sought to incorporate Panama's remote regions into the nation, including the national economy. Until this era, the San Blas

²⁰ Orán Bodin and Orán, "Reading Noam Chomsky," 236.

²¹ Congreso General Guna, *Nan Garburba Oduloged Igar: Propuesta Curricular de la EBI Guna* (Panama City, Panama: Editora Sibauste, S.A., 2011), 21.

economy had remained autonomous, and the majority of Kuna commerce occurred through clandestine trading with Colombian merchants. During the later years of the Torrijos regime, the CGK began to consolidate comarcal economic policy, prioritizing the comarcal good over the national but utilizing national laws and their new political positions to justify their actions.

Contraband trading was an ongoing issue in the comarca, and since colonial times, the Kuna traded with rival powers, such as the British during the colonial era and the United States and Colombians after Panamanian independence. Although the San Blas comarca is located close to the port city of Colón, trading through legal channels would require the Kuna to fully participate in the cash economy and pay taxes whereas illicit trading with the Colombians allowed individuals to barter and exchange and forego tax payment. As seen with the case of the transatlantic cruise ships, both the National Guard, and at times, the Intendancy, supported the restrictions placed on boats that illegally entered comarcal waters. However, many local sahilas refused to cooperate with these laws because forbidding contraband trading would harm the community's economy.²²

In many of the CGK meetings, discussions centered on the issue of increased drug use amongst Kuna, and participants reached a general consensus that these contraband Colombian merchants were responsible for trafficking drugs. Thus, increased cooperation regarding contraband trading emerged as more ships were detained and inspected.²³ One pivotal turning point that convinced hesitant sahilas of the dangers of contraband trading was

²² República de Panamá, Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia, "Informe general sobre el movimiento de las embarcaciones en el puerto de El Porvenir," Expediente no. 81, mayo 1981, AI, CGK.

²³ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 3," 20 marzo 1979, AI, CGK; Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 6," 30 ago. 1979, AI, CGK.

with the detention of the *Morning Star*. The ship was detained in Cartí Sugdupu and after inspection, was found to carry cocaine, marijuana, and arms.²⁴ Both the community of Cartí Sugdupu and the Intendant called upon the Panamanian National Guard to fine and arrest the crew of the *Morning Star*, but the Kuna leadership created no systematic approach to documenting the entry of ships.

Meeting minutes from a 1979 CPC discussion shed light onto Kuna hesitation to create a standardized response to the illegal entry of ships in the comarca and Kuna unwillingness to request an increased presence of the National Guard in the comarca to patrol the waters. While the CGK strongly opposed drug trafficking in the region, stating that it violated the morals of Kuna culture and also disagreed with tourism tax evasion, stricter monitoring of the local docks would also restrict the Kuna's capacity to conduct illicit trading, particularly the profitable coconut trade. A representative from the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario* (Ministry of Farming and Livestock Development, MIDA) attended this 1979 CPC meeting to discuss possibilities for the commercialization of coconut. He proposed several alternatives to replace the contraband trading with the Colombian merchants, such as selling the coconuts on the international market, purchasing machinery to produce and sell shredded coconut, participating in the national markets in Colón, Sabanita, and Panama City, or selling the coconuts to businesses that produced coconut oil. However, the Kuna delegates found these alternatives unsatisfactory, primarily because the prices the Colombians pay and the quantities they purchase were fixed and sufficient, unlike the national and international markets, which fluctuated. They also remarked that the Colombians provided their communities with other essential items, such as sugar, salt, and

²⁴ Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, to Lic. Jorge E. Ritter, Ministro de Gobierno y Justicia, Panamá, 20 abril 1981, AI, CGK.

gasoline, at prices much lower than those in Colón. Finally, one delegate suggested to the MIDA representative that Panama create a trade agreement with Cartagena, the Colombian port city the Kuna trade with, to legalize the trade, rather than force the Kuna to adjust the comarca's economic structure.²⁵

The uncompromising attitude and stance of the CGK on coconut trading, when juxtaposed with the general approach to the case of the *Morning Star* and other illegal ships, seems contradictory. However, after considering the underlying motives, it becomes apparent that during this era, the CGK began to act primarily on the best interest of the comarca, not necessarily that of the nation. When contraband traders brought drugs into the comarca, the CGK and Kuna leadership utilized nationalistic discourse and legal measures to denounce these actions. However, when illicit trade brought direct benefits to the internal economy of the comarca, the CGK offered support and refused to adopt less profitable alternatives. Since both the Intendant and the National Guard chief in this zone were Kuna and ardent supporters of the CGK, the Kuna leadership could simply choose when they wished to enforce national laws as the legislation under Torrijos gave these Kuna institutions increased political clout and legitimacy.

Governance Consolidation

During the final years of Torrijos' regime, the Kuna consolidated the comarcial politics under the direction of Eligio Alvarado. Not only did the role of the Intendant significantly change with the first appointment of a Kuna to this position, but the roles of the sahila also shifted during this era in an effort to divide power more affectively throughout the CGK. By 1981, the CGK had completely reunited and began to issue demands to the

²⁵ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 4," 15 junio 1979, AI, CGK.

national government that required revision of the Carta Orgánica. Through the consolidation of comarcal governance, the Kuna emerged as a powerful political actor in Panama that utilized the nationalistic discourse and the inclusion extended to the comarca through pluriethnic nationalism to further protect their cultural autonomy.

When the Panamanian government permitted Eligio Alvarado to be named Intendant of San Blas, they made a significant concession to the Kuna. The Intendant served as the government representative in the region, acting as an intermediary figure but more significantly, ensuring that comarcal policies benefitted and supported the national government first and foremost. With Alvarado's assumption of this critical position, the national government correctly assumed that the CGK and the Kuna populace could unite and more effectively participate in the Panamanian nation. Perhaps what the national government did not foresee was the CGK's ability to utilize this powerful position of Intendant to further Kuna interests, even when these collided with national concerns, as seen in economic and tourism development. The Kuna leadership supported Alvarado, stating,

Alvarado has demonstrated the ability, talent, and personal integrity in the duration of his time as Intendant of our comarca of San Blas. That this charge is in the hands of a son of our people has proved to be very effective in the solution of our problems and propitious to the unity of the Kuna family.²⁶

At Alvarado's suggestion, Kuna communities appointed administrative sahilas, in addition to the traditional ones, to participate in both the CGK and the CPC. In this manner, each community had two individuals, each with equal legitimacy, who were responsible for ensuring that the community abided by national laws and Kuna culture.²⁷ Likewise,

²⁶ Congreso General Kuna, "Escritura no. 13,581," Legajo 1978 SPAMARSA, 17 dic. 1979, AI, CGK.

²⁷ Ernesto Martelo, Caledonia, to Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, 12 dic. 1978, AI, CGK; Sahila of Anachucuna, to Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, 15 dic. 1978, AI, CGK; Sahila of Carneto, to Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, 16

Alvarado integrated members of the CGK into the CPC and held all meetings in both the Kuna and Spanish language to remove all barriers to communication.²⁸ In doing so, traditional and official leaders interacted more often, the content of these meetings was transparent to all, and the two institutions maintained equal legitimacy. Alvarado also invited key governmental figures to the CGK meetings so that non-Kuna officials could better understand Kuna culture and the rationale behind various programs and regulations in the comarca.²⁹ The CPC began to focus solely on development projects at the comarcal level rather than the community level, in order to avoid competition and strife between communities.³⁰ These changes served to unite comarcal leadership and created a solution that prioritized both the development of San Blas, as the progressivists wanted while simultaneously emphasizing Kuna culture, as the traditionalist faction demanded.

Finally, two of the head sahilas, Estanislao López and Ceferino Colman, retired during this era due to old age and poor health, and interestingly, the CGK selected two of the rival sahilas from the 1976 split to assume this role. Leonidas Valdés replaced López in 1979, and Enrique Guerro replaced Colman in 1983. Just a short time later, when Kawidi retired in 1989, the third rival sahila, Armando González, was elected to his position.³¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, Valdés, Guerro, and González had split and formed a second CGK in 1976, asserting that the current head sahilas and representatives sought only

dic. 1978, AI, CGK; Sahila of Armila, to Eligio Alvarado, El Porvenir, 14 dic. 1978, AI, CGK; Sahila of Sasardi-Mulatupu, to Eligio Alvarado, 13 dic. 1978, AI, CGK.

²⁸ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 2," Ailigandí, 8 feb. 1979, AI, CGK.

²⁹ Legajo *Notas de invitación enviadas (Congreso General Kuna) 1979*, AI, CGK.

³⁰ Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 2," 8 feb. 1979, AI, CGK; Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 5," 27 julio 1979, AI, CGK; Consejo Provincial de Coordinación de San Blas, "Acta No. 1," 20 dic. 1979, AI, CGK.

³¹ Valdés, "La evolución histórica," 13.

personal gain and prestige in the eyes of the national government and therefore, paid no heed to the preservation of Kuna culture. In their discourse during the comarcal crisis, Valdés, Guerro, and González clearly prioritized their ethnic identity over their national identity, and their allegiance to the Kuna nation overshadowed any commitment they had to the Panamanian nation. By selecting these notorious leaders as the new head *sahilas*, the CGK signify that, as an authoritative institution, the Kuna would collectively never jeopardize Kuna culture for the good of the Panamanian nation. However, continued Kuna participation in national politics and affairs suggests a desire to contribute to the Panamanian nation when doing so did not injure or obfuscate their distinct ethnic identity.

One way that Kuna citizens participated in national politics was through political parties. Although outlawed in the aftermath of the 1968 coup, the Panamanian government legalized political parties once again in 1979, and in both 1979 and 1980, Panama held elections for political parties to garner the necessary 30,000 votes to achieve official status. The Torrijos regime formed the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD) and in the 1979 election, San Blas overwhelmingly supported the PRD. In 1980, the *Partido del Pueblo* (PP) received slightly more votes than the PRD, but the PP, a Communist-based party, also supported the Torrijos regime. Additionally, in the 1981 elections that selected legislators, San Blas had the highest voter turnout amongst the provinces in Panama, with 78.06% eligible voters participating.³² These results can be interpreted in different ways; either the Kuna truly did support the Torrijos regime or they understood that the comarca could continue to gain concessions from the government in exchange for political support, in a form of clientelism. Regardless of whether this support was simply an act to garner

³² República de Panamá, Tribunal Electoral, *Memoria de Tribunal Electoral de Panamá*, 1980.

autonomy or was genuine, through participating in Torrijos' pluriethnic national project and through playing the role of involved Panamanian citizens, the Kuna achieved important concessions that enabled the comarca to further realize their relative autonomy in political and economic matters while striving to prioritize cultural preservation above any national concerns.

The CGK request to revise the Carta Orgánica is a final example of this shift toward consolidation. The Carta Orgánica, ratified in 1953, served as the internal law for the comarca, but at the CGK in Tikantiki in November 1980, the CGK voted to revise this legislation to make its statutes more relevant to the current structure of the comarca.³³ The CGK commissioned a group of 18 people to rewrite the internal law in order to create an internal hierarchy in light of the "duality of power" established with the creation of the representatives in 1972. Likewise, this new law would establish the CGK, not the CPC, as the primary link to the national government, thus safeguarding power in the hands of the traditional authorities rather than with government agents.³⁴ The national government supported the idea of revising the obsolete law, stating that the 1972 Constitution expressed respect for Panama's indigenous populations, and therefore, the government would cooperate with the desires of the Kuna. However, the Minister of Government and Justice did warn that any changes must still be compatible with the Constitution, because San Blas is part of Panamá, and as Panamanian citizens, the Kuna must obey national laws.³⁵ During the early

³³ Congreso General Kuna, "Resolución de Tikantiki," 21-24 nov. 1980, AI, BCD.

³⁴ Juan Uribe D., "Revisión de la ley 16," *Estrella de Panamá*, 19 dic. 1980.

³⁵ Roberto R. Rodríguez, "Territorio Kuna Yala..."

1980s, this commission rewrote the internal law for the comarca, and in 1995, the Panamanian government finally ratified the law.

The resulting legislation, the *Ley Fundamental de la Comarca de San Blas*, encapsulated the consolidation of power that the Kuna leadership had worked toward during the later years of the Torrijos regime. This law establishes the CGK and the CGCK as the highest authorities in the comarca, above any government official, thus negating the need for the Intendancy, which the CGK argued was a relic of the colonial past. The laws set guidelines for the structure of these governance institutions, mandated bilingual education in all comarcas schools, forbade non-Kuna or any businesses from owning or exploiting comarcas territory, and regulated the internal economy, including tourism.³⁶ Through this document, the Kuna clearly establish their priority of cultural preservation and autonomy despite their many overtures during this era about commitment to the Panamanian nation.

Conclusion

On July 31, 1981, General Omar Torrijos unexpectedly died when his private plane crashed. Rumors of assassination abounded, although no concrete evidence surfaced to prove this assertion. His death did not mark the sudden end of Panama's military dictatorship; rather, the military continued to govern Panama until the US invasion in December 1989, which overthrew Manuel Noriega and once again, established a democratic government in Panama.

Regardless of his motivations, General Torrijos often spoke with great respect and favor toward the Kuna and besides the 1977 Canal Treaty Plebiscite, enjoyed Kuna support.

³⁶ Congreso General Kuna, *Ley Fundamental de la Comarca de San Blas*, <http://www.congresogeneralkuna.com/normas%20kunas.htm> (accessed 2.28.2012)

Through the inclusion that Torrijos offered the Kuna through his pluriethnic nationalism project, the Kuna gained unprecedented political power in national politics. Through utilizing these novel rights, the Kuna leadership overcame initial divisions and differing ideologies and interpretations of the national law to eventually consolidate their power under the institution of the CGK. By mid-1981, the CGK functioned as the single authoritative and legitimate governance body in the comarca, as demonstrated by increased control over tourism, education, the regional economy, and governance changes. Collectively, the Kuna began to redefine their identity as one that was no longer completely isolated and uninvolved with the nation but still retained a strong sense of ethnic identity. Through this era, this indigenous group determined how to be Kuna-Panamanian, confronting the challenges that a seemingly paradoxical position held, but emerging as citizens of the larger national corpus who also highly esteemed their ethnic identity.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE

General Omar Torrijos often spoke of everyone being Panamanian: the Afro-Caribbean sectors, the Chinese immigrants, the Hispanic population, and the indigenous peoples. He portrayed the true Panamanian as a mixture of these cultures and ethnicities, arguing that Panama was unique because of each group's contributions. Recognizing that his military dictatorship could only survive through popular support, Torrijos sought to include the majority of the population into this vision of what constituted "the nation" rather than solely focus on the elite, white sectors of the population. This ideology, which I have defined as pluriethnic nationalism, extended rights, privileges, and a political voice to many marginalized citizens who, until this point, had not been included into this abstract concept of the nation.

In using this new membership in the Panamanian nation, the Kuna emerged from this era as more adamantly protecting their ethnic identity. During the military regime of General Omar Torrijos, the Kuna consolidated their control over the comarca, mandating the future direction of initiatives that formerly were under national government's control. As a national identity became more pronounced during this era, a resurgence of ethnic identity occurred as the Kuna fought to preserve their culture in light of the acculturating threat of the larger state presence. This process was not immediate but was contested throughout the period, causing ruptures amongst Kuna leadership. With the 1972 Constitution, the creation of direct representation established, in a sense, two rival factions within the comarca, which I have

defined as the traditionalist and the progressivist faction. Undeniably, these labels simplify the complexities and the variance in the ideology of the members of these two factions. This comarcal division was never clearly delineated as individuals constantly changed alliances to further their own self-interests. Furthermore, these two opposing viewpoints represent opposite ends of the spectrum, ignoring middle voices. However, for the purposes of tracing the general trends throughout this era, the documentation and the arguments recorded in various sessions of the CGK and the CPC do clearly portray this basic dilemma: does participating in Panamanian national affairs, such as politics, diminish and harm one's ethnic identity? Did development projects, such as healthcare, education, and tourism, directly undermine and gradually erase Kuna culture and values? Could an individual retain membership in the Panamanian nation while still be a dedicated member of the Kuna nation?

As this essay argues, by 1981, the Kuna had collectively defined a response to the challenge presented by pluriethnic nationalism. While leaders from the traditionalist faction emerged as the new Kuna leadership during this era, the CGK formulated a compromise to this debate, recognizing that complete isolation from Panama was impractical and impossible. The Kuna began to utilize Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalism to gain concessions from the government that would further protect Kuna identity.

For the first time, the national government named a Kuna man to the position of Intendant, and this action, in a sense, relinquished direct government control over comarcal affairs. Although Alvarado remained accountable to the national government for comarcal activities, his priority was not simply enforcing national laws in the comarca and furthering the government's interests in the region but rather focused on prioritizing Kuna demands. Under his leadership, the Kuna won a significant victory against tourism incursion in the area

as the national government supported the Kuna initiative to remove all foreign-owned property from the comarca. This action, in turn, set a precedent for future negotiations regarding tourism, and today, the CGK, not IPAT, controls all tourism activity and revenue in the comarca. Another significant achievement under Alvarado's leadership was the revisions of the Carta Orgánica. Small gains in governance, economic autonomy, and territorial protection culminated in this document, which asserted Kuna autonomy in the comarca and designated the CGK as the only decision-maker for inter-comarcial policies.

Therefore, during the Torrijos regime, the Kuna simultaneously became increasingly incorporated in the Panamanian nation while preserving and prioritizing their Kuna ethnicity. By using the new political spaces given them through the 1972 Constitution, the Kuna leadership framed demands for comarcial autonomy in nationalistic discourse. Doing so provided support for the Torrijos regime and resulted in increased governmental concessions for the Kuna. Torrijos' pluriethnic nationalistic project may have failed to gain the complete allegiance of the Kuna, as they continued to prioritize their ethnic identity, but it did succeed, at times, in further integrating the Kuna into the Panamanian nation. When the Torrijos regime gave increased legitimacy to official governance structures, which negated the power of the CGK, the Kuna demonstrated their dissatisfaction through voting against the 1977 Canal Treaty Plebiscite. Torrijos further negotiated with the Kuna and the CGK, appointing Alvarado to the Intendancy and permitting the participation of the CGK in the CPC, and in the end, the comarca did overwhelmingly support Torrijos, as demonstrated by their participation in national political parties that endorsed the regime. Throughout this thesis, I argue that the question of identity served as the fundamental concern behind debates regarding political, social, and economic issues.

The case of the Kuna raises interesting questions about the relationship of nationalism and ethnicity. The Kuna Panamanian case demonstrates how a distinct ethnic population can simultaneously participate in the nation while maintain an ethnic identity. However, it also argues that one has to prioritize one identity over the rest, and in the case of the Kuna, as shown by the CGK's documents, that priority is their ethnic identity. Interesting further study that involved ethnographic study at an individual level could reveal trends regarding self-identification in Panama's Kuna population, complementing my study, which only considered general historical trends. Collectively, however, the Kuna illustrate how ethnic identities, particularly those who occupy a distinct territory within a state, undermine a state's efforts at a unified nationalism. As the state promotes a single national identity, ethnic and regional identities respond by becoming more pronounced, often preventing any unity within the populace. The Kuna, through using nationalistic discourse and through their increased participation in the Panamanian nation, managed to subvert the Torrijos' goal of national unity to further consolidate and protect Kuna culture and tradition.

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