

Kuna Yala¹ Part I: Ethnography Lite:²

The Kuna, population 55,000, are the largest of Panama's 7 indigenous groups. They have lived along the Caribbean shoreline of eastern Panama for hundreds, perhaps a thousand, years (yellow strip upper right on map). At some point 300-400 years ago, they began locating most of their villages on many of the 350 small islands lying ½ to 7 mi off the mainland but they continue to farm and maintain *fincas* on the mainland.



In the 1920s an important spiritual and political leader, Nele Kantule realized that with the modern world pressing in, the Kuna nation would lose its identity unless it did something active to preserve it. In a weird footnote to early 20th C. eugenics, the Kunas did just that: they killed and threw out the Panamanian and mixed-race police and governmental authorities and according to some accounts killed all people, including children, who were not 100% Kuna. Panama armed for revenge, but the end result, possibly brokered by the US as de facto colonial power, was that the entire eastern Caribbean coast and mountains of Panama were declared to be “Kuna Yala”, a “comarca” of Panama, under the complete control of the Kuna nation. Other indigenous groups, principally the Embera, the Ngobe and the tribes of Darien also occupy comarcas of their own. The combined land mass of these reserved lands exceeds 30% of Panama. Not a problem now -- the entire population of Panama is only 3.5 million -- but in the future, who knows? Although comarcas send elected representatives to the National Assembly, indigenous Panamanians participate in national life only to the extent they choose to. The Kuna generally do not choose to. There are many small airstrips in Kuna Yala but only one road, which goes straight from Panama City to the town of Carti in western Kuna Yala. It requires high-axle 4-wheel drive and is open only to the Kuna transportation companies, who only intermittently are willing to carry non-Kuna.

Since the events of the 1920s, the Kuna interface with the outside world has become more nuanced. Profiting from the modern world while preserving a traditional way of life is an on-going challenge and the responses are quite interesting to observe. The most traditional communities are in the east, closest to Colombia, while to the west, closer to the popular international cruising grounds, villages reflect increasing levels of Panamanian and tourism influences, especially in the public buildings, clothing and perhaps aspirations. However even here strong Kuna social organization prevails, a feature that makes Kuna Yala a very secure cruising ground for international sailors.

¹ the land of the Kuna (Guna)

² These remarks are a combination of personal observation and information from the Bauhaus and Zydler cruising guides to Panama. They are based on only 2 months' experience and are definitely not authoritative.

Here is a quick preview of 3 Kuna towns, discussed further in “Kuna Yala, Part II”.



Careto (pop ~1000) is the easternmost and most traditional of all the Kuna villages. It is on the mainland and has only one non-traditional building, a wooden evangelical church. We were told bathroom functions simply take place at water's edge or in the forest. Freshwater is supplied by a river beside the village. From sundown to sunup there were no lights visible at all.



Ustupu is the biggest of the Kuna towns (pop ~10,000) with a mixture of traditional thatched homes and two concrete block schools, clinic, and gov't buildings. Note cell phone towers and the two concrete water towers on the right that hold clean water pumped from the river on the mainland (1/2 mi). Bathrooms consist of latrines and showers over the water. At the far right you can see the bow of a Colombian coastal trading boat on the concrete town dock.



Nargana-Corazon de Jesus is one of the transitional towns in western Kuna Yala. Here there are generators, electric lights, and – increasingly-- satellite dishes for TV. There are still traditional huts with a grace and dignity of their own but the tin roofed or concrete block homes next to them suddenly look like poor shanties in Panama slums, especially when people cluster passively in front of TV sets on a rainy day.

All land in Kuna Yala is owned in common and cannot be sold. As a consequence, there are no roads and several thousand square miles of jungle and steep mountains with untouched old-growth forests. Rights to land plots in villages are determined by the congresos and plots and compounds are passed down through the generations. Similar land rights apply to *fincas* (farming plots on offshore islands or inland jungles) that produce basic foods and large quantities of coconuts sold to the Colombian trading boats that ply the coast. The economy is partly subsistence based on fish and tropical fruits and partly cash. Cash from the sale of coconuts and increasingly from tourism is used to buy rice, vegies, sugar . . . and cell phone minutes. Except in the east, cell phones are widely available, with high cell phone towers and fairly wide coverage. For Kuna living isolated on outer islands, this leads to an amusing problem: cruisers are often asked if they will recharge a cell phone battery.

Traditional Kuna architecture consists of thatch-roofed huts, collected into family compounds of 1-3 huts enclosed by the hut walls and palisades (fences) made by canes or bamboo. These structures stand for 15 years or more before major repairs are needed. The villages are swept clean and trees and flowers can be seen over an occasional compound wall. In the larger towns, the compounds are organized into straight streets. Alas, in almost all of Kuna Yala, shoreline garbage abounds and sewage is usually just a latrine over the water. This is not a problem in small villages but made the waters near larger towns very off limits for us.

The Kuna are a people of small stature (women less than 5' tall and men about my height) and very gracefully proportioned, with handsome features and gorgeous smiles. Men wear standard Caribbean male attire: tee-shirts and long shorts or trousers. In the westernizing towns young women also wear shorts, jeans and tee-

shirts but the traditional woman's dress, worn in the eastern villages and by middle-aged and older women everywhere, is really stunning. It consists of wrapped dark skirt and a blouse with puffy sleeves and an embroidered, layered central panel around the torso (the mola) and often a loosely draped red and yellow headscarf, which is really quite dignified. I am devoting a whole blog to it -- see "Kuna Yala III: Beauty".

The traditional communities are tight-knit : all the men are required to attend the evening congreso, led by the Saila (a combination of civic and spiritual leader), where problems and disputes are aired. Such communities appear to be very stable. I wonder how their idea of "the individual" differs from the Western concept. Interestingly, the Kuna are a matrilineal society: property is passed down through the women of a family and when a man marries, he moves into the compound of his wife. The women have their own congreso on some afternoons. If a Kuna from the most traditional villages marries a non-Kuna, he/she must leave the village. In former times, this also applied to someone marrying a Kuna from a different village, which led to a lot of inbreeding. This has now resulted in a surprising number of albino Kuna, who look quite uncomfortable with their pink skin and vulnerable eyes under the bright tropical sun. Outsiders are welcome to visit the Kuna villages. In traditional villages, visitors must leave by sunset.

The Kuna use canoes the way Americans use cars. The canoes are single big logs, dug/burned out and shaped, and they are very very tippy. Young children paddle toddlers, who I am sure do not swim. Everyone is an accomplished boater. Many of the larger canoes now have outboard motors – another link to the cash economy.



Note plastic trash along village shore. Alas.



dugout canoe sailing in 3' seas



the woman paddling was elderly



As we sailed westward from Puerto Obaldia toward the "Happy American Cruising Grounds" in western Kuna Yala we anchored in or near 5 villages, gradually learning more about Kuna culture with each town. As a typical American saddled with our national history and mythology about Indians, I initially approached the Kuna

with a careful and somewhat exaggerated respectfulness. But since almost the entire population of the Caribbean coast of Panama consists of either indigenous peoples or of Afro-Caribbean descendents of freed or escaped slaves and of Jamaicans and others brought in by the French and then the Americans to work on the Panama Canal, by the end of our 5 months in Panama the Kuna were just one more part of the interesting mix. But I was particularly impressed with them. The Kuna I spoke with (beyond simple commercial transactions) were mentally very alert, thoughtful about their choices to live within or apart from traditional bounds, and surprisingly aware of the outside world. They knew they live in a paradise: they benefit from clean water supplies and medical clinics provided by the Panama government³, their isolation permits them to live as they choose and the traditional lifestyle permits abundant free time in which “goin’ fishin’ is useful work. I, for one, hope the Kuna continue to live on their lands, in whatever manner they choose, for many centuries to come.

³ Although judging from some of the crowded islands we saw, I wonder if there isn’t a population explosion in progress.