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978-0-521-10711-2 - Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through its Discourse

Joel Sherzer

Excerpt

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Kuna Indians are probably best known for their molas, colorful appliqué and reverse-appliqué blouses made and worn by Kuna women and sold all over the world. They are one of the largest indigenous groups in the South American tropics, numbering more than 30,000 individuals, the majority of whom inhabit San Blas, a string of island villages stretching from near the Canal Zone to the Panama-Colombia border, quite close to the jungle mainland, where they farm. Living on the edge of modern, urban civilization, the Kuna have managed to maintain their cultural uniqueness through a creative integration of old and new, constantly adapting and manipulating traditional patterns to make them fit new situations.

The Kuna language is usually classified as Chibchan, a very broad grouping which encompasses other languages of southern Central America and northern South America. It is not closely related, however, genetically or typologically, to any other Amerindian language. With regard to social and cultural organization, the Kuna are also unique, remarkably different from the other indigenous populations of Panama and neighboring regions. On the other hand, close and deep analysis of Kuna language, culture, and society, and especially their interaction and intersection, reveals certain similarities with other native groups in Central and South America, including some as far away as Brazil.

The Kuna have a rich and dynamic verbal life. Like most tropical forest and lowland South American Indian societies, the Kuna's world is permeated by and in fact organized by means of their discourse – the mythical chants of chiefs; the histories, legends, and stories of traditional leaders; the magical chants and secret charms of curing specialists; the speeches and reports of personal experience of all men and women; and the greetings, leave-takings, conversations, and joking of everyday life. All of this is oral – spoken, chanted, sung, shouted, and listened to.

This book is about the verbal life of the Kuna, presented here in the form of original versions and translations of myths, speeches, stories, and magical chants, together with extensive and intensive social, cultural, and linguistic commentary and analysis. My purpose is to demonstrate concretely how such discourse shapes life and experience in this nonliterate tropical island and forest society, in which all knowledge and information, from history and geography to the latest sports news from Panama City, is orally conceived, perceived, and transmitted. Experience of the physical, natural, and

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human world – both Kuna and non-Kuna – is expressed and mediated through the discourse presented here. And it is through this discourse that we as outsiders can best appreciate Kuna life – its philosophy, mythology, symbolism, rhetoric, esthetics, and daily preoccupations; what Kuna individuals consider to be serious or sad, tragic or funny.

The verbal performances presented here were all recorded on the island of Sasartii-Mulatuppu, located in the eastern portion of San Blas, near the Colombian border. I first visited this island in 1969 and was immediately drawn into the fascinating world of Kuna discourse. From early in the morning to late at night I saw and heard the talking, chanting, shouting, and laughing of men and women as they conversed, counseled, cured, and joked. As the result of many visits I have made to Sasartii-Mulatuppu since that first one, I have become increasingly sensitive to and appreciative of the artistic properties of Kuna discourse as well as the necessity of approaching Kuna culture and society in terms of this discourse. From both theoretical and methodological perspectives my research is discourse centered. An earlier book, *Kuna Ways of Speaking*, is an exploration of Kuna language and culture from an ethnographic perspective. In it I examine general and specific patterns of language use, in both ritual and everyday life. This second book delves further and deeper into Kuna discourse. Each of the chapters centers on a particular verbal performance and follows the intersecting paths of linguistic, cultural, social, and poetic patterning reflected in and created by it.

The organizing focus of this book is verbal art. The Kuna are superb verbal artists, remarkable performers of the poetic discourse which is so essential to their social and cultural life. The performances presented here are all considered verbally artistic by the Kuna, who perform, listen to, appreciate, and evaluate them. They provide a rich and varied illustration of Kuna verbal practices, including chanted and spoken speech, ritual myth telling and formal speech making, political oratory and magical communication with the spirit world, serious reporting and humorous tale telling. They are the locus of many aspects of Kuna life – ecology, political and religious beliefs, curing and medicine, economic concerns, dealings with the outside world, personal relations, and humor.

While to a certain degree, all Kuna discourse, including everyday conversations and joking, is verbally artistic, it is especially in formal and ritual contexts that the Kuna most consider themselves to be verbally “on stage” and “on display,” attempt to

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heighten the quality of their own verbal artistry, and critically evaluate the artistry of others. One major ritual context is the centrally located gathering house, in which chiefs chant about myths, legends, local history, and personal experiences, political leaders counsel, debate, and report in long and eloquent speeches, and expert story tellers unfold their serious and humorous tales. The other major type of ritual verbal performance involves communication with representatives of the spirit world. This communication, whose purpose is magical and curative, is in the form of long chants, usually performed in the home of the performer or his or her patient.

As it is most often men who are the public performers of verbal art among the Kuna, all of the individuals whose voices are represented here are men. An investigation of genres and ways of speaking in terms of men and women reveals that men are involved in speech that is traditional, ritual, symbolic, esoteric, and public, such as the chanting of chiefs in the gathering house and the performance of curing and magical chants, while women, whose major performance genres are lullabies for children and laments for the dead, deal with matters which are, from the Kuna point of view, more personal, private, and superficial – even though child care and mourning for the dead are clearly basic concerns of social and cultural life. That is, again from the Kuna point of view, it is men who are the public verbal artists. The primary form of women's artistic and communicative expression is not ritual speaking and chanting, but, rather, the decorative and visual *mola*. It is interesting that one of the primary contexts for the making (as well as the wearing) of *molos* is the gathering house, the central public meeting place, and the locus of verbally artistic performances by men. Women make their *molos* there as they listen to men perform.¹

The performers represented here are all verbal leaders and acknowledged verbal artists. Their verbal performances were recorded in natural settings. They are actual instances of the ongoing flow of Kuna verbal life. Especially because of the formal and ritual contexts in which they were recorded, the heightened attention to verbal artistry involved in their performance, and the performers' sense of being "on stage" and "on display," the form and the content were not determined by or affected by my presence or the presence of the tape recorder. While it is impossible to prove that my presence made no difference, the particular performances and events presented here regularly occur and would have occurred whether or not I was there. The Kuna treated me as an

¹ See Sherzer and Sherzer (1976), Sherzer (1983: 70-71, 176-179, 232-233), and Sherzer (1987).

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ordinary member of the audience and my tape recorder as an instrument of recording their oral traditions, something they are most concerned about.

My approach to verbal art is both sociolinguistic and ethnographic. It is sociolinguistic in that I view the grammar of the Kuna language, the different varieties of Kuna, and the human voice as resources which are exploited by speakers in the creation and structuring of actual forms of discourse. It is ethnographic in that I situate this discourse within the social, cultural, and personal contexts in which it occurred. The concept of context, in two senses, plays a crucial role in my interpretations and analyses. Context signifies on the one hand the social and cultural backdrop, the assumptions, beliefs, and symbolic associations that are uniquely Kuna. These include aspects of the local ecology, including plant and animal life; the nature of politics, curing, magic, and other ritual; figurative and allusive uses of language; history; and humor. Context signifies on the other hand the immediate location and situation in which a particular form of discourse occurred and was recorded, including the relations and interactions among those present; recent, relevant local, national, and natural happenings; and the specific goals and meanings of words and actions. In this way Kuna language, culture, and society can be viewed as both traditional and adaptive. The voices represented in these pages reflect the most ancient of tradition while at the same time they creatively mold this tradition to current situations. For this reason, my approach crucially depends on the recording of actual and natural speech events.

One aspect of the recent interest on the part of several disciplines in the detailed and precise analysis of discourse is a focus on structure and style in such a way that it seems difficult if not incorrect to make a distinction between ordinary language on the one hand, and literary and poetic language on the other. All discourse has features that have characteristically and traditionally been considered to be literary, and analysis of poetic structure is often what discourse analysis is all about. So rather than shove off the study of metaphor, foregrounding, cohesion, line and verse structure, dramatization of the voice, and grammatical aspects of style on literary critics, attention to such matters is basic to the work of linguists, anthropologists, and folklorists.²

² For consideration of poetic and literary aspects of and approaches to discourse as central to the study of language and speech and the relationship among language, culture, and society, see Bauman's (1977) focus on culturally and socially situated performance as the locus of verbal art; Friedrich's (1979) studies of the symbolic and poetic potentialities of grammar; Gumperz's (1971) studies of code-switching and contextualization, in which such poetic processes as foregrounding and metaphor are

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In my analyses and interpretations, I demonstrate the ways in which grammatical, discourse, social, cultural, and personal factors intersect and interact in the creation and structuring of verbal art. The result is a contribution to ethnopoetics – a presentation of the rich, varied, and dynamic nature of Kuna verbal art, intended both to be faithful to the Kuna's own performance and esthetic values and principles and to be accessible and understandable to a wider audience.

An important aspect of Kuna ethnopoetics, as distinct from the published literature of literate societies, which is often conceived of as a body of masterpieces that a few educated people are able to read and enjoy, is the fact that Kuna verbal art is a central, instrumental part of social and cultural life, including politics, curing, magic, and social control. Kuna discourse is serious, humorous, poetic, recreational, and socially and culturally functional, all at the same time.

In addition to being a contribution to Native American verbal art, precisely by providing readers with concrete, illustrative examples, this volume also contributes, theoretically and methodologically, to linguistics, anthropology, folklore, and literary criticism. With regard to linguistics, it offers analyses, from a nonliterate society, of forms of discourse, recorded in actual, natural contexts. These analyses demonstrate not only that discourse has a structure and a patterning of its own, related to but separate from grammar, but furthermore that it draws on and utilizes the resources provided by grammar in ways that shed most interesting light on grammar itself. More generally, there is increasing recognition that discourse is not only the place of the actualization of grammar, but the place of the creation of grammar. The study of discourse is thus anything but marginal to linguistics, it is essential to it.

In addition, there are aspects of linguistic form and linguistic structure that only emerge through the study of language use in verbally artistic discourse. Speech play, humor, and verbal art involve language in its essence, on display. Potentials inherent in language are packed and pushed to their highest limits as they are manipulated by

shown to be at the heart of everyday communication; Hymes's (1981) grammatical/cultural/rhetorical analyses of North American Indian narrative, in which it is argued that narrative is central to the creative expression of what culture is all about; Labov's (1972b) analysis of the structure of the quite literary personal narratives that occur within everyday conversational interaction; and the work of Tedlock (1978, 1983) in the analysis and especially the translation of American Indian performance style. This work must be carefully distinguished from Geertzian "interpretive anthropology" in which both "text" and "interpretation" are used metaphorically and in which native voices are seldom heard. See Geertz (1973).

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skilled performers. Rather than viewing the structural principles and processes that constitute artistic language as marginal to linguistic research, I would argue, on the basis of the analyses presented here, that they are central, in that crucial and significant aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and style emerge in sharply distilled form in artistic performance. A good example of the intimate relationship between grammar and verbal art is the system of verbal suffixes, used in different ways in different styles and genres. (See chapter two and Sherzer 1989.) The study of verbal art, then, is of utmost relevance to linguistics, methodologically, analytically, and theoretically, a point stressed by two of the pioneers of modern linguistics, Edward Sapir, and Roman Jakobson, but not followed up by mainstream linguistics.

From the perspective of anthropology, the forms of discourse presented here cannot be viewed as marginal to social and cultural life, unimportant sideshows to much more significant main events. Nor on the other hand are they mere mirror reflections of and thus totally determined by and redundant with regard to some abstract ideational cultural patterning or social organization. Quite the contrary. Discourse is the richest point of intersection of the relationship among language, culture, society, and individual expression. In discourse individuals draw on their personal creativity and at the same time on the special and unique resources of the language and culture of their communities, including vocabulary and grammar, norms of interpretation, cultural knowledge and symbolism, systems of genres and style, and rules of effective performance. In so doing, they not only replicate, interpret, and transmit, but actually conceive, create, and recreate their social and cultural reality. The best way to understand Kuna politics is through a political speech; Kuna curing, through the report of a curing specialist; Kuna magic, through a magical chant; Kuna mythology, through the performance of a myth; and Kuna humor, through the telling of a trickster tale.

This book then is not only about verbal art in San Blas, but, simultaneously, as the subtitle indicates, Kuna culture through its discourse. And this is precisely the point. The best way, and I would argue the only valid way, to apprehend Kuna culture is through its discourse and this discourse is verbally artistic. There is thus an intimate relationship between Kuna culture and verbal esthetics. Verbal art and, as I will show, verbal play are at the heart of Kuna culture.

The analysis of discourse, especially the analysis of the structuring of verbally artistic discourse, is a logical continuation of the Boas, Sapir, Whorf tradition in anthropology and linguistics with regard to the relationship between language and

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culture. While Boas, Sapir, and their students considered texts to be an essential part of linguistic field work and analysis, these texts tended not to be studied as verbal art and were not viewed as the place to look for intersections between language and culture. Rather, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it has come to be known, is associated with a search for isomorphisms between grammar, conceived of in a narrow, abstract sense, and culture, conceived of as a separate, nonverbal entity. My approach is quite different and is concerned with the poetic and rhetorical organization of discourse as an expression of the intimate intersection of language and culture and with the dynamic actualization of the potentials of language in culturally meaningful and socially situated discourse. It is for this reason that it is essential that the oral performances which I have rendered in the subsequent chapters of this book in the form of written texts, in Kuna and in English translation, be accompanied by my analyses, which root them in the social and cultural contexts in which they were orally performed.

In addition, there are certain contemporary issues in anthropology which are spoken to by the discourse-centered and verbal art-centered approach I espouse and adopt here. One is ideology. Discourse is the locus of the expression of ideology and especially of the playing out and the working out of conflicts, tensions, and changes inherent in ideological systems. In focusing on the expression of ideology in discourse, it is important to pay attention to matters of detail, such as lists and orders within lists, which are most revealing of underlying beliefs. (See chapters three and four.) Related to ideology is a historical perspective in conjunction with the influences of the world economic and political system, both of which can be shown to be perceived by and interpreted by interactants and performers in concrete instances of discourse. (See chapters four and five.) Also related to ideology is political structure and political structure, like ideology, is expressed in various ways in discourse. In particular political discourse is characterized by a fascinating intersection of rhetoric and poetics. In Kuna political discourse, like that of many traditional societies with egalitarian orientations, allusive and metaphorical language are important as is the translation of the esoteric to the intelligible. The particular intersection of and manipulation of metaphor, ritual, public speaking, rhetoric, poetics, humor, and personal experience, out of which Kuna ideology and politics are created, can only be appreciated and analyzed through a careful investigation of a Kuna political speech. (See chapter four.)

Another contemporary concern of anthropology is the role and the place of nature in relation to individuals and society. This concern is particularly relevant to lowland and

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tropical forest societies such as the Kuna whose environment is shrinking daily. In Kuna discourse we find an expression of a very intimate esthetic relationship between humans and nature, including plants and animals. The Kuna view themselves as the guardians of nature. While they use elements of nature, both actually and symbolically, they also are careful to replenish it. In Kuna discourse, nature is used rhetorically and poetically, to convince and to control magically.

Control of the natural, as well as the human world, is often the role of shamans, whose expertise and power derive from knowledge of and ability to manipulate the spiritual realms which underlie the overtly natural and human. In traditional societies such as the Kuna, falling increasingly under the influence of an impinging modern world, the continuing practice of shamanism is particularly interesting, some would even say subversive. Knowledge about shamanistic practices, both for native Kuna and for us, outside observers, can best be acquired through discourse – the actual esoteric chants used in magical control (chapter eight) as well as discourse describing the learning and teaching practices of shamanism (chapter five).

Another issue in contemporary anthropology is the recognition that social and cultural categories are not static and monolithic but rather dynamic and constantly emerging. One aspect of this is the influence of history and especially, in recent years, of the overarching world economic and political system. But it is a focus on discourse and in particular the multi-voiced, metacommunicative, and culture-creating aspects of discourse that enable us to see the emergent properties of both discourse and culture and society and especially their interaction.

One aspect of approaching culture, society, and discourse as emergent categories is that methodologically we must analyze not abstractions but concrete moments of social and cultural life. For the worlds of the people we study are not made up out of monolithic abstractions, but rather actual moments and instances of discourse. It is in these moments that their social and cultural worlds emerge. The moments, as I label them here, are quite akin to what Dell Hymes (1974) calls speech events. My emphasis on the significance and emergent quality of these moments is related to what Clifford Geertz calls the circumstantial – things that happen to happen in the course of individuals' lives and anthropological field workers' experiences which are packed with significance and must be taken seriously.

Thus topics which are traditionally considered important within anthropology, such as metaphor, ritual, politics, and curing, are studied here in concrete and specific terms

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as actualized in particular events, moments of Kuna cultural life. In these moments, Kuna concepts and notions of metaphor, ritual, politics, and curing in the abstract are realized in actuality, as Kuna performers, Kuna actors in social life, make their cultural worlds come alive, create them.

In addition, by focusing on moments in the flow of Kuna discourse in the chapters of this book, I find that play, humor, and esthetics emerge as much more significant in Kuna life than they would seem to be if I followed conventional and static anthropological models. Verbal esthetics and verbal humor, I would argue, on the basis of my experience with Kuna, are not just interesting in their own terms, but are central to the anthropological enterprise. For as individuals play, manipulate, esthetically perform, and joke with language, they demonstrate their knowledge of and put on display the essence of their cultural beliefs and practices.

Finally, with regard to folklore and literary studies, as well as anthropology and linguistics, these analyses of Kuna verbal art contribute to our understanding of the nature of the discourse of nonliterate societies. The texts provide an addition to the published corpus of Native American literature and are of value with regard to both content and style. They embody the esthetics of Kuna culture and at the same time make a distinctive contribution to world literature.

Consistent with contemporary trends in folklore, I take the presentation of Kuna performances, their representation and translation on the printed page, quite seriously. All performances are presented as full, complete texts. I draw on recent work dealing with the transcription, translation, and analysis of oral discourse and oral performance while at the same time contributing to issues raised by this work.

The distinctions between oral and written discourse have recently been given considerable attention. While there are literate Kuna, Kuna discourse, and in particular the verbal art that is the focus of this book, is oral. This does not mean that Kuna discourse is **oral** rather than **written** in some simple general or universal sense. There is no single feature that characterizes Kuna discourse as a whole. Rather there is a set or complex of such characteristic features. While some of these features may be uniquely characteristic of oral discourse, especially those involving the dramatization of the voice – the manipulation of pitch, tempo, amplitude, silence, and musicality; others, such as parallelism, formulaic repetition, and metaphor, are also found in written speech. My research clearly indicates that there is not a simple set of features which uniquely characterizes oral discourse, a position in keeping with Finnegan's (1977)

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pioneering overview of oral literature and critique of simplistic views of its nature. (See also Finnegan 1988.) There are Kuna verbal genres which are absolutely fixed in form and memorized word for word. There are others which are relatively fixed in general form and structure but which individuals creatively manipulate in actual performance. And there are still others which must adhere to a certain formulaic style but within which considerable individual improvisation is permitted and indeed expected and valued. Nor can one sharply dichotomize ordinary and literary Kuna language and speech. Rather, it is necessary to recognize poetic structures and processes in a wide range of forms of Kuna discourse, from everyday and informal to ritual and formal.

Given its nature, as a unique event situated in a unique social, cultural, and individual context, there is always an emergent structure to an oral performance. Each of the oral performances presented and discussed here thus involves a particular interplay of memorized, precomposed, formulaic, and improvised verbal elements and at the same time contributes to theories of oral composition in general. The significance, meaning, and function of a performance is not inherent in or obvious from a text, but must be studied as part of a contextual and especially emergent and emerging structure of performance as a whole.

In these last few pages I have outlined what I see as the significance of the study of discourse, especially verbally artistic discourse and particularly the chapters which follow for several disciplines – linguistics, anthropology, and folklore. What is perhaps even more interesting is that the study of discourse is located at the intersection of a series of waves of contemporary critical thought linking sociology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism. In each of these disciplines discourse is increasingly viewed, not as marginal, nor even as a means to an object of study, but rather the object of study itself. And whether we are talking about the social construction of reality or the literary construction of fictional worlds, it is by means of the study of discourse, especially approached in dynamic, contextual, and emergent terms, that we can perceive the intimate relationship that exists among social and cultural life, language, and esthetics.

It is impossible to write about the discourse of native South America without relating to the monumental work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, dealing with the languages, cultures, societies, and especially the mythologies of lowland South America. Lévi-Strauss's approach is in many ways diametrically opposed to mine. He is abstract,