



# KUNA INDIANS



# HISTORY

- ▶ Actual origins are still disputed, but according to tribes' oral tradition, the tribe emigrated from Colombia during the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- ▶ They were repeatedly attacked Amerindians with poison darts and arrows...fled and settled in the Darien Mountains.
- ▶ During the Spanish invasion, the Kunas moved to the coast.

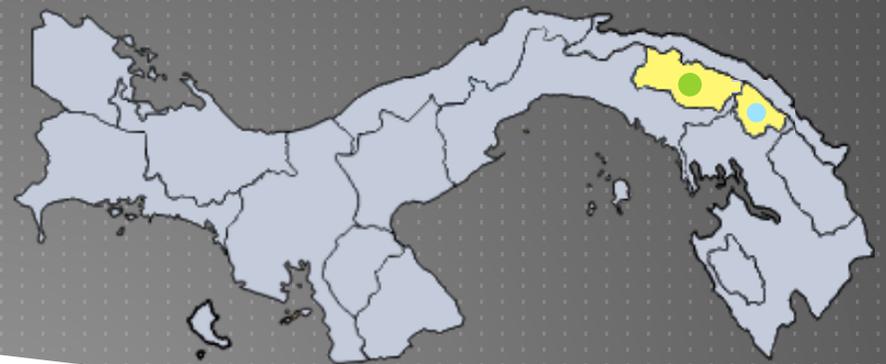


- ▶ The Spanish and the Kuna began their relationship with struggles. Kuna wanted to maintain their traditional lifestyle while the Spanish wanted their cultures to assimilate.
- ▶ The Kuna resisted...and moved offshore (from the mainland). Their isolation resulted in a strong cohesiveness in this group that continues to this day.
- ▶ The majority of Kuna Indians live in the San Blas Archipelago (Kuna Yala) located along Panama's northeast coast.



# LOCATION

- ▶ The Kuna live in 3 politically autonomous (independent) comarcas (reservations) in Panama.
- ▶ The majority of Kuna people live on the San Blas Islands, while the other 2 Kuna comarcas are **Kuna de Madugandi** and **Kuna de Wargandi**.
- ▶ There are communities of Kuna people in Panama City, Colon, and other cities...and few villages in Colombia.



# HOMES

- ▶ The Kuna people build their homes out of bamboo and coconut fronds (leaves).
  - ▶ Bamboo – from mainland of Panama
  - ▶ Fronds – from trees on the islands
- ▶ Homes cost about \$100 to build and last about 10 years.



# LANGUAGE

- ▶ Kuna language is called *Dulegaya*.
  - ▶ Dule – People
  - ▶ Gaya – mouth
- ▶ Dulegaya – the primary language
- ▶ Spanish is also used, especially in education and written documents.



# POLITICAL

- ▶ The Kuna have the most advanced political system of any tribal group in Latin America.
- ▶ There are 49 communities in Kuna Yala. The whole region is governed by the Kuna General Congress, which is led by 3 Saila Dummagan (“Great Sailas” or chiefs).



# POLITICAL

- ▶ Decisions are made in meetings held in the Onmaked Nega (Congress House).
  - ▶ Congress House - a structure which serves both political and spiritual purposes
  - ▶ It is in the Onmaked Nega that the Saila sings the history, legends and laws of the Kuna, as well as administering the day-to-day political and social affairs.
- ▶ They have elections throughout the reservation.



# GREAT SAILAS

- ▶ The Saila is traditionally both the political and spiritual leader of the community.
- ▶ He memorizes songs which relate the sacred history of the people.
- ▶ The Saila is usually accompanied by one or more *arkar* who function as interpreters and counselors for the Saila. Because the songs and oral history of the Kuna are in a higher linguistic register with specialized vocabulary, the Saila's recitation will frequently be followed by an explanation and interpretation from one of the *arkar* in everyday Kuna language.



# ECONOMY

- ▶ The economy of Kuna Yala is based on agriculture and fishing, with a long tradition of international trade.
- ▶ Coconuts, called *ogob* in the Kuna language, and lobsters are the most important export products, and migrant labor and the sale of molasses provide other sources of income.
- ▶ Tourism is an important part of the economy.



# FOOD

- ▶ The Kuna have plots of land in the jungle where they grow plantain, bananas, coconut, and avocados, among other fruits. They also grow corn.
- ▶ They eat a variety of wild game hunted from the jungle, but their staples (main diet) are fish (Tilapia) and plantains.
- ▶ Rice and beans – they buy those from the mainland
- ▶ Food requiring no refrigeration (no electricity on island)
- ▶ They also drink a variety of chichas (any drink made by boiling or mixing water and something else), but principally drink a boiled corn chicha.



# CLOTHING

- ▶ The Kuna women wear:
  - ▶ Colorful clothing and beads around their ankles and wrists
  - ▶ Known for their colorful mola blouses
    - ▶ Sew by hand out of many pieces of cloth
  - ▶ Gold jewelry on special occasions
    - ▶ Made by pounding gold into flat pieces and then cut into shapes
- ▶ The Kuna men wear modern clothing.



# TRANSPORTATION

- ▶ The main form of transportation is a dugout canoe or 'ulu'.
- ▶ One dugout canoe costs \$500 for the wood and work.
  - ▶ The hardwood for these canoes comes from the mainland. Each canoe is made from a single tree trunk, hollowed out by hand, a technique which the forest Kuna specialize in.
- ▶ Both women, men and children are expert handlers and sailors.
- ▶ The abiding use of these canoes has produced a unison between the islanders and their boats, and their law that the land belongs to all Kuna's has prevented a division of the people into those who have, and those who have not, allowing them to live in harmony with each other and their beautiful land.



# RELIGION

- ▶ Animism
- ▶ They believe in a creator God who now is far away from them and that the *poni* (groups of malevolent spirits roam the earth entering peoples bodies causing sickness and disease).
- ▶ They use the *nuchus*, small dolls carved out of balsa wood, to protect them from the *poni*.
- ▶ The *saila*, or Kuna chief, speaks for God much like a prophet, telling the people what they need to do so God will be pleased with them.
- ▶ They believe they must work to please God so that he doesn't send an earthquake or other terrible things against them.



# CULTURE

- ▶ A Kuna woman is not given a name until she has had her first menstrual period. She then has her hair cut short and a name is selected with the help of the local medicine man.
- ▶ Matrilineal is practiced in Kuna
  - ▶ Inheriting or determining descent through female line
  - ▶ New husband is required to move into wife's home with her family.
- ▶ The Kuna usually marry young; women at the age of 15 while men 17.



# CULTURE

- ▶ The women play in an important part in providing for the family.
  - ▶ Mola (famous worldwide)
- ▶ Photographing the women is a more touchy business, many cover their faces, or if not, pose and then immediately ask for the 1 dollar fee,
- ▶ The Kunan Congress is governed by men only, but the Kunan culture itself is matriarchal (female head of a tribal line or dominant member of group).



# ALBINISM

- ▶ The Kuna have a very high incidence rate of albinism.
- ▶ In Kuna mythology, albinos (or sipus) were given a special place.
- ▶ Albinos in Kuna culture are considered a special race of people, and have the specific duty of defending the Moon against a "dragon" which tries to eat it on occasion during a lunar eclipse. Only they are allowed outside on the night of a lunar eclipse and used specially made bows and arrows to shoot down the dragon.

