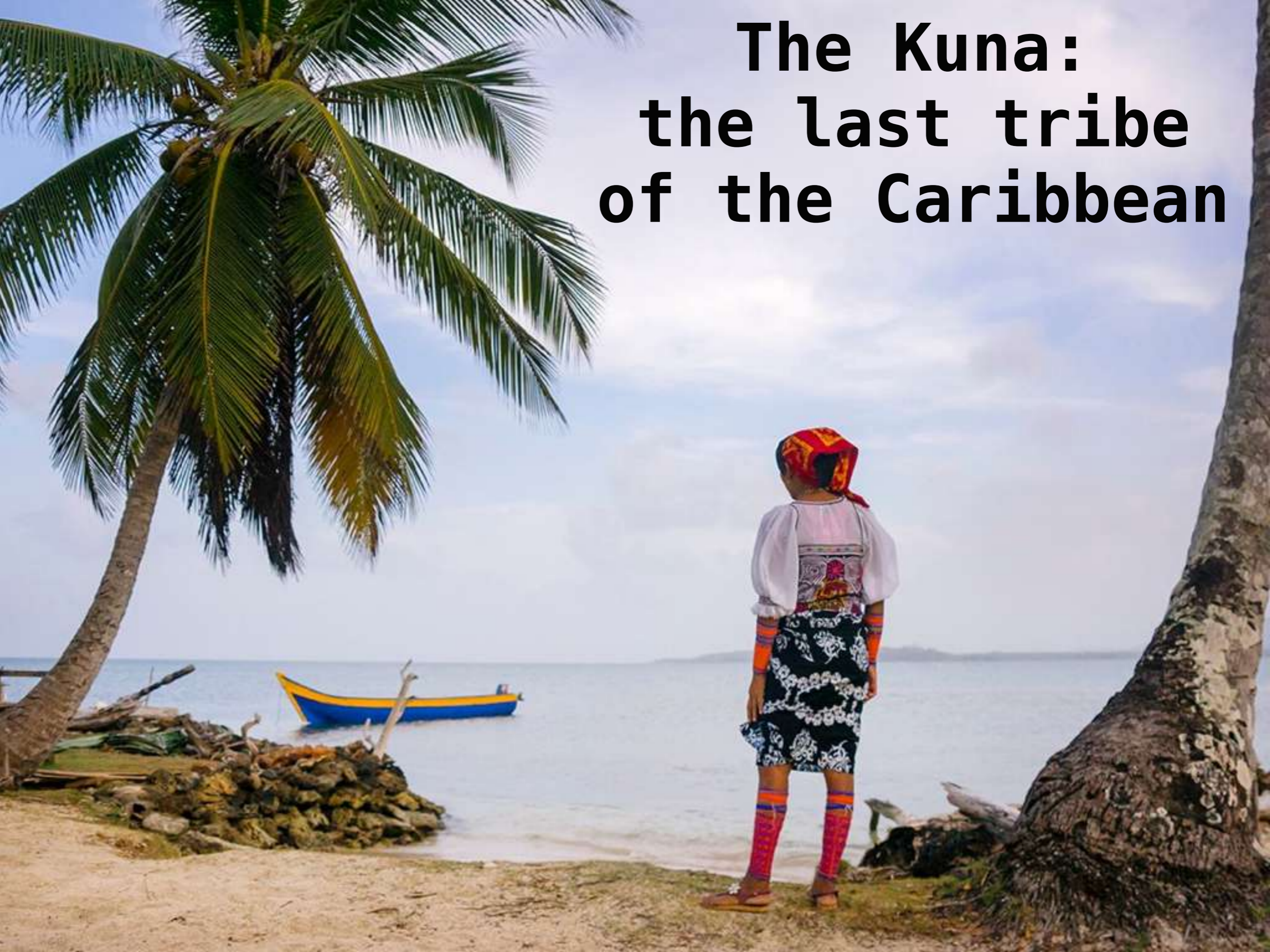


The Kuna: the last tribe of the Caribbean





500 years ago, the Kuna people lived on the border between Panama and Colombia. In the early 18th century, when the Spanish conquistadors expanded their presence in the area, the Kuna began to emigrate to the San Blas islands where no foreigners were permitted until the late 1940s. Some say Christopher Columbus discovered this land, but the Kuna will retort that they have occupied it for centuries. Of the 365 islands, approximately 40 are inhabited and, at first glance, they appear to be way overcrowded!



Either a boat or plane is needed to reach the San Blas islands where the 50,000 Kuna live. The Kuna have gained a certain level of autonomy and in the process, have successfully maintained their traditions and customs. They tend to be short in size and characteristically quiet and friendly.



Gatir, pictured here with his mother, lives on Mamitupu island. He was born with white on top of his head so a shaman said he may develop special powers such as prophetic dreams and visions. People like Gatir are known as “Nele”. They can converse with evil spirits, combat them, and help cure the afflicted.



Gatir's parents place wood statues under their boy's hammock. These statues, known as "nuchis", are imbued with good spirits. The Nele employ them to keep the evil spirits at bay.



Interestingly, the statues often look like foreigners, wearing suits or hats. The type of wood used to craft the nuchis is actually more important than the design of the nuchis themselves.



Gatir also has reed crosses above his bed. These bare no relation to Christianity. The Kuna believe that “purbas”, or spirits, are everywhere. Like the nuchis, the crosses also protect people from the malevolent spirits.



Throughout history, many different religions have tried to convert the Kuna to little avail. The few Kuna that have joined a foreign religion have simultaneously maintained their traditional animist beliefs. This is the First Baptist Church in Mamitupu.

M/S

MI PUEBLO



Kuna women wear a recognizable attire featuring a red shawl, a skirt, beaded bracelets and necklaces, a gold nose ring, and at least one Mola design on the fabric. Mola art was once painted on the body but was relegated to clothing under the influence of the missionaries. Earliest accounts of Mola fashion date back to 1514!



Using the technique of reverse application, artists create images depicting natural scenes including landscapes and wildlife, as well as more abstract geometrical patterns. Since some on these islands have TV, animals like elephants are also represented, even though they are not indigenous to the area. In the modern metropolis of Panama city, the Kuna women proudly wear their traditional clothing. Museums around the world exhibit molas.



Even school uniforms are influenced by the mola art.



Mola women are the breadwinners of the household. By selling their molas to tourists at around 30 euros each, they provide a large share of their family's income. Kuna men earn their living on the mainland, working in agriculture, fishing, and the coconut trade. The Kuna have a traditionally matriarchal society. Belongings and property are always handed down from mother to daughter.



A Kuna woman receives her name when she begins menstruating. On the day of her first period, she cuts her hair short. This is one of the most important ceremonies in her life. From that day forth, she will never grow her hair long again. Elderly women dislike having their picture taken. They believe that once it appears in a magazine, the paper will inevitably be burnt, and their soul will fade away with the smoke.



A "winis" is a colorfully beaded accessory. It is made by wrapping the beads first around a piece of wood and then around an arm or a leg. At the age of 15, Kuna girls begin to wear winis which protect them from purbas. Winis are swapped out frequently for novel geometric designs.



The extra chique Kuna coordinate their winis' and hammock's colors. The society regards thin arms and thin legs as attractive features.



Kuna have one of the world's highest occurrences of albinism with one albino for every 145 births. Locally, these people are known as "children of the moon". Geneticists determined that a gene called Chromosome 15 is the biological root of this abnormality.



This albino Panama City resident has 9 sisters and 3 brothers, one of whom is also albino. Her father says that albino children are gifts from God.



Kuna mythology describes albinos as a special savior race. During lunar eclipses, they would climb onto rooftops to frighten away a dragon that would try to devour the moon. But today's Kuna albinos have an even greater enemy: the tropical sun.



Erme from Achuputo island is an “Omegid”. Even though he is male, he behaves like a female. In the past, if no woman was born into a family, then a boy was designated to be raised as a woman and eventually fulfill the responsibilities of a matriarch. He goes as far as dressing like a woman. Nowadays, this fairly ubiquitous practice also works for homosexuals. Mainland Panama however has a very macho society, so this is looked down upon.



Erme likes to crossdress in the privacy of his home but the village leader has forbidden him to wear women's clothes in public.



“Mothers in the Kuna community love to have a gay son, since he will help us sew Molas, and bring revenue to the family.”



Little by little, modernity creeps its way into the Kuna world. They now have solar-powered pay phones that allow people to keep in touch with their families who emigrated to Panama City for work.



The Kuna community is financially pretty well off despite the fact that they often lack some basic necessities such as plumbing and education. Every fisherman must pay taxes on their catch. Every visitor who enters Kuna Yala (the Kuna territory) must pay an entry fee as well.



As Colombia is close, a lot of boats come from there for commercial purposes. They purchase coconuts for 40 cents each bringing the villagers significant income. Colombia's proximity also causes a host of problems for the community. Some drug smuggling speed boats throw bags of cocaine into the sea when they are being chased by coast guards. The drugs end up in the hands of the Kuna who consume it or resell it. Gang activity and violence ensues.



The Kuna suffer from some environmental issues as well. Rising sea levels and tropical storms threaten the islands, which may find themselves under water in the next 20 to 30 years. The Panamanian government has developed a plan to relocate the Kuna to the mainland, however, only the younger generations are open to moving. The elderly wish to live out their days in their homes.



The Kuna are known for their longevity. Many believe it is due to their high consumption of cacao. Blood pressure is also very low on average.



Though the islands have the potential to be major tourist destinations, the fact that there is only one ten-person flight a day into Mamitupu island, the Kuna are able to stave off globalization and maintain their traditions.



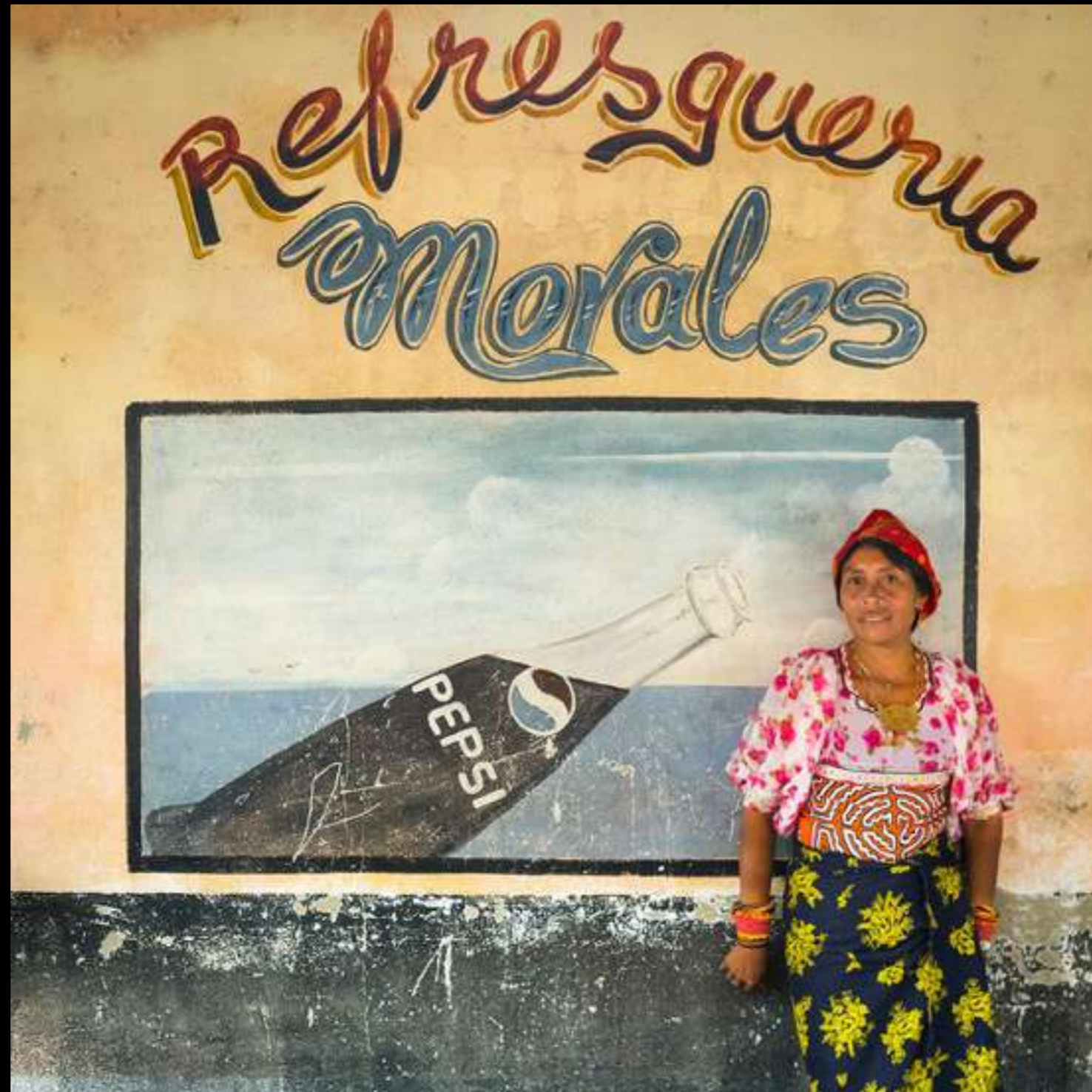
Pablo runs an eco lodge on Mamitupu island. He was married to an English woman and lived in London for 10 years. Now he is back on his native island, living on a giant plot while his fellow Kuna live squeezed together. "The local leaders said that this land was full of bad spirits so nobody wanted to live there. Me, I don't care!"



The travel brochures will not show this part of the island. Since no garbage disposal system exists on this otherwise paradisiacal island, the Kuna throw everything into the sea (both trashes and human waste). Now that they have access to plastic bags, the islands have become an ecological disaster.



At school, children are taught to clean up the trash. Most of them will have to leave the island and continue their studies on the mainland. The future for Kuna is uncertain. They want to preserve their unique culture while at the same time developing their economy. Mass tourism may be an option to create jobs. But there are no big hotel chains on the San Blas islands because the Kuna own everything and choose to maintain control over their lands.



Texts + photos: Eric Lafforgue
lafforgue@mac.com
www.ericlafforgue.com