

MORE ABOUT UCHUS IN SAN BLAS*

CLYDE KEELER

Georgia State College for Women, Milledgeville

A year ago when, after four visits to the Cuna Indians of San Blas, I turned in to the Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science the article published in volume 30, pages 203-211, 1955, I thought I had written approximately the final word on Cuna uchus, those curious, little wooden men often carved in civilized clothes, painted in bright colors and made out of woods believed to have mystical, medicinal virtues or influences. Usually their noses are enormous, and their chief duty, under the direction of a professional chanter, is to go into the ground in spirit to chase and overcome the wicked devils, also spirits, that have stolen the soul of the sick person and thus have caused him all of his discomfort. If the uchus can rescue the soul from the devils of disease who stole it and bring it back to the patient, he will get well.

It is difficult to obtain all the details on any subject in San Blas, and so when I spent six weeks more on the Cuna Islands this past summer, I was not unprepared to hear a few new things about uchus. But I was surprised to find my new information so important that I feel I must put it on record as a supplement to that which I had already written.

A year ago when I got to Koetup I was very sick with a flu that turned into a six weeks siege with tropical pneumonia. I was running a fever, but I managed to get a good photograph of the large, community uchus housed in the council hall. After we left the Island, alas, I realized that I was so confused that I had forgotten my most important mission which was to get a picture of the famous wooden image known as Mu Sekop, the powerful leader of the Koetup medicinal uchus, who is carried from house to house in the time of sickness. This uchu (Fig. 1) is a woman, copied from the figurehead of an old sailing vessel.

This summer I came to Koetup at the wrong time, however, because the whole town was in the process of making "sugar cane-parched maize" beer in a great ceremonial canoe standing within the council hall, and Chief Nukeli was superintending the job. Mu Sekop was residing with all the chief's personal uchus at his house, and the chief obligingly took me to his house to meet her. Because sex is so constantly in the minds of primitive peoples, Chief Nukeli felt sorry about Mu Sekop's celibacy, and so made a husband for her, whom he also introduced to me. Fortunately, by slipping Chief Nukeli a dollar bill, I was permitted to photograph the happy couple. I could not take a

*This research was made possible by a grant-in-aid from the Southern Fellowships Fund of the Council of Southern Universities.



Fig. 1.—Mu Sekop (the Sailing Vessel Figurehead Uchu) shown with her husband and their little uchu friends in the uchu collection of Chief Nukeli of Mulatuppu. Mu Sekop is carved without arms and legs but with enormous breasts. Breasts on nude female uchus are usually minimized.

flash which would frighten the uchus, and I must not take Mu Sekop outside the house, so the result was a picture publishable only by virtue of much reworking in the photographic dark-room and final retouching.

While I was at Chief Nukeli's house I took the opportunity of examining his uchus. These were, in general, very primitive. Their carving was of the traditional Cuna style. They appeared to be very old and most of them were unpainted. Furthermore, many of them were naked, and some were definitely indicated as males and females. I had never seen naked uchus before, although I suspected that naked ones must have existed among the body-painting Cunas of pirate days before their adoption of clothing.

When I got back to Mulatuppu I learned that a young woman of local residence had suffered an abortion, and a portion of the placenta had been retained. She lay at the point of death from blood poisoning. Claudio, the young native missionary, and I went to see her. There we found an elaborate array of "medicines" such as are employed by chanters in their ultimate, frantic appeal to the good spirits. In a cloud of incense tobacco smoke provided by the pipes of three old midwives, a chanter was

crooning the Mu Ikar, a sacred petition to the Great Earth-mothers having charge of pregnancy and embryonic development.

There were about sixty household uchus in three wooden boxes at the foot of the hammock of the sick woman, and one of the midwives explained that the tobacco smoke which permeated the inclosure was necessary to make the uchus do their work well. With the uchus were two sticks spiralled with sacred, red makepa seed paint and crowned with a circle of red feathers. I inquired and learned that these were massart sticks, guardians against the evil spirit population of red maccaws dwelling in the underworld. These spirit birds are special enemies of the pregnant woman.

With the usual array of large idols and weapons that flanked the hammock of the patient on three sides were medicines I had never seen before, including a shotgun, a paddle and a block, the latter two objects used in hammock weaving.

There was a curious, large, red pod or plant growth that drooped almost to the ground from the end of a large stem. This bizzarre growth was a foot long and about eight inches wide. It was shaped like a huge head of wheat. It seemed to have been from a fan palm. As I looked at it I noticed a sliver of wood about four inches long thrust through the stem. I asked, and sure enough, they called it a "nakkrus" as I had suspected. Previously, I had seen nakkruses made of green nawalla fronds, but nothing like this.

I gazed about the dimly lighted inclosure for the sick I noted a two-and-a-half-foot uchu tied to the base of a roof support. He was a very sporty fellow, wearing a brightly painted coat, a tie and a hat.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"That is Mummut," replied an old midwife. "He is so powerful that if you so much as push him, he will strike you unconscious."

I said that I was afraid of Mummut, at which statement they were all pleased because so many foreigners exhibit belittling disrespect for the ideas of primitive peoples, and to them this uchu bears a powerful spirit for good.

The word Mummut is the name of the "drunk tree", the sap of which inebriates birds, snakes, monkeys and men. It is a sacred tree that grows near Ustuppo, and there is a law against cutting it down. So the Mummut uchu (Fig. 2) is the "drunk man". On Mulatuppa he is often carried from house to house where there is sickness, to command the ordinary uchus of the household, just as is the function of Mu Sekop on Koetup. The reason that a drunk man commands the images so well is that a drunk man is more reckless and daring than a sober man and great daring in leadership is needed in chasing clever devils in the underworld.

When I arrived at Ailigandi I gave a briar pipe to Manitakinappi, the albino devil driver and medicine man. I then asked

him to show me his collection of uchus. This he did, examining the wood of each one carefully and then telling me from what kind of a tree it was made, because the kind of wood determined its specific virtues.

In discussing uchus, I have quoted Nordenskiöld to the effect that if the image of a Catholic Saint be placed in the box with Cuna uchus, it influences them so adversely that they cannot do their work well. Thus, it is not common practice to introduce Catholic images into Cuna uchu procedures, and I have published that during four summers in San Blas I never saw a Catholic Saint among the uchus.

About the middle of our review of his collection, however, Manitikinappi came upon a porcelain image of the Virgin Mary. He held it up with a grin on his face. "Pe ucha" (your uchu), he said.

Later I inquired around town about the use of the Virgin Mary uchu and was told that it is employed only when some Cuna sailor has returned home sick from a disease that he had caught in some far off place, and therefore the result of having had his soul stolen by strange, foreign devils whose hideouts are entirely unknown to the Cuna uchus who have never traveled. In these rare cases it is necessary to employ an uchu familiar with foreign lands, as are the Virgin Mary and the Catholic Saints whose images are available in Panama City and Colon.

As Manitikinappi neared the end of his box of uchus, he took out an uchu of old fashioned carving, although it had been brightly painted. "Mummutwalla", he said. When I had ended my visit, I took out a dollar bill and said I would like to buy Mummut. Manitikinappi shook his head; Mummut was too valuable to part with.

However, after a moment's reflection a smile of decision lit up the devil driver's face. He took Mummut from his uchu box and reached him out to me. "Only because you are my good friend," he said in Cuna dialect, "I will sell you Mummut."

Last year I had learned about the powerful "hot pepperwood" man (Fig. 2) or "kaopi" from Caiman who keeps hot pepper incense under his closely fitting hat. When he goes underground, he rushes among the disease devils, and takes off his hat. The hot pepper smoke rolls out and chokes all the disease devils that are then at his mercy.

This year I felt that I must have a kaopi to add to my collection. I was delighted to find that my old friend, Upikinya, the aged Ailigandi medicine man, was willing to sell me a much used hot pepper wood man with a crack in him.

Skepticism sometimes arises today in the minds of Cuna Indians who have worked in the Canal Zone, and I think it well to record one case. At Mulatuppu a man went to the mainland to look for sarki, a long, tough vine that the Indians pull down



Fig. 2.—Kaopi (the hot pepperwood man, left) and Mummut (the drunk-treewood man, right).

from tall jungle trees with which to bind together the frames of their houses. He did not return. Toni Nele the Clairvoyant was consulted, and he said, "The uchas tell me that the man is high in the mountains. He is lost, he is afraid, he is cold, he is hungry." Twenty men were dispatched to look for him.

Not finding him, the next day the town council sent fifty men into the mountains. They scoured the high mountains up to the third ridge, but in vain.

Toni Nele reported that the uchas are saying: "He is high in the mountains. He is uninjured. He is sitting on a rock crying. He is very hungry. If help does not come soon he will starve to death!"

The third day all the men of Mulatuppa joined in the search, and for two days more.

On the fifth day they found the man's body below a small cliff very near the seashore. He had been dead five days, and it was obvious how he died.

Evidently the man had been walking along the raised ground when he was seized with a heart attack. He fell to the lower level and broke his neck, dying instantly. His gun fell with him and was standing upright with its muzzle forced into the ground. His machete lay beside him, and no wild animals had touched him.

Worn out with five days of frantic dashing through the jungle, some of the townsmen complained to Toni Nele. Ignacio the Chanter against Sadness said: "That fellow certainly did fool us!" Others boldly accused Toni Nele. "Why did you mislead us?"

To this Toni Nele replied: "How could I help it if my uchu mimmikana told me lies?"