



nuchus

THE AESTHETICS
OF HEALING
IN SAN BLAS

A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF AUDE AND ALEXANDRE DE BEAULIEU

nuchus

THE AESTHETICS
OF HEALING
IN SAN BLAS



nuchus

A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF AUDE AND ALEXANDRE DE BEAULIEU

TABLE OF CONTENTS



A private collection	6
<i>Aude et Alexandre de Beaulieu</i>	
Prologue	8
<i>Samuel Vásquez</i>	
Introduction	10
<i>Diego Madi Dias</i>	
Foreword	12
<i>Cebaldo Inaniwapi</i>	
Generic images	14
Professions	42
Portraits	66
Symbols & totems	106
Testimonies	128

A PRIVATE COLLECTION



nuchus

Aude & Alexandre de Beaulieu

Alexandre and Aude de Beaulieu met in Paris before they left to live in Costa Rica. They soon moved to Panama, where they would live for nearly fifteen years with their four children.

Shortly after arriving, they had their first encounter with a *nuchu* through their close friends. It was love at first sight, the beginning of a collection that extended over a decade and allowed them to bring together more than 1,500 Guna sculptures, and form lasting friendships among the inhabitants of the San Blas Islands. *Nuchus* are traditionally charged with a magical power through a process of ritual sanctification. After a certain time, the Guna transfer the magic to another sculpture, removing all power from the first one, which no longer has the same significance in their eyes and henceforth becomes a wooden statue devoid of all spiritual power. It is these statues that Alexandre seeks out, traveling by dugout canoe from island to island, village to village, to the depths of the Darien forests.

Thanks to a dear Guna friend, and always with the blessings of the chiefs and communities they visit, the collection has come to life due to these wooden sculptures acquired for their formal characteristics.

Beyond their anthropological or mystical significance, these sculptures bring about a profound visual emotion in Alexandre and Aude. This book is the product of the passion that has guided their aesthetic research. It is a book that pays homage to these works of art and their artists in a context in which, in spite of a desire to perpetuate their traditions, Guna culture and the beliefs of their cosmogony are steadily losing ground to the reality of our lifestyles that are fraught with modernity.

PROLOGUE

Samuel Vásquez

Beyond his particular woodcarving abilities, the essential attribute of a *nuchu* carver is his ability to call on the invisible powers living in the trees and to incorporate their essential, silent qualities into the image through the hands of the carver himself. It is a powerful being, both in its actions and in its words. The *nuchu*, indeed, is a protector, a messenger, a mediator, a being of words and wood. Its spiritual power is breathed into it through an invocation: the Gunas speak to them in their healing rituals, and at times when their intercession is required as protectors. Some say that once the tree is transformed into a human figure, it gains the ability to interact with special human beings.

Carving a *nuchu* is an ability that not everyone possesses. One must acquire the technical ability to handle the tools on the chosen material to obtain the desired form. More than that, however, a carver requires the gift of breathing life into the image that is hidden within the tree.

Carving a *nuchu* demands that the carver possess the vision of a cosmology, just as the officiant must understand the essential ritual forms when speaking to the *nuchu*, so that the spirit living in the wood can answer when it is called. A gift with words is also important for the *nuchu* to be able to act, since words are what breathe the life into these wooden figures.

The essential spiritual power of the carver makes the *nuchu* quite distinct from craftsmanship and transports it into the realm of magical art. This magical art is accompanied by healing singers, herbalists or seers who interact with the spirit living in the wooden image often through dreams.

“Dreams are a school as well. Many Masters, men and women, perfect their art through dreams. Songs open their mind, awaken their intelligence and give it an extensive vision.”

nuchu

Diego Madi Dias

UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO
FORMER LABEX CAP POSTDOC AT THE MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY

Originally from the tropical rainforest of Colombia, the Guna migrated towards the eastern Atlantic coast of Panama throughout the 19th century. Today, they inhabit the province of Guna Yala, including the islands of San Blas. Speakers of a language belonging to the Chibchan family, the Guna are experiencing a period of demographic growth, with their current population exceeding 80,000 people in Panama. The Guna language, *Dulegaya*, is substantially different from the Mayan languages of Mesoamerica, and its typology is unrelated to any other Amerindian language.

The Guna history of resistance and assertion of ethnic identity has allowed them to seize political and administrative autonomy in their territory. Guna Yala is a relatively homogenous region in cultural and linguistic terms. It consists of nearly 400 islands, spread out between the borders of Colón Province and the Colombian border. Thirty-eight of the islands are inhabited, forming island communities. Another thirteen villages are situated on the mainland.

Fishing and farming are the main subsistence activities in Guna Yala. The Guna remain in control of the tourism activities and maritime transportation in the district. In Panama City, they are concentrated in certain parts of the metropolitan region. In Panamanian cities, they rely on different types of wage labor; some families hold stores in the craft markets, where they sell their traditional textiles (mola).

The Guna are known worldwide for their multi-colored textiles, sewn by women using a reverse-appliqué technique. This book provides a gaze to the molas, the Guna carved wooden statues that are used in a ritual context as part of traditional healing therapies. As I was once told by Achu de Leon Kantule, a renowned Guna painter from the village of Ustupu, “no one escapes art” in a Guna village. He was referring to a certain aesthetics that exist among the Guna, the artfulness of the everyday life, ‘the world as artwork’, as Nietzsche would put it. Achu’s thoughts, however, could be perfectly applied to the Lowland Amerindians in general.

Considering the perishable aspect of the surface in Amerindian art, often portrayed in the form of bodypainting, these peoples must constantly rework

their art. Conversely, the prominence that the Western tradition has ascribed to objects throughout its artistic tradition, at the cost of processes, seems to have hurt the recognition of the aesthetic expressions of the Lowland Amerindians. This is the very first time that the art of woodcarving performed by Guna men has been subject of a publication aimed at a wide audience. The art of sculpting little “live beings” gives them a tangible form, which, like the human body, is perishable and decays. The book’s merit lies in exploring an aspect of the artistic production in Guna Yala regarding which little information exists outside the communities where it is practiced.

The pieces that are part of the collection were obtained over many years of contact with the Guna. Those transactions were performed directly in the villages only after having been granted formal consent by the chiefs of the communities that were visited. The passion for the elaborate aesthetics of these ordinary and ritual objects, which led the curiosity of the collector, can now be shared through this publication. We hope this book will contribute towards the recognition of the art of life in Guna Yala.

Cebaldo Inawinapi

Nudsumar: guardians of bodies, of houses,
of villages, of dreams.

Such has been written about these figures of balsa wood, wooden figures often carved into a simple shape, though at times they may be more complex. They have been studied by anthropologists, artists, and musicians, from the point of view of medicine and literature. What is a *Nudsu*? A formal definition may present the *Nudsumar* as wooden anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures. Yet *Nudsumar* are considered to be the community's guardians and messengers, especially when evil spirits approach it; they are intermediaries between the natural and preternatural worlds. But let us tell the story as it was told to me, or as I lived it.

My first birth was in Usdup, one of the 366 islands that comprise the Guna Archipelago, where I was received by my grandmothers and joyous midwives, among cacao smoke and traditional songs, as all “dule” children are received. Mother had her first child, accompanied by her friends, and father planted my placenta and umbilical cord in the lush forest, the jungle at the front of the island, to feed the land and the trees.

When a boy is born in a Guna village, the midwife gives the placenta to the father. He'll go to the forest to plant the seed of a fruit tree, a banana root, and the placenta, which serves as fertilizer. In this way, Mother Earth, always generous, receives a piece of the new being and the mother's blood. Days and months pass, over many moons, and as the banana grows, every time a villager passes by, he converses with the sapling, wishes it a good life, good fruits... The Guna say that words are important, allowing things to live, allowing beings to rejoice... Like any living thing, the tree does not just grow because of the water and sun, but it needs the word and the gentle touch of men and women.

The Guna say that Great Father and Great Mother lived at the banks of a river in the fourth subterranean realm at the beginning of creation. That is where the first beings were created, who witnessed the entire process of the Earth's birth. These special beings lived through the trials and delights of the First Birth: it was the first trees, *suardulegan*, who began to inhabit the surface of the world. They experienced the great adventure of bearing witness to the creation and being present while Great Father and Great Mother created the bounty of the Earth: oceans, rivers, forests, animals, edible plants... and finally, woman and man.

Great Father and Great Mother spoke to the *suardulegan*, giving them the task and duty of caring for the other beings who would arrive one day: the future generations of the *Oludulegan* (People of Gold, as the Gunas consider themselves). They would care for the birds and animals of the forest, and plants too. The *suardulegan* then had the responsibility of making shade for all of them and defending them from evil and sadness, assisting them in the struggle against epidemics and fear, bringing joy to their days and nights, swaying and singing with the wind.

Now the Earth exists with its inhabitants! After the creation of the natural world, the arboreal beings returned to the place of the first creation, in the fourth subterranean realm. They remained there, learning and observing the latest inventions of Great Father and Great Mother.

There, in this Original Home, the arboreal beings received their first names – sacred names, magical names. In this way, the creators instilled special powers in them. From then on, trees of different sizes, colors, and shapes began to inhabit the planet Earth. The power of the trees comes from their experience.

nuchus

Generic images

[These generic images are indispensable tools for the protection of a town, a house or a river – places or objects that are a common good, which do not represent any particular person. They also serve to “re-present” the common people.]

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



Generic images

Some *nuchu* figures do not have distinctive features but follow an archetype that can represent a multiplicity of forms. This archetypal manifestation of the human figure is not a gratuitous or concocted simplification, but rather a search for fundamental elements that express the essence of the subject's form. These primary forms of schematic representation tend to repeat themselves because the carver feels that they properly symbolize a particular category, allowing him to group together a number of individuals who share common characteristics.

A subject's essence is not simplified but synthesized in primary forms. Carvers repeat a nose, an oval of the face, not out of negligence or disinterest, but as the successor to a form of expression that their ancestors found to be pleasing. It is through repetition that a style is sown, breaks through and manifests itself. It is through repetition that the expressive constants of a culture are built. These constants are one generation's bountiful legacy to those that follow in their footsteps. It is such forms that allow us to recognize the specific artistic culture of the Cyclades, or the Easter Island.

The generic representations display certain physical peculiarities such as height, age, or sex, but lack a truly personal representation. What matters here is capturing the spirit rather than an external form.

These generic images are indispensable tools for the protection of a town, a house, or a river – places or objects that are a common good, which do not represent any particular person. They also serve to “represent” the common people.

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood
Achiote pigment enhancing









GENERIC IMAGES

Softwood

Achiote pigment enhancing

Cotton artifacts, cord and pearls





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood and hardwood
Paint and achote pigment enhancing





GENERIC IMAGES
Hardwood
Achiote pigment enhancing





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood and hardwood
Achiote pigment enhancing
Cotton artifacts





GENERIC IMAGES

Softwood
Charcoal enhancing





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood
Charcoal enhancing
Pearl and artifacts inlays





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood
Charcoal enhancing
Pearl and artifacts inlays





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood
Charcoal enhancing
Pearl and artifacts inlays





GENERIC IMAGES
Softwood
Achiote pigment enhancing



nuchus

Professions

[In the evolution of cultures, these kinds of typological portraits are often followed by more physiologically accurate ones.]

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



PROFESSIONS

Hardwood
Paint enhancing



Professions

Any specific piece of clothing or objects that indicate a professional activity serve to distinguish the image of a specific person. Special emphasis is placed on the clothing rather than the facial features, with the individual identified through the clothing that corresponds to their profession.

It bears mention that we're talking about clothing, not costumes: the figures represent real people rather than characters.

The *nuchu*, then, does not resemble the individual subject, since it uses a series of elements that generically represent a particular class of individuals. It is what we might call a "typological portrait". The typological portrait shows specific attributes that distinguish a group of individuals.

In the evolution of cultures, these kinds of typological portraits are often followed by more physiologically accurate ones.

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



PROFESSIONS

Hardwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing
Pearl inlays





PROFESSIONS

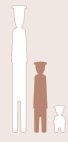
Softwood and hardwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing





PROFESSIONS
Hardwood
Paint enhancing
Pearls

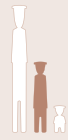




PROFESSIONS

Hardwood
Paint enhancing
Pearl inlays



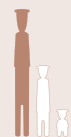


PROFESSIONS

Softwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing



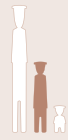


PROFESSIONS

Softwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing





PROFESSIONS

Hardwood

Achiote pigment enhancing

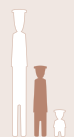


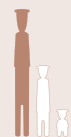


PROFESSIONS

Hardwood and softwood
Achiote pigment enhancing







PROFESSIONS

Softwood

Achiote pigment enhancing



nuchus

Portraits

[Portraiture is essentially and exclusively human. No portraits are made of God, who is idealized or symbolized. Nor are portraits made of trees or tigers: nature is represented more abstractly.]

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



PORTRAITS
Hardwood
Paint enhancing
Pearls



Portraits

The most fundamental definition of a portrait makes us think of an artistic representation of a person that seeks to imitate them as closely as possible. An artist seeks to show an approximation, to reveal their subject's personality through a stylized depiction of their basic features.

Portraiture is the visual representation of a face in a static, still position. The model's expressions are captured to reflect their external appearance while also making their inner personality visible. That is to say, the artform involves a sort of enchantment.

The person is made individual through an imitation of their personal characteristics. In every case, however, these portraits are conceived for a magical purpose, not a social depiction that seeks renown and distinction for their subject. The point is not to feed into a cult of personality.

A historian reminds us that when King Boluba of the Congo was unable to find a good sculptor, he refused to allow anyone to carve his image, his portrait, for posterity. He preferred it to be lost to time than be poorly depicted.

Portraiture is essentially and exclusively human. No portraits are made of God, who is idealized or symbolized. Nor are portraits made of trees or tigers: nature is represented more abstractly.

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ





PORTRAITS

Hardwood

Paint enhancing

Pearl and nail inlays





PORTRAITS

Softwood and hardwood

Paint enhancing

Pearl inlays





PORTRAITS

Softwood
Paint enhancing
Pearl inlays





PORTRAITS

Hardwood

Paint enhancing

Pearl and artifacts inlays





PORTRAITS

Softwood
Paint enhancing
Pearl inlays





PORTRAITS

Hardwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing

Pearls





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing





PORTRAITS
Softwood
Traces of paint and charcoal





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Paint and achote pigment enhancing





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing

Cotton artifacts, cord and pearls





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Achiote pigment enhancing





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Charcoal enhancing

Cotton artifacts, cord and pearls







PORTRAITS

Softwood and hardwood
Charcoal enhancing
Cotton artifacts





PORTRAITS

Softwood

Traces of paint and charcoal

Cotton artifacts





PORTRAITS

Hardwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing

Artifacts and pearl inlays





PORTRAITS

Hardwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing



nuchus

Symbols & totems

[According to Lezama Lima, a myth is an owned image and an image is a myth beginning its adventure.]

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



Symbols & totems

The symbol is an analogous, synthetic form of representing an idea. It is a manifestation to which meaning is given through explicit or implicit likeness.

Every analogous thought is constructed through images and analogy is an essential source of metaphor.

Gadamer, in an etymological account of the meaning of symbols, refers to the ancient tradition of the tablet and the relation between a host and a guest. Each one kept one part of the tablet, and when they met once again, if the tablets fit together, their owners would recognize one another as old friends. This is the meaning of symbol, from the original Greek, in the sense of a TOKEN OF REMEMBRANCE.

“Gadamer proposes that the other existing fragment, the constant object of our searching, will create a sense of completeness.”

The totem, for its part, brings together a diverse array of attributes and qualities in a magical, artistic adaptation of animals translated into spiritual or supernatural forces.

It would appear that the natural evolution of the image begins from generic figures, which become more realistic with the knowledge of materials and techniques as they continue to become symbolic expressions.

According to Lezama Lima, a myth is an owned image, and an image is a myth beginning its adventure.

SAMUEL VÁSQUEZ



SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood and hardwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood
Collage





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS
Softwood
Achiote pigment enhancing





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood

Achiote pigment enhancing

Glass, pearl and artifacts inlays





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing
Cotton artifacts





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood and hardwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing
Glass and pearl inlays





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Softwood
Paint and achiote pigment enhancing
Pearl inlays





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Hardwood

Paint and achiote pigment enhancing





SYMBOLS & TOTEMS

Hardwood

Charcoal, paint and achiote pigment enhancing



nuchus

Testimonies

COSMOLOGICAL FRIENDSHIPS



NUCHUS ARE MADE FROM SPECIAL TREES – NOT ANY TREE, SPECIAL ONES. THEY HAVE THEIR OWN NAMES. THEY ARE PREPARED HERE USING TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, THEY ARE GIVEN THE FACE OF A HUMAN, MALE OR FEMALE. PEOPLE CAN ALSO GIVE THEM THEIR NAME, IN THE GUNA LANGUAGE. AFTER BEING PREPARED, MAN OR WOMAN, THE ***NUCHUS*** HAVE TO COME TO LIFE. THE MATERIAL IS DEAD, THE WOOD IS LIFELESS. SO THESE PEOPLE, THE ONES WHO KNOW THE SECRETS, BEGIN TO SING TO GIVE IT ITS SOUL. WHEN IT IS READY, THEY LOOK FOR BASIL AND BEGIN TO BATHE THE FIGURES. THEY PLACE ANNATTO ON ITS FACE, COLORING IT RED... EVEN NOW, THE ***NUCHUS*** SEEM TO BE HUMAN BEINGS WITH THEIR FORCE AND POWER. THE ***NUCHUS*** ARE GIVEN TO THE ***NELES***, THE DIVINERS. WHEN THEY ARE GIVEN TO THE DIVINERS, THE ***NELES*** AND THE ***NUCHUS*** BECOME FRIENDS. THEY MEET ONE ANOTHER IN THE VISIONS AND CONVERSE. AN EXAMPLE: A MAN IS SICK, HE HAS A FEVER, HE HAS HEADACHES, AN ILLNESS. NO ONE KNOWS, THE DOCTORS DON'T KNOW. THE ***NELES*** ASK THE ***NUCHUS***, THEY CONVERSE WITH THEM. THEY BURN CACAO IN A BRAZIER AND THEIR VISION BEGINS THERE, THEIR VISION CHANGES. THE ***NUCHU*** TELLS ONE OF THE DIVINERS WHAT THE SICKNESS IS. THEY CAN ALSO BE SEEN WHEN SLEEPING. THE ***NELES*** LEAVE THEIR BRAZIER OF CACAO NEAR THEIR HAMMOCK WHEN THEY LIE DOWN SO THAT THEY SLEEP WITH THE ***NUCHUS***. THE ***NUCHUS*** LIVE IN THE DREAMS TO GIVE INFORMATION TO THE ***NELES*** ABOUT PEOPLE'S SICKNESSES.

TAKING CARE OF CHILDREN, **TAKING CARE OF NUCHUS**



THE **NUCHUS** FEED ON CACAO SMOKE. BUT ALSO, WHEN YOU SIT DOWN TO LUNCH, JUST AS YOU CALL THE CHILDREN – “CHILDREN, COME AND EAT!” – THEY SAY THAT THE **NUCHUS** COME TO EAT AS WELL. SPIRITUALLY, YOU CAN’T SEE THEM. YOU HAVE TO CALL THEM. IF IT IS BREAKFAST, YOU HAVE TO CALL THEM. LUNCH, YOU HAVE TO CALL THEM. DINNER, YOU HAVE TO CALL THEM. BECAUSE THE **NUCHU** IS A PERSON TOO. YOU’RE HELPING THEM. YOU HAVE TO GIVE THEM SUSTENANCE. EVERYONE CALLS THE **NUCHUS** TO EAT, THEY CALL THEM EVERY DAY – ESPECIALLY THE CHILDREN, THEY NEVER FAIL TO CALL THEM! THE CHILDREN ARE ALWAYS CALLING THE **NUCHUS** TO EAT. THEY SAY “**NUCHUS**, COME AND EAT AS WELL, COME AND DRINK.”

THE CHILD WHO IS BORN AS A **NELE** CAN BE RECOGNIZED EVEN AT BIRTH. FROM A YOUNG AGE, HE BEGINS TO BATHE HIS **NUCHU** IN MEDICINE, TO SING AND GIVE IT POWER. THEN THE CHILD HAS HIS VISION, THE SONGS OPEN HIS MIND, AWAKEN HIS INTELLIGENCE, AND GIVE HIM AN EXTENSIVE VISION. WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS PREGNANT WITH HER FIRST CHILD, SHE WOULD ALWAYS DREAM ABOUT **NUCHUS**. THEY CAME AND TOLD HER THAT SHE WOULD HAVE A LITTLE BOY. THEY SAID THAT THIS BOY WOULD COME TO HER AS A FUTURE **NELE**. AND SO IT WAS, THE BOY CAME AND WAS RECOGNIZED AS A DIVINER. MY GRANDSON IS THREE YEARS OLD AND CONTINUES HIS TREATMENTS WITH MEDICINAL BATHS AND SINGING TO DEVELOP HIS VISION. HE HAS HIS FRIENDS, THE **NUCHUS** ARE HIS FRIENDS. WHENEVER HE GOES TO EAT, HE INVITES HIS FRIENDS TO EAT AS WELL.

SMOKING TO FIGHT, **SMOKING FOR PEACE**



THE **ABSOGED** IS DIFFERENT FROM THE **NELES**, HE IS A SPECIALIST WHO ACTS WHEN THERE IS AN EPIDEMIC. THEY USE **NUCHUS** IN THE FORM OF EAGLES, BIRDS, LIZARDS, TURTLES, DIFFERENT KINDS OF ANIMALS. THEY ARE **NUCHUS** MADE FROM Balsa WOOD. DURING THE TIME OF AN EPIDEMIC, THEY SING FOR EIGHT DAYS WHILE SMOKING THE PEACE PIPE. IN THIS TIME OF SMOKING THE PIPE, A MAN CANNOT GO TO HIS HOUSE WITH HIS WIFE. THE MEN GO TO SLEEP IN THE HOUSE OF CHICHA OR IN THE MEETING HOUSE. THEY CANNOT LISTEN TO MUSIC, EVERYTHING MUST BE QUIET. EVERYONE HAS TO BE TOGETHER, CONCENTRATING. AN EPIDEMIC IS AN ATTACK, IT IS VERY DANGEROUS. IF A MAN TOUCHES HIS WIFE, THE **NELE** MAY FAINT, THE **ABSOGED** MIGHT DIE. DURING THE TIME OF AN EPIDEMIC, THERE IS NO GOING OUT, THERE IS NO PERMISSION. THE **SÁHILA** DOES NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO LEAVE TO TRAVEL AROUND PANAMA. NOR CAN ANYONE ENTER. WHEN THEY ARE SMOKING, THEY RAISE THE RED FLAG AND ANYONE WHO COMES FROM THE CITY CANNOT ENTER. IT IS PROHIBITED BECAUSE IT IS NOT KNOWN WHETHER ONE WHO ARRIVES FROM THE CITY HAS HAD SEXUAL RELATIONS. DURING THE SMOKING TIME, THE MEETING HOUSE FILLS WITH **NUCHUS** IN THE FORM OF ANIMALS. EVERYONE WHO HAS **NUCHUS** SHAPED LIKE ANIMALS BRINGS THEM TO THE MEETING HOUSE. THEY ARE LARGE **NUCHUS**, THE SIZE OF A PERSON. THE **NUCHUS** REMAIN THERE, TOGETHER, TO DEFEND US FROM THE EPIDEMIC THAT IS ATTACKING US.

LIFE AND DEATH OF A SOLDIER



THE *NUCHUS* MADE OF Balsa wood are used in the eight days of singing, during the time of an epidemic, when the peace pipe is being smoked. As the singing goes on, the *NUCHUS* leave to run through the community, watching. They are like strong soldiers, no one enters. If serpents or lizards come, none enter. As the singing goes on, the life of the *NUCHUS* multiplies, they can have up to twelve lives. After it ends, the singer, *ABSOGED*, has to give a sacred and very important message – guidance, that's what it's called, he has to guide. So the *ABSOGED* leads the *NUCHUS* back to their houses, he says, "Thank you for supporting me, thank you for helping me. Now, I will take you to your houses." So now the life is gone. After the singing, we have to gather the *NUCHUS* and place them all together. They are no longer alive. They can be sold. It is different with *NUCHUS* of strong trees, they are forever. *NUCHUS* made from Balsa wood are used once, against an epidemic, and then they leave, they lose their lives. They are soldiers.

REVEALING THE TRUTH



ONCE, MY WIFE LOST HER GOLDEN NECKLACES. SOMEONE ROBBED HER, WE DON'T KNOW WHO IT WAS. SHE OPENED HER JEWELRY BOX, AND HER GOLDEN CHAINS WEREN'T THERE ANYMORE. SHE WAS QUITE DISTRESSED: WHERE HAD THEY GONE? AFTER A MONTH, SHE HAD A DREAM AND THE **NUCHU** APPEARED TO HER. HE TOLD HER EVERYTHING, TOOK HER TO THE PLACE WHERE HER GOLDEN CHAIN WAS. IN THE MORNING, MY WIFE AWOKE AND WENT TO WHERE THE CHAINS WERE, IN THE HOUSE OF SOME FAMILY MEMBERS. AND SHE SAID TO HER COUSIN, "YOU STOLE MY NECKLACES." HER COUSIN SAID THAT SHE WAS LYING, BUT MY WIFE TOLD HER, "OPEN THAT UP," POINTING AT THE PLACE THAT SHE SAW IN HER DREAM. AND THERE WERE HER NECKLACES; SHE FOUND THEM.

HELP AND DEFEND: **A LIFE PURPOSE**



THE SPIRITS OF BALSA WOOD LIVE IN THE FIFTH LAYER UNDER THE EARTH. IF THERE IS AN EPIDEMIC, THEY HELP US. WHEN I AM SINGING, IT IS THROUGH THEM THAT AN EPIDEMIC CAN BE CONTROLLED. THE SPIRITS OF BALSA WOOD ARE JUST LIKE US, THEY ARE BORN AND THEY DIE. THEY HAVE THEIR MOTHER, THEY HAVE THEIR FATHER, THEY HAVE THEIR FAMILY. THEY AREN'T JUST BORN, BUT RATHER THEY HAVE A PURPOSE. THEY ARE BORN TO DEFEND, TO HELP. AN EXAMPLE: WHEN THERE IS A WAR, THE GOVERNMENT CALLS THE SOLDIERS TO COME AND HELP. IT'S THE SAME WAY WITH THE SPIRITS OF THE BALSA WOOD. THAT'S WHY THEY ARE BORN.

AN INVISIBLE BATTLE



WHEN I AM SINGING, THE **NUCHUS** COME OUT TO FIGHT. THROUGH MY SONG, THEY MAKE THEIR JOURNEY. BUT I DON'T SEE IT. IT'S THE **NELES**, THE DIVINERS, WHO HAVE THEIR VISIONS. IF THERE ARE CROCODILES OR ELEPHANTS RUNNING LOOSE, I BEGIN TO SING. THE **NELES** SEE, AND I SING SO THAT THE **NUCHUS** CAN GO AND SEARCH FOR THE SPIRITS. THAT IS WHY WE WORK TOGETHER, THE **ABSOGED** AND THE **NELES**. IF THE DIVINER SAYS THAT THEY HAVEN'T YET CAUGHT THE DEVILS, THAT THEY ARE STILL RUNNING LOOSE, I KEEP SINGING SO THAT THE **NUCHUS** CAN GO AND CATCH THE DEVILS. IT'S THE **NELES** WHO WILL SEE EVERYTHING THAT IS GOING ON. THE **NUCHUS** NEVER FAIL TO PROTECT US, NOR DO THEY EVER LIE. IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG, IT IS THE **NELES** WHO LIE, NOT THE **NUCHU**. THE **NELES** CAN SEE WHAT HAPPENED AND IF SOMEONE DISOBEYED THE PROHIBITIONS.

THE BIRTH OF A SHAMAN



I BEGAN TO DREAM ABOUT **NUCHUS** IN 2010. I KEPT DREAMING FOR FOUR YEARS UNTIL MY SON WAS BORN IN 2014. IN MY DREAMS, THE **NUCHUS** TOLD ME THAT I WOULD GET PREGNANT AND WOULD HAVE A SON WHO WOULD BE A **NELE**, A DIVINER. I DID NOT BELIEVE IT, BUT THE DREAMS KEPT COMING. I WAS IN THE HAMMOCK AND I SAW TWO VERY BEAUTIFUL BIRDS WEARING HATS ON THEIR HEADS. THEY WERE SINGING, AND AN EAGLE WAS FLYING ABOVE ME. THE **NUCHUS** WERE BEHIND ME. THEY TOLD ME THAT THE BIRDS I WAS SEEING MEANT THAT MY SON WOULD HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF KNOWLEDGE, THAT HE WOULD LEARN MUCH ABOUT THE SONGS AND THE MEDICINE. I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING TO ANYONE WHEN I WOKE UP. I JUST THOUGHT AND THOUGHT, "WHY DID I DREAM THAT?" WHEN I FELL ASLEEP AGAIN, I SAW THE BIRDS. SOMETIMES, THEY WOULD DIE. I WOULD CRY IN THE DREAM, I FELT PITY WHEN I SAW THOSE BIRDS FALLING FROM ABOVE. SO I ASKED THE **NUCHUS** WHY THE BIRDS WERE DYING AND THE **NUCHUS** SAID THAT IF I DIDN'T TAKE GOOD CARE OF THE BABY, HE WOULD DIE TOO. THE **NELES** ARE VERY SENSITIVE, THEY CANNOT BE EXPOSED TO THE SUN OR USE PERFUMES, BECAUSE ALL OF THIS IS BAD FOR THEIR MIND. WHEN I HAD BEEN PREGNANT FOR FIVE OR SIX MONTHS, I BEGAN TO HAVE THOSE DREAMS AGAIN. I ALSO HAD MANY HEADACHES. THE BIRTH OF A DIVINER IS VERY DANGEROUS. WHEN HE WAS BORN, IT WAS NOT A NORMAL BIRTH. HE GOT STUCK AND I HAD TO HAVE A C-SECTION. I HAD PROBLEMS BECAUSE HE WOULD HIDE FROM THE DOCTORS. THEY HAD NEVER SEEN A CHILD WHO WOULD HIDE AND PLAY WITH THE DOCTORS THAT WAY.

DREAMING OF GOLD



IN ONE OF MY DREAMS, THERE WERE SOME *NUCHUS* AND SOME OLD WOMEN. THE GRANDMOTHERS TOOK ME TO A TWENTY-STORY BUILDING. THEY TOLD ME, "IF YOU GO TO THE LAST FLOOR, YOU WILL SEE A LOT OF GOLD. YOU WILL TAKE THAT GOLD WITH YOU AND WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES, HE WILL KNOW ABOUT THE GOLD. IF SOME OF THE GOLD IS LOST, THE BOY WILL KNOW WHERE THE GOLD IS, AND WHO STOLE IT." I WAS TIRED AND WALKED SLOWLY, I COULDN'T KEEP WALKING UP THE TWENTY STORIES ANYMORE. BUT I REACHED IT IN THE END. WHEN I GOT TO THE LAST FLOOR, SOME *NUCHUS* WERE THERE, AND THEY TOLD ME, "SIT DOWN, GIRL." I SAT DOWN AND THEY SHOWED ME A GREAT QUANTITY OF GOLD. THEY ASKED ME, "WHICH GOLD WILL YOU TAKE?" I SAID, "I DON'T KNOW WHICH GOLD YOU WANT TO GIVE ME". IN THE END, I CHOSE A VERY BEAUTIFUL GOLDEN BRACELET, ONE THAT CAN'T BE FOUND AROUND HERE. IT HAD A MOON ON IT, AND THERE WAS A STAR ON THE MOON. WITHIN THE STAR, THERE WAS A WOMAN AND A BOY. THEY PUT THE BRACELET ON ME AND THE *NUCHU* TOLD ME, "YOU HAVE TO GIVE YOUR BOY THIS NAME WHEN HE IS BORN." BUT I DID NOT REMEMBER THE NAME WHEN I WOKE UP. THEY PUT NEW EARRINGS ON ME AND CHANGED MY CLOTHES. I STARTED TO LEAVE TO GO DOWN FROM THAT PLACE, AND WHEN I LEFT A *NUCHU* TOLD ME, "YOU MUSTN'T LOOK BACK BECAUSE THE PEOPLE IN THE STREET WILL TAKE YOUR GOLD AWAY. IF THEY TAKE YOUR GOLD AWAY YOU WILL LOSE THE BOY" – THAT IS, THAT I WOULD MISCARRY. I CRIED A LOT. WHENEVER I WOULD DREAM, I WOULD CRY IN THE DREAM. SO I WOULD WALK ALONG THE STREETS AND PEOPLE WOULD WANT TO TAKE AWAY THE GOLD, BUT THE *NUCHUS* WOULD PROTECT ME. THEY WOULD FOLLOW ME, SINGING, COVERING ME IN CACAO SMOKE.

Directed by Alexandre and Aude de Beaulieu.
Curated by Samuel Vásquez.
Texts by Samuel Vasquez, Diego Madi Dias and Cebaldo Inawinapi.
Stories and narratives gathered, transcribed and translated by Diego Madi Dias.
Book designed by Isabella Serey.
Translations by Adam Kabir Dickinson.
Nuchus photos © Irene Chamorro.
Portrait © Bénédicte Brocard.
Printed in Québec, june 2021.
Legal deposit - Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2021.

ISBN 978-1-7776667-0-5

