5B The Guna, *Molas*, and Religious Syncretism

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The Guna people of Panama are renowned for their determination to remain autonomous in the governance of their homeland, for their art as manifest in the *mola* textiles used to make women's blouses, and for their creative blend of spiritual practices meshing their preconquest beliefs with Christianity. The Guna (a population of over 50,000) live principally on islands off Panama's Caribbean Coast and on the mainland in the Darién region. These regions are demarcated as *comarcas*—territories governed by the Guna under their own system of political leadership. The largest *comarca* is today called GunaYala, and comprises the San Blas Islands and a strip of land on the Caribbean coast. Many Guna also live in Panama's cities, but often travel back to home villages. A smaller group lives on two different *comarcas* in the interior of Darién province (cf. Wali 1989 for details on these communities). Their economic system is a mix of self-subsistence through cultivation of small plots on the mainland strip and fishing, and income generation through the sale of handcrafts and coconuts, tourism, and wage labor. The system of government has been well documented in the ethnographic literature (Howe 1986; 1998). Each village has hereditary chiefs and attendant officials who enforce decisions and norms developed in consensus at nightly gatherings of all the villagers in a special lodge. Guna Yala is governed by an overarching body—the Guna General Congress—comprised of all the leaders of the villages, who elect three chiefs to represent the whole *comarca*. Although Panama's government imposes some laws on the *comarca*, most of the laws and norms are determined at the local level and by the Guna General Congress.

Women are not usually in positions of political power, but exert influence in both daily life and in village-level decision-making through their economic contributions and participation in the village gatherings. Guna women's commercialization of the *mola* textile has been a significant aspect of Guna Yala's economy since at least the mid-twentieth century. In 1964, women across several island villages formed a cooperative to sell their textiles and, at its peak, about 2000 women were members (Tice 1995). The trade in *molas* spread into the international market, and the *mola* became iconic of Guna artisanry.

The *mola* is a component of the traditional women's blouse. Typically, two *mola* panels are sewn together and attached to a yoke at the top and a ruff at the bottom. For commercial purposes, many *mola* textiles are sold as individual panels. The technique of making *molas* is sometimes referred to as "reverse appliqué" and involves layering cloth, cutting out patterns, and embroidery. The earliest designs were geometric patterns, probably reflecting body-art designs that preceded access to cloth in the nineteenth century. Women then started to innovate, making patterns that reflect local flora and fauna (Ventocilla, Herrera, and Nuñez 1995), local events, and noted figures. Eventually, as Guna gained access to magazines and other visual media, women drew inspiration from pictures, copying images or improvising to meld together older designs with new themes and motifs. The textiles are recognized for their brilliant use of color combinations, their often symmetrical designs, and for elements of whimsy and humor that are infused into the clothes. Guna women are proud of their craftsmanship, and critique each other frequently on the quality of the embroidery and the freshness of the design. Although there are no rigid rules for the creation of patterns, *molas* often have a symmetrical design, reflecting an aesthetic that strives for balance as well as expressions of the relation between person, nature, and the cosmos (Fortis 2010; Salvador 1997).

Museums in Europe and the Americas started collecting *molas* in the late nineteenth century. An early collection was made for the Göteborgs Etnografiska Museum in Sweden by Erland Nordenskiold, one of the first ethnographers of the Guna. Other collections can be found at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian and the National Museum of the American Indian. The Field Museum's collection ranks among the most significant both because of its time depth (from 1919 to 2017) and because of its size and variety. The collection has both full blouses and separated *mola* panels. It also contains patches and other objects that have *mola* designs. In total the Field Museum's collection contains 513 *mola* textiles—81 full garments and 437 blouse panels. *Molas* comprise about half of the total collections from Panama (ethnographic and archeological). The earliest materials were collected by Mr. G. L. Fitz-William, a chemical and mining engineer from Hammond, Indiana, sometime in the early 1900s and accessioned into the museum collection in 1919. The next large accession came from the purchase at a railway auction and was accessioned in 1965. In the late 2000s Field Museum staff brought in another substantial number of contemporary *molas*. Thus, the collection represents an opportunity to understand how design motifs and styles have changed over time.

The diversity of designs and motifs in *molas* makes it difficult to discern any overarching themes (Marks 2014). However, religious motifs are popular subjects for Guna women. *Molas* with churches, religious figures, and scenes can be found in museum collections. As with other Indigenous people who have been subject to missionization in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, the Guna accepted Christianity but retained their own cosmology and belief systems. Christianity took hold systemically among the Guna in the early twentieth century when one of the chiefs on the island of Nargana invited a Jesuit priest to start a school for boys. Later, a Protestant missionary also came to the

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island. As Christianity spread, it was not universally embraced, but tolerated. More often than not, women probably included religious themes in the *molas*, not out of religious dedication but because they liked the story or because it conformed to their aesthetic principles (Figure 5.6). This is manifest in the *mola* depicting Adam and Eve displayed in the exhibition. The *mola* embodies the symmetric principle, balancing Adam and Eve. Note that the tree is more palm tree than the conventional apple tree of biblical lore. Except for the most religious among the Guna, the concept of "original sin" and the expelling of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden was probably not taken seriously or treated as a reason to be "reborn" in Christ (for the Guna creation story, see Chapin 1997).

Guna death rituals are elaborate rites of passage through which the dead continue to an afterlife attended by food and belongings needed in everyday life. Guna women designated as specialists lead the mourning, chanting and keening over the dead wrapped in a shroud and placed in a hammock usually well into the night. The deceased is then carried to the mainland cemetery and placed in the ground in the hammock. Sometimes a hut is erected over the grave and food is left there. In sum, the Guna have maintained a strong sense of identity and retained cultural practices that allow them to maintain pride in their art and belief systems. They continue to defend their autonomy in the face of pressures to accept national norms and practices.

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Rabbi Hillel (ca. 110 BCE–10 CE), one of the founders of the *Mishnah*, is noted for saying, "If I am not for myself, who will be? And being only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" That is, one has duties to self, and our humanity is expressed in how we treat others. Further, one should not delay in these duties. This teaching is grounded in the Jewish and Christian conviction that human beings are created in the image of God. As stated in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a): "Whoever saves a single life is considered by scripture to have saved the whole world." This shows the great importance of life and death in Judaism, and the reason Jews are called to mend the world. Living while dying has then intertwined religious and moral duties such that living as a faithful Jew is imitating the goodness, justice, and mercy of the divine Creator. Life is not simply preparation for death; it is, as with Christians, a calling to a distinctive way of life within a community.

Judaism and Christianity, like most religions, are intensely aware of human fragility in living while dying, human fault, and propensity to do evil and wrong. Christians explain these negative features of human beings in terms of original sin, variously understood. Many Jews hold that evil started with Adam's and Eve's disobedience to God's will and command. Evil then became a human propensity that does not need an external temptation to sin and can be overcome by following *Torah*. This belief is rooted in scripture. After God destroys all living beings, except Noah, his family, and each type of animal in the Great Flood (Gen. 6:11–9:19) because of human sin and evil in order to begin anew, "the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth'" (Gen. 8:21). However explained, the propensity for evil and wrongdoing seems to be a human trait found in all times, all places, and all people.

Figure 5.6. Guna *mola* textile of the original sin: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (FM 190472).

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Figure 5.7. *Parinirvana* Buddha sculpted in soapstone by students from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh ca. 2015 (courtesy Mitch Hendrickson).

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5C Death and the Reclining Buddha

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The passing of the world's great religious leaders often becomes a transformative event that galvanizes their ultimate message for future followers. Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection, celebrated today by Christians at Easter, reinforces the nature of his sacrifice to die for others. Over half a millennium earlier, in what is now northern India and Nepal, the death of the Buddha represents an equally important but philosophically different perception of what dying, the "afterlife," and living means.

The Buddha's story describes the transformation of Siddhartha Gauthama, a prince of the Shakya kingdom, who rescinds his elite life to become a wandering ascetic focused on understanding the nature of existence and finding an escape from suffering (*dukkha*) and the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). His teachings, initially passed on orally by monks and centuries later recorded in Buddhist texts, focus on several key events during the Buddha's life: his enlightenment, where he finally grasped the means to escape *samsara* at Bodhgaya; his first sermon, where he shared his teachings (*dharma*) at Sarnath; and finally, his death (*parinirvana*) at Kushinagar. Unlike Jesus, who died violently on the cross at the hands of the Romans, the Buddha passed peacefully in a cave after eating a meal of tainted pork or mushrooms at the age of 80. The record of his death captured in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* explains how the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodhgaya allowed him to follow the Noble Eightfold Path in this last life and escape the cycle of rebirth and suffering (Figure 5.7).

The Buddha's final death addressed a fundamental philosophical issue in ancient South Asia. Unlike reincarnation, Buddhists recognized that there is no individual soul (*atman*) and rebirth is merely a transmission of essences between lives (Becker 1993). An apt analogy is to see life as like passing a flame from one candle to the next. The ultimate goal is to extinguish the flame that connects these essences to the physical world and enter into the state of *nirvana*, or nothingness. While later branches of Buddhism evolving in East Asia focus on entering into "heavens," they are not the same as the Western view where one's "self" ends up after living a good and proper life on Earth.

The Buddha's ultimate passing had spiritual and physical impacts across South Asia. His cremated remains were initially divided into eight parts and interred within stupas, mound-shaped monuments which became important pilgrimage sites for those who wished to be in his "presence." Centuries later these remains were unearthed and divided among thousands of sites throughout India and were ultimately disseminated across Asia. A replica of one of the most famous Buddha relics interred in the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy, Sri Lanka, is still annually paraded on the back of an elephant during the Esala Perahera festival to commemorate the arrival of Buddhism to the island nation. While using his corporeal remains appears to stand in direct contrast to the idea of "nothingness" and lack of self, it shows how the Buddha's death continued to breathe life into his faith and spread the word of the *dharma*.

Images of the Buddha himself did not appear—for philosophical reasons—until several centuries after he walked the earth (DeCaroli 2015). The typical form of Buddha is very familiar to anyone who has visited an Asian art exhibit: meditative, seated figures with hands in various gestures (*mudras*) that represent important events in his journey. While the meaning of each hand position is often lost to the casual observer who lacks a deeper understanding of the religion, the image of his death—known as the reclining Buddha—is much more easily recognizable: a robed man, eyes peacefully closed, lying on his right side with his right arm underneath his head and his left stretched out along the top of his body. Examples of this motif commonly appear in carved reliefs and paintings, but is it the creation of colossal statues that signifies the importance of this event. A 14-meter/46-foot-long image made from brick recently dated to the third century CE at Bhamala in Pakistan represents the earliest known example of such larger-than-life representations (Hameed, Samad, and Kenoyer 2020). Colossal reclining Buddhas literally grew in popularity and size as the religion spread eastward within Asia. *Parinirvana* imagery was widespread in China by the fifth century but reached new artistic heights and meaning in the seventh century at the Mogao Caves near the famous Dunhuang monastery (Lee 2010). The numerous reclining Buddhas were carved directly from the rock inside individual caves—the largest of which spanned 17 meters/56 feet in length—to recreate both the event and the space where the Buddha died. In fifteenth-century Cambodia, the Khmer remodeled the entire western façade of their eleventh-century Hindu Baphuon temple to create a 70-meter/230-foot-long reclining Buddha. This act seems to mark the state's official transition to Theravada Buddhism as its sole religion and shows the relationship with spirituality and politics in the past (Leroy et al. 2015).

Reverence for the *parinirvana* image continues today and is most stunningly found in Jiangxi Province, eastern China. Carved directly into the mountain, this *parinirvana* image measures 416 meters/1365 feet long and 68 meters/223 feet high and represents the single largest image ever created of the Buddha's passing. The reclining Buddha displayed in this exhibit lies in stark contrast to the massive examples created throughout Asia's rich history. Hand-crafted by a local Cambodian artist, this small stone image represents a long tradition of capturing this important moment and, like

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