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Kuna or Guna? : The Linguistic, Social and Political Implications of Developing a Standard Orthography

by

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Kuna or Guna? : The Linguistic, Social and Political Implications of Developing a Standard Orthography

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Dedication

We garda nergualedgd, an Elidili Pérez Grimaldo nuggine narmaksa. Be dungualir be
dulegayaba garda narmaked, geb absoged wisguegala.

This thesis was written in the name of Elidili Pérez Grimaldo. May you be able to write
and read in Kuna when you grow up.
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Preamble

This version of the thesis was published in August of 2005 along with a translation of the thesis in Spanish. In the process of publishing the version in Spanish, there were some discrepancies that were encountered in the original English version, which led me to republish the thesis so as to be more congruent with the Spanish version. Although the changes are few and will most likely go unnoticed by most readers, I nonetheless wish to declare that this is not the original version of the thesis approved by the University of Texas.

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Abstract

*Kuna or Guna?* : The Linguistic, Social and Political Implications of Developing a Standard Orthography

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Many variations in the orthography of the Kuna language, an indigenous language spoken in Panama, have emerged over the past decades. The Kuna Congresses determined that the development of a standard Kuna orthography is important for the community, and beginning in June 2004, commissioned a yearlong series of seminars with Kuna academics to address this matter. As an official orthography is expected to emerge from this process, debates have arisen concerning which elements will be included in this new writing system. I explore the linguistic, social and political implications of these seminars in order to document the unique manner in which the
Kuna community is internally addressing these issues. I use instances of written and spoken discourse from Kuna academics to couch the development of a standard writing system in its larger cultural context. I explore the language ideologies behind the new orthography and show how the Kuna understanding of writing and literature is being reflected in the development of the writing system and the ways in which it is being employed. The thesis is situated in larger discourses of oral and written traditions, showing that through the process of creating a standard orthography, the Kuna are not only challenging the written tradition established through colonization, but are actively working to construct a new system.
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Hoy se sabe que la conquista de Abia Yala (América) está en la base de lo que actualmente se conoce como globalización, que no es otra cosa que el dominio planetario del capitalismo con una ideología insignia, el neoliberalismo.

Tal conquista en los hechos consistió en la aniquilación de pueblos enteros, el robo y pillaje de sus tierras y bienes, la explotación de los recursos y trabajo humano, el aprovechamiento de su cultura y su conocimiento.

Todo lo cual se justificó entonces, y continúa hasta el presente, con una ideología que ha ocultado la verdad de esos hechos y llenado de palabras vacías como que nos trajeron “el progreso,” etc. Ideología con que también se ha pretendido someternos en lo espiritual, social, político, cultural. Es decir el aculturamiento, uno de cuyos aspectos fue impulsar el monoculturismo que engendra el desprecio a las culturas indígenas, lo que aún persiste en nuestros tiempos.

Los gobiernos de los países de América aplican las políticas neoliberales que alientan la dependencia, el paternalismo y el aculturamiento de los pueblos indígenas.

Nuestros pueblos no son pobres. Son pueblos empobrecidos. Esta situación de los pueblos indígenas obedece sobre todo a políticas impropias que los Estados y los países americanos emplean para atender los problemas indígenas, y por la actual mala distribución de la riqueza que se da en nuestros países, y no porque estos pueblos mantengan su cultura y tradiciones como suelen afirmar los amantes del neoliberalismo. Japón los mantiene y es un país desarrollado.

Las Repúblicas Americanas desde sus inicios estructuran sus vidas económicas, políticas y culturales conforme a los moldes europeos. Y con el pretexto de que el modo de vida de los pueblos indígenas como no es de origen Europeo es atrasado o primitivo, los nuevos dueños de los territorios o de las ya Repúblicas Americanas crearon un sistema jurídico de marginación, y en muchos casos hasta de considerar como enemigos a nuestros pueblos. Lo cual significó que no quedáramos involucrados en las decisiones políticas de Estados para los asuntos que atañen a los propios pueblos indígenas. Se dio entonces el proceso de homogenización de nuestros pueblos, el que se realiza a través de proyectos inconsultos, manipulados desde afuera, que no responden a los intereses indígenas, sino de la sociedad envolvente. Los medios de comunicación masiva contribuyen también en gran medida a la despersonalización de nuestros pueblos. Pero el instrumento con la cual socava con mayor sutileza los cimientos de nuestra cultura, ha sido, y es, la educación.

La educación que se aplica en nuestras comunidades está orientada a maximizar los elementos de la cultura occidental y a negar o a disminuir los de la cultura indígena.

Los pueblos indígenas tienen sus formas propias de resolver sus necesidades y de concebir el mundo. Esta diversidad de concepciones y saberes del mundo indígena enriquecen los conocimientos del hombre actual y de la sociedad moderna. Cabe destacar
que a estas alturas del conocimiento humano es inadmisible hablar del desarrollo de los pueblos indígenas sin considerar sus vivencias culturales. La élite gobernante de los países Americanos, sorda ante los clamores de los pueblos indígenas que exigen cada vez más un nuevo tipo de relaciones, insiste en mantener una política obsoleta que evidentemente empeora la escuálida situación en que se encuentran nuestras comunidades.

Los datos señalan a nuestros pueblos como los más pobres. La salud es precaria en nuestras comunidades. Han aparecido nuevas enfermedades en nuestro medio. La deserción, el ausentismo y el analfabetismo son problemas educativos que no se han podido superar. Se despoblan nuestros campos por la fuerte emigración de sus habitantes a la urbe metropolitana. Se dice que esa situación ha obedecido a la falta de una política indígena por parte del Estado. Pero en realidad, esa aparente falta ha sido una política de hecho, política de exclusión, de marginación, inconsulta hacia los derechos de los indígenas como pueblos, y de ser usados en el clientelismo político electoral.

El cuadro de desolación que presentan nuestros pueblos amerita ya una atención especial y urgente. La educación no es la panacea de todos los males de nuestras comunidades. Pero ella puede promover y orientar a nuestros pueblos a tomar conciencia de sus realidades y encontrar senderos propios de su liberación.

Conscientes de ello y demeritando la importancia de otros aspectos de la vida, los pueblos indígenas claman por una educación que les permita desenvolverse en la vida nacional sin la pérdida de sus valores culturales, llámese ésta, educación indígena, bilingüe, etnoeducación y bilingüe intercultural.

- Reuter Orán (n.d.)

Today we know that the conquest of Abia Yala (América) is based on what we is now known as globalization, that is nothing other than the global domination of capitalism with an insignia of ideology: neoliberalism.

This conquest in fact consisted of the annihilation of whole towns, the robbing and pillaging of their land and property, the exploitation of their resources and human labor, and the appropriation of their culture and knowledge.

All of which was justified then, and continues still in the present, with an ideology that has concealed the truth about these acts and filled (them) with empty words, saying that they brought us “progress,” etc. Ideology with which they sought to defeat us spiritually, socially, politically and culturally. This is to say acculturation, one of the aspects of which was to push monoculturalism, which engenders the devaluing of indigenous cultures, a practice that still persists in our time.

The governments of the countries of the Americas use neoliberal politics that encourage dependency, paternalism and acculturation of indigenous communities.

Our communities are not poor. They are communities that have been made poor. This situation of the indigenous communities obeys above all the improper politics that the States and other countries in the Americas use to attend to indigenous problems because of the current poor distribution of wealth in our countries and not because our
communities maintain their culture and traditions as the lovers of neoliberalism always assert. Japan maintains [their culture and traditions] and it is a well-developed country.

The republics of the Americas, from their beginnings, structured their economic, political and cultural lives around the European mold. And with the pretext that the lifestyle of the indigenous communities was backwards and primitive, as they are not of European origin, the new owners of the territories, or of the modern American Republics, created a legal system of marginalization, and in many cases have even considered our communities as enemies. This signified that we would not be involved in the political decisions of the State for the sake of the issues that concern the indigenous communities themselves. It resulted in a process of homogenization of our communities, which has been realized through non-collaborative projects, manipulated from the outside, which don’t correspond to indigenous interests, but to the surrounding society. Mediums of mass communication also contribute in large part to the depersonalization of our communities. But the instrument which undermines with great subtlety the foundation of our culture has been, and is, education.

The education that has been applied in our communities is oriented to maximize the elements of Western culture and to deny or belittle those of indigenous cultures.

Indigenous communities have their own ways of taking care of their necessities and understanding the world. This diversity of concepts and this knowledge of the indigenous world enrich the understanding of humans and of modern society. It remains to be noted that at these levels of human understanding, it is inadmissible to speak of the development of indigenous communities without considering their cultural ways of life. The governing elite of the countries of the Americas, deaf to the clamors of the indigenous communities that increasingly demand a new type of relationship, insists on maintaining obsolete policies that obviously worsen the squalid situation in which our communities find themselves.

The figures show that our communities are some of the poorest. Health is precarious in our communities. New diseases have appeared in our mists. Dropping out, missing class and illiteracy are educational problems that haven’t been overcome. Our fields are being depopulated due to the heavy emigration of its inhabitants to the metropolitan hub. This situation is said to be due to the lack of indigenous policies on the part of the State. But in reality, this apparent lack has been a policy of action, a policy of exclusion, of marginalization, disregarding the rights of indigenous peoples as pueblos, and using them in the clientelism of electoral politics.

The picture of desolation that our communities present merits special and urgent attention. Education is not the panacea of all of the problems in our communities. But education can promote and orient our pueblos to be conscious of their reality and find their own paths to liberation.

Conscious of this, and valuing the importance of other aspects of life, indigenous groups clamor for an education that allows them to integrate themselves into national life without the loss of their cultural values, call this what you will: indigenous education, bilingual education, ethnoeducation and bilingual-intercultural education.

- Reuter Orán (n.d.)
In June 2004, the Kuna Congresses sponsored the first of a series of seminars in order to establish a standard writing system for the Kuna language. Although most indigenous peoples have principally been considered to have “oral cultures,” many indigenous pueblos are in the process of creating, or have already created writing systems and bodies of literature that challenge dualistic notions of orality and literacy. The process of creating a standard writing system is an important one for indigenous pueblos, as their understanding of writing and literature is reflected in the development of the writing system and the ways in which it is employed.

On a social and political level, a standard orthography is important in the way that it is conceived of by the community and then developed. It is through this process of infusing a writing system with meaning, beliefs and cultural understandings that a written abstract representation of a language becomes a writing system. The development of a standard orthography is a dynamic process that is inextricably embedded in a larger socio-historical framework. Colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and now globalism have created and are continuing to create the barriers, which the Kuna and other indigenous peoples struggle against. This is the process I explore here through the social, political and linguistic issues that shape it. This thesis explores the context from which the Kuna are developing a standard orthography by looking at the Kuna language seminars, which began in June 2004 as a way to establish guidelines for a standard orthography. These meetings, along with the linguistic debates that have dominated these
seminars and the socio-political context in which it is all embedded, are the focus of this thesis.

In this first chapter I began by exploring the general background on Kuna history and the language seminars, the history of reading and writing of Kuna and some similar case studies. In Chapter 2 I unpack orthography and literacy through a review of current literature on the subject, followed by an examination of the literature surrounding oral and written traditions. In Chapter 3 I begin to examine in more depth the context from which the language seminars emerge. Here I address the social and political circumstances surrounding indigenous languages in Panama, as well as issues of identity and spirituality. Chapter 4 moves into the actual linguistic arguments that are being discussed in the language seminars while also serving as a basic grammatical sketch of the Kuna language. My conclusions on Kuna orthography and its situated position in language politics are presented in Chapter 5.

Some Background on the Kuna

The Kuna language is generally classified as belonging to the Chibchan family, a large language family stemming from Colombia and greater Amazonia in which many distantly related languages are classified (Constantla 1991). While there is some variation in the Kuna language, especially in mainland communities in or near Colombia, all variations of Kuna are mutually intelligible. The Kuna language is not closely related to

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1 *Pueblos* is used here as an alternative to “communities,” because this is the word used in Spanish by the Kuna, and because both the English “community” and the Kuna “neggwebur” can have narrower connotations meaning “singular community.”
any other spoken language, and of all of the seven indigenous languages in Panama, only Bribri is also recognized as part of the Chibchan family, although it is only distantly related (Constantla 1991).

There are approximately 50,000 to 70,000 Kuna in Panama, and another couple thousand in Colombia, making the Kuna the second largest indigenous group in Panama. The majority of the population lives in Kuna Yala, an autonomous province on the Caribbean coastline that consists of mainland territory and more than 300 barrier islands, shown in Figure 2 along with the other indigenous comarcas of Panama. Kuna Yala was established as a semi-sovereign state in 1954 as part of the long process of defining their relationship to the nation state after the successful Kuna revolution in February of 1925. Two other indigenous comarcas, Madungandi and Wargandi, followed in 1996 and 2000, respectively.

![Figure 1. Area Map](image)

I use *comarca* here because it is the term used in Panama for these semi-sovereign states ruled by the indigenous population.
The 1925 Kuna revolution was a revolt against assimilationist policies being implemented by the Panamanian government at the time that included the introduction of a Panamanian police force, mandatory schooling and dress codes (Howe 1998). On February 25, 1925, bands of organized Kuna men attacked and killed the foreign police stationed on two of the islands. This revolution led to the establishment of the Kuna Yala Comarca (formerly known only as San Blas) as an autonomous indigenous region to be governed independently by the Kuna within the nation state of Panama (Howe 1986). The Kuna revolution is not only an important historical event; it carries great social and cultural significance and has become a day of remembrance and celebration for Kunas living in both Kuna Yala and urban barrios.

In the 1930s many Kuna men went to work in the American Canal Zone (which was turned over to Panamanian rule in 1999) for short periods of time, usually a year or
less, before returning to Kuna Yala (Howe 198:15). This temporary work situation was arranged in part by Kuna leader Nele Kantule, who felt that it would bring necessary funds into the communities without entailing the loss of community members. In the 1970s, however, an increasing number of Kunas began permanently living in or around Panama City. By the late 1970s the number of people immigrating to the city increased, and urban Kuna barrios were formed in some areas. In the city itself, many island communities started centros, which became communication and socialization centers for people to communicate with friends and family back home (Sherzer 1990).

Communication and transportation to Kuna Yala can be difficult and costly. Although some island communities in Kuna Yala would technically be only a two or three hours bus ride from Panama City, there are no roads to Kuna Yala traversible by car. Most travel to and from Panama City is done on small planes, which now costs about $80 - $100 roundtrip, or by ship to Colon, which costs considerably less but is a journey that takes days, as opposed to hours, to complete. The centros serve food and drink, provide courier service for mail back and forth, and have been general places to meet and dance gammu burwi, a co-ed group dance in which men play pan pipes and women play maracas. The centros still operate today, although some of their functions have changed. They still serve food and drink, and function as gathering centers, but the community dependence on them as communication centers has diminished due to the advent of the telephone. Many of them serve beer as well, often turning into dance clubs at night.

The massive migration to Panama City over the past thirty years is part of the context for the emergence of a standard orthography. With the migration to the city, more
people have had access to Western schooling, which has supplied some of the urban Kuna population, especially those involved in the language seminars, with both the impetus for establishing Kuna norms in the educational system (due to their experiences in Western-style schools) and the resources necessary to change such systems. Migration to Panama City and urban life are undoubtedly important factors in both the Kuna language seminars and Kuna-language education, although migration to Spanish-speaking Panama City has also been a cause of language loss among the Kuna. The implications of migration, education and urban life on the Kuna language will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

A Past and Present Survey of Writing in Kuna

The Kuna, like many other indigenous groups of the Americas, did not have an established phonetic writing system before the arrival of the Spanish. With the implementation of colonial rule, the Kuna, along with all the other indigenous groups of Panama and Colombia, became subjected to the domination of the Spanish language and its writing system. The first Kuna phonetic writing systems were developed by Catholic Spanish missionaries and later on by American Evangelists. In these cases, the writing systems were developed by missionaries with the principal goal of translating Christian beliefs into the Kuna language for evangelical purposes.

The Kuna, however, have their own iconographic picture-writing, which dates back to at least 1927 and is used to document chants and other oral texts (Severi in Salvador, ed. 1997). Kuna picture-writing, as noted by Carlos Severi, is a system of semi-
iconographic symbols with no phonetic value, resulting in picture-writing that is undervalued by Western literary standards. Severi explains that

[f]aced with a document that stands midway between sign and design – we will see that in a Kuna pictogram there is more than in an ‘arbitrary’ design and less than in a ‘conventional’ sign – we feel uneasy (in Salvador, ed. 1997: 245).

It is in the juxtaposition of “arbitrary” and “conventional” that we have come to define writing systems, as our Western understanding of writing systems implies the latter. As Severi points out, Kuna picture-writing stands in the middle, and therefore makes us “uneasy” by questioning the standard definition of a writing system. Kuna picture-writing, an example of which is shown in Figure 3, is still practiced by some today, although many chant and igar-knowers\(^3\) now document their oral texts through phonetic transcriptions.

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\(^3\) *Igar* is the Kuna word for “chant,” but it also means “path” or “way.”
In considering Kuna picture writing, it is tempting to follow arguments that attempt to validate or invalidate Kuna picture writing as authentic or inauthentic because they are thought to have been elicited at the request of foreigners as a way to document chants. Severi recognizes the arguments that have been made against both practical and theoretical aspects of Kuna picture writing, and calls for an understanding of the picture writing in own right:
These acts of transcription of the mythological universe of which the Kuna tradition offers us a particularly sophisticated example, far from reflecting the first faltering steps, the unsuccessful attempts, the distant precursors of the origins of writing, reveal a number of crucial features of the multiple oral and pictorial pictures that constitute a so-called oral tradition (in Salvador 1997:270).

Severi’s argument is interesting in the way it attempts to call the oral and written into question, although it ultimately falls into the dichotomous traps set by Goody and Watt (1963) that claim written language is more sophisticated than spoken language. I will not attempt to engage these academic discourses on the difference between written and spoken language in regards to Kuna picture writing, although oral and written traditions are theoretically analyzed in Chapter 2. I also do not wish to engage arguments regarding the “authenticity” or origins of the picture writing, as it only takes away from the importance that picture writing holds, both in real and symbolic senses, for the Kuna today. Picture writing is not widely practiced today, but it is recognized as an important Kuna invention for documenting oral discourse in particular.

As schooling has made its way into everyday Kuna life, the Kuna have found new ways to utilize their education for their own benefit and for the benefit of the larger Kuna community. Figure 4 is part of a representation of “Cantule Igar,” a Kuna chant transcribed on the island community of Mulatuppu in the 1970’s. There are many such written phonetic transcriptions today, some written by the igar or chant knowers themselves and others typed or transcribed by a Kuna scribe.
While these examples exist, writing phonetically has generally been conceived of by the Kuna as a Spanish or English-language activity. Written letters, papers and books, generally referred to as *garda* (borrowed from the Spanish *carta*), are inventions of the...
*wagmar* (non-Kunas; latinos), and are therefore written in *waggaya* (the language of the latinos; Spanish) or *mergigaya* (language of the Americans; English). One form of long-distance communication that developed before cassette-tape exchanges and the telephone, for example, was that of letter writing. The sender would dictate a message in Kuna to one of few Spanish-literate scribes, who would then translate their message into written Spanish. Upon arrival this letter would be read by another Spanish-literate scribe and then translated into Kuna for the receiver (Sherzer 2001). This practice was soon outdated with the invention of the cassette tape, which could easily be recorded and then sent to a receiver. Cassette tapes were then later overtaken by the installation of telephones in Kuna Yala. Official letter writing and important community documents, however, are still domains for written Spanish, which are recognized as weight-carrying mediums of communication.

New domains for writing in Kuna are currently emerging, as the Kuna find innovative and creative ways to express themselves in words, often utilizing new technologies in the process. Some of these relatively new genres include books, poetry and newsletters. Cyberspaces, including websites and email communication, are also emerging as new communication spaces for the Kuna. As a large population of Kunas is now living in Panama City, where internet access is cheap and accessible, there is increased communication via the internet. The Kuna are using these spaces to communicate within their speech community, and this, especially in urban contexts, means an educated bilingual population. Kuna writing, therefore, often reflects this reality. Books, poetry, emails and internet sites, although sometimes written solely in
Kuna, often appear as indexing Kuna identity by using vocabulary, greetings and titles in Kuna, within a largely Spanish-language text. Such use of language is quite common and has been documented as being used in Navajo poetry (Webster 2004). The appropriation of the colonizer’s language in subversive discursive practices is shown to be a powerful tool of resistance (Collins and Blot 2003). This practice of framing Spanish-language text as Kuna serves to index the writer’s identity through the use of their native language while simultaneously speaking against imperialist dominance through the language of the colonizers.

There are, however, more sustained examples of written discourse in Kuna, indicating an awareness that the Kuna language can also be written phonetically. It is difficult to say whether there has actually been an increase in the amount of written Kuna discourse, as there have arguably been people writing in Kuna for many years (see Figure 3) and most of these examples have never been published. There is, however, a definite increase in published Kuna works, most likely due to a larger percent of the population being educated in Western school systems and increased access to the economic resources that enable publishing. Some of these published works in Kuna, along with many unpublished ones, are partially reproduced in this thesis.

In addition to these efforts to produce written works in Kuna by Kuna writers, poets and intellectuals, there are other, “smaller” ways in which written Kuna is being utilized. Collins and Blot explore how power in literacy and power in general work and are expressed in both big and small ways:

Most basically, and of greatest relevance for understanding the puzzling legacies of literacy, it has become clear that power is not just some concentrated force that
compels individuals or groups to behave in accordance with the will of an external authority, be it parent, boss, or public authority. Instead, power has "microscopic" dimensions, small, intimate, everyday dimensions, and these are constitutive as well as regulative; they are the stuff out of which senses of identity, senses of self as a private individual as well as a social entity in a given time and place, are composed and recomposed (Collins and Blot 2003:5).

There are many ways in which such an analysis can be interpreted. One way that literacy presents itself in “microscopic” ways is through everyday written communication, such as through email. It is in these same small everyday spaces where written Kuna challenges the written power of Spanish.

The following text, Figure 5, is actually an email that I recently received from a friend in Panama who is uninvolved with the Kuna language seminar series.

```
Subject: SALUDOS
Date: Fri, 04 Feb 2005 12:12:13 -0500
NA DEQUITE KAYLA BE NUEGANBI
ANMAR WEGUINDI NUEGANBY
ANDI AN ARBADE AGA BE GAN NARMAQUE, DEISOCU VE WISBE FAMILIA
OISOBIELE
ANSE VE SUN NARMASALE O BINSA SUNMAQUEGA VEGUISI
DEISOCU TESEMALO
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Figure 5. Recent email to the author written in Kuna.

There are many ways that this email can be contextually questioned. The reader would like to know, for example, if this email was written only in Kuna because I was the intended audience, if emails between native Kuna speakers are always in Kuna, if letters written between Kuna speakers are in Kuna, etc. My point in presenting this email,
however, is not to pretend to establish the number of Kuna speakers that write emails in Kuna, but rather to provide an example of how written Kuna is becoming a part of everyday life, and in doing so, works to challenge these spaces that are mostly dominated by Spanish.

Another way in which writing in Kuna is presenting itself on a popular level is through signs at Kuna centros. These signs in the Kuna language are extremely visible and are similar to the signs in Yucatec Maya described by Brody (2004). Even though most Kuna claim not to be able to know how to read Kuna, almost all of the Kuna centros in Panama City display some sort of sign with writing in Kuna. There is great orthographic variation between these signs, but the principal concern of the owners and the patrons is the fact that these establishments are expressing their cultural association. The following picture of a centro door, although rather plain and unadorned compared to signs at most of the other centros, nonetheless shows how signs in Kuna are symbols of culture and identity for Kuna establishments. Figure 6 is a picture of the entrance door to Us Nega, a centro for members of the island community Ustuppu, the most populated island community in Kuna Yala. During the evening it serves as a very popular discoteca for young Kuna adults, the majority of which have grown up in Panama City. Additional pictures of Kuna signs are included in Appendix B.
These examples of writing in Kuna serve to paint an historical and contemporary picture of how writing is being utilized by the Kuna and in what context. Emails and entrance signs hardly mean that writing in Kuna is a popular practice, but they do serve as examples of how writing in Kuna enters into daily life, perhaps in ways that will facilitate future movements to construct even broader literary practices.

Looking at Writing from an Ethnographic Perspective

As this research concerns the establishment of a standard writing system and domains for writing in Kuna, looking at writing ethnographically supports the importance of studying writing practices methodologically. As all cultural practices, writing practices are a dynamic set of practices. As some members of the Kuna pueblo now work to increase the domains and use of written Kuna, this becomes an especially interesting question. The way that these writing practices
have been and are being developed and implemented as communicative activities is an important descriptive part of the analysis. The ways in which these communicative activities are being conceived, however, is key in understanding the cultural, social and political motivations involved in these activities. In this research I look at different instances of writing in Kuna, expanding on the ethnography of writing by investigating the motivations the Kuna cite for past and present writing practices.

Informed by the ethnography of speaking as defined by Hymes (1962), Basso made a call for the ethnography of writing, which he defined as an important focus for linguistic anthropology that had largely been overlooked. In the ethnography of speaking, Hymes proposed the speech event as the locus for analysis of the event itself as well as all of the social factors that created and influenced it (Urban 1991:16). Drawing on this approach, Basso called for the ethnography of writing:

In contrast to earlier approaches, which have dealt almost exclusively with the internal structure of written codes, the one proposed here focuses upon writing as a form of communicative activity and takes as a major objective the analysis of the structure and function of this activity in a broad range of human societies (1989: 426, emphasis in original).

Although there has been a recent surge in literature on writing, this has generally been a neglected area of study of human communication. Such an approach focuses on the act of writing rather than on the structure of the written word, just as the ethnography of speaking focuses on the speech act instead of grammatical constructions.
In order to explore the social aspects of creating a standard Kuna orthography, I draw on the theory and methodology of the discourse-centered approach, using actual instances of discourse in this research. The discourse-centered approach, first elaborated by Sherzer (1987) and Urban (1991), grew out of the ethnography of communication and the ethnography of speaking, which were developed by Hymes (1962) and Bauman and Sherzer (1974). The discourse-centered approach grounds the researcher in actual instances of socially-produced discourse, which is “the actual medium through which knowledge (linguistic and cultural) is produced, conceived, transmitted and acquired” (Sherzer 1987:305). Such an approach allows the researcher to focus on language as a cultural medium which both shapes and is shaped by human understandings. As Sherzer explains, the discourse-centered approach is both a theory and a methodology:

This is a theoretical position. But it has methodological implications as well, for both anthropologists and linguists. Since discourse is an embodiment, a filter, a creator and a recreator, and a transmitter of culture, then in order to study culture we must study the actual forms of discourse produced and performed by societies and individuals (1987:306).

I take the theory and methodology of the discourse-centered approach seriously in my research, using excerpts of spoken and written discourse from Kuna scholars, writers and activists. Through this approach, the ways that the Kuna are talking about developing a standard orthography, and hence creating and recreating a cultural understanding of this task, can be illustrated.

The discourse-centered approach is often utilized more narrowly to discern the ways in which language makes and reflects culture, concentrating only in part on the message that is being communicated. In working with such an overtly socially and
politically engaged project as the development of a standard orthography of Kuna, I have found it useful to analyze discourse here on a more meta-level. Whereas many researchers have successfully showed how more micro-level aspects of discourse, such as metaphor, repetition and many other poetic devices are used to construct cultural meaning, I have found that the data for my research necessitate a more macro-level analysis. Due to the political concerns of those involved with Kuna cultural movements and the language seminars, I have attempted to align my methodology with their concerns, highlighting issues that they have openly designated as important to the Kuna pueblo. I have used the discourse-centered approach to develop a methodology that better reflects the ways that actual instances of discourse are being used socially and politically to support the development of new spaces for the Kuna language.

Related to the ethnography of speaking, the discourse-centered approach and the ethnography of writing is the study of discourse analysis, which also uses actual instances of discourse, spoken and written, to analyze how discourse constructs social subjects. Discourse analysis is similar to conversation analysis in that it looks at actual instances of discourse, documenting the micro workings of discourse that create social actors. Discourse analysis, however, also examines how these discourses function on a more macro level to create social constructions. In looking at these larger patternings of discourse, Fairclough notes that “it is in the concrete discursive practice that hegemonic structurings of orders of discourse are produced, reproduced, challenged and transformed” (1995:95). By looking at discourse patterns, in relation to cultural theories of power, such as that of hegemony provided by Gramsci, Fairclough shows how
discourse analysis can pinpoint the ways that discourse structures creates and recreates power.

By looking at how the Kuna are conceptualizing and realizing a standard writing system through discourse, it becomes clear how they are challenging, subverting and appropriating the hegemonic orderings of writing and literacy established by the dominant society. Utilizing these concepts and tools from discourse analysis, I analyze written and spoken discourse that reveals social structures of power. The discourse analyzed in this research generally addresses hegemonic discourses of language politics by speaking against them, revealing not only the structure of dominant language ideologies but also the structure of the discourse that has emerged to counter them.

The Research

My research data consists of actual instances of discourse, both written and spoken. The spoken discourse used in this research is from a series of 15 interviews done in Panama City during May, June and July of 2004 and January of 2005. Some of the interviews were conducted with members of the Kuna community in Veracruz, a suburb of Panama City, who have no connection to the Kuna language seminars, while others were conducted with people directly involved in the seminars. For those not involved in the seminars, the interviews were semi-structured, based on a series of questions on migration to Panama City and language ideologies. For those involved in the language seminars, unstructured interviews were conducted with questions pertaining specifically to the language seminars and their areas of expertise. The written discourse presented in
this thesis comes from both published and unpublished documents by Kuna writers in both Kuna and Spanish.

The information concerning the Kuna language seminars may be out of date at the time of publication of this thesis. The socio-political factors that are simultaneously part of this context and creating this context, however, will still be active in some form. This research, then, can be considered an attempt at a momentary documentation of the process of the Kuna creating a standard orthography, but more importantly, an attempt to understand some of the cultural factors that influence and are influenced by this movement of Kuna intellectuals.

My Role in the Research

This thesis has emerged from my interaction with Kuna writers and language scholars over the past two years as well as my observation of the first two Kuna language seminars. I take an active supportive role regarding issues involving Kuna language and literature and pursue dialogue with Kuna colleagues, so that academic work such as this can be developed collaboratively. I take an active position in supporting Kuna language rights, but a non-interventionist, non-prescriptivist stance regarding linguistic issues and internal Kuna language politics. In addition, my involvement in Kuna language politics as a non-Kuna is heavily restricted by the Kuna, and is constantly being negotiated, especially in new social spaces, such as the Kuna language seminars. My participation in the seminars is therefore appropriately restricted to observation, while my support is seen as manifesting itself in other ways, such as this thesis.
In laying out the arguments presented in this work, it is obvious that I have had a strong hand in representing the speakers and their words by choosing which pieces of discourse to present and how to present them in relation to my analysis. This is an issue that every linguist and ethnographer must face, and although there is no easy solution to the power of representation in writing, I find that for me, ethics and research come together when the community in question is involved. A preliminary draft of this work has already been translated into Spanish and given to various people involved with the Kuna language seminars in order to receive critical comments. Through stimulating such dialogue, and continually being aware of how representation functions in my work, I hope to produce research that is both aligned with the community and scientifically informative.

In order to make this research available and accessible to the Kuna community, I will translate the final thesis into Spanish and in a sikwi-like tradition, will ask a Kuna colleague to recap the academic writing of this thesis into Kuna. In addition, while conducting the interviews for this research, my friend and colleague Iguaniginape Kungiler had the idea of creating a short video from some of the interviews for community education purposes, which would make the research even more accessible. The interviewees were therefore asked if they would also agree to having parts of their interview be incorporated into a short video, which we will begin working on in the summer of 2005.

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4 A sikwi, literally meaning “bird,” is a person who serves as a messenger or an interpreter.
After toying with the presentation of discourse for this work, I opted for entire paragraphs of single-language discourse followed by a paragraph of translation. Original spoken discourse is presented in bold-face type, original written discourse is presented in normal type, and the translation always appears in italics. In this way, I hope to facilitate the reading of this paper by non-Kuna speakers while still maintaining a representation of the original discourse.

In the same ways that language and culture are dynamic, this research is not intended to stagnate after being published as a Master’s thesis, but rather to serve as documentation of the process of standardizing an orthography for the Kuna language, which will hopefully continue to be elaborated on by myself and others. Indeed, at the time this work is published it will most likely be out-of-date. But through providing a Spanish translation and a summarized Kuna translation to interested members of the Kuna community, I hope to receive commentary and criticisms that will help this work better reflect the processes that are currently occurring, while simultaneously contributing to and continuing a dialogue on these matters in the Kuna community.

My presence as a young white female graduate student from Texas, even in the role of an observer, is an important factor on many levels. There have been other foreign researchers involved with the Kuna, some of whom have been women (most of whom have been men), but these social spaces are constantly being negotiated. My identity here is obviously not extractable from my personal interactions or my research. Instead, it forms an integral part of how I approach this research and how others approach me, allowing me to obtain certain insights on occasion and restricting me from them on
others. Mindful of the fact that I am stating the obvious, I nonetheless wish to make my presence in this research a conscious factor.

A Realistic Rendering

In writing about the Kuna language seminars in terms of power, structure and hegemony, it is tempting to paint a picture of a unified and coherent movement. But in discussing hegemony and counter-hegemony, we are reminded by Raymond Williams:

we are better able to see this, alongside more general recognition of the insistent pressures and limits of the hegemonic, if we develop modes of analysis which instead of reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions, are capable of discerning, in good faith, the finite but significant openness of many actual initiatives and contributions (1977:114).

While I do not wish to detract from the significance of their striving for literary and educational justice, I find it useful to explore the areas where there is dissonance within the movement or research lacking on my behalf in order to avoid reducing this movement to a “fixed position.”

First, the participants in the Kuna seminar are overwhelmingly male urban intellectuals. While some of the participants grew up in Kuna Yala, or travel often between Panama City and Kuna Yala, the majority of the participants principally live in urban areas and have received a higher education in Panama City. As the seminars and the participants are both based in Panama City, this removes the context of the seminars geographically from Kuna Yala. As Garzon notes of many Mayan intellectuals in Guatemala, "Even when an educational system had an assimilationist ideology, the system may inadvertently create the conditions for the emergence of a group of
indigenous professionals, some of whom do not support a shift to the dominant language" (1998: 32). It is a similar group of Kuna intellectuals that is utilizing new technologies to construct a new educational system that takes from their experience with the assimilationist state school system in order to transform it into a new Kuna-based educational approach.

As with any group of people organizing around an idea, there are real people and real actions that embody the idea of an organization. While there is no formal list of names of those who participate in Kuna language issues, there still exists a recognized group of individuals who work in this area. While there are some important figures who are recognized as linguists and specialists, the larger picture is one of Kuna intellectuals interested in language assembling for a common goal.

A second notable feature of the seminars is the fact that is unquestionably male-dominated. While there are a few females that help organize the seminars, and others that are involved through their positions as teachers, this movement is not an area in which many women are participating. My research does not address the issue of gender as related to the Kuna language seminars, and while I can offer some basic observations in regards to this matter, it remains to be analyzed in greater detail.

One possible and partial explanation for the unequal numbers of men and women participating in this movement is the fact that in Kuna society, politics are part of the male division of labor. While women organize politically in other ways, for example through mola cooperatives (see Salvador 1997, Tice 1995), women do not participate in intellectual politics, and certainly not in any sort of co-ed sense. In Panamanian latino
society, men also dominate areas such as politics and education. Whether either or both of these gender ideologies are being employed is very difficult to assess, especially considering the exposure to multiple cultural ideologies that urban indigenous intellectuals experience. Perhaps a more productive way of understanding Kuna women’s role in the urban intelligentsia is through a model of political economy, which would show how and why Kuna women and men are obtaining different educations in the urban context. Such an approach certainly deserves further exploration.

**Kuna or Guna, Tule or Dule?**

Whether one should write *kuna* or *guna* is an orthographic debate, but there is another underlying question here, which is whether one should write *kuna* or *guna* at all in reference to the Kuna people. The term *kuna* is a word that currently means “the last level of the earth,” which is the level on which the people live. It may etymologically be traced to *olokungilele*, which means “the golden [special] people” in ritual Kuna language. The popular term for “person” or “people” in the Kuna language, however, is *tule* or *dule*, both pronounced [dule]. This has become an issue for many Kunas who write in Spanish, many of whom have chosen to write *dule* or *tule*, *kuna* or *guna*, and a number of whom are employing both terms in their writing and speech in Spanish. In written and spoken Kuna, it is very difficult to employ *kuna* or *guna*, because the word is not used in everyday discourse (it is unknown if it ever has), and the term *tule* or *dule* is used to refer to the Kuna people. The same is true of the Kuna language, which can only
be referred to as tulegaya or dulegaya in everyday Kuna, but which may be referred to as idioma kuna “the Kuna language” in Spanish.

The term kuna, often written as cuna in the past, has been used for many centuries in written documents by foreigners. It is still the term that is used and recognized internationally to refer to both the Kuna community and the Kuna language. Even writings from the past century use the term cuna, such as A.L. Pinart’s 1890 Vocabulario Castellano-Cuna (Holmer 1947). Since the 1980s, kuna with a “k” has been used as the popular spelling, which better reflects the phonology of the Kuna language than the Spanish convention of “c” and is probably based on the International Phonetic Alphabet. Most of these documents, however, have been written by non-Kunas in languages other than Kuna. Most Kuna institutions utilize the term kuna, such as the Congreso General Kuna and the Congreso de la Cultura Kuna, although these titles are also in Spanish.

In writing this thesis, I found that I have to take a very political position in using either kuna or dule to refer to both the Kuna people and the Kuna language. On the one hand, dule may seem to be a more progressive term, especially because many Kuna authors advocate the use of dule and use it in their own writing. On the other hand, the term kuna is indeed a Kuna term (although its etymological significance is not fully known), and is recognized internationally. My first impulse was to continue with what seems to be a progressive organic trend of using dule, although such use of dule instead of kuna has not been addressed by the Congreso General Kuna. A nondiscriminate use of dule, may however work to undermine much of the work that has been done by the Kuna
(through disassociation with the term kuna), as opposed to playing the supportive role that was intended. If, however, the use of dule is indeed a practice that the Kuna community is in the process of mandating, then my use of kuna in an academic paper is further inscribing this historical trend that some in the Kuna community are working so hard to change. This paper has, however, been written in a language other than Kuna, under which circumstances then it would be acceptable and expected by the literary world to use the English language representation just as it is expected to capitalized the names of languages in English, and not in Spanish, for example. All of these issues have been thought through, and in the end, it seems as if there is no clear solution. It is in this tangled web of language and politics that I have therefore decided to leave this thesis, using mainly kuna because it is widely recognized and Kuna institutions use kuna in their titles (such as the Congreso General Kuna), and using dule on the occasion that other authors cited are using this term. I have chosen kuna over guna because it is the recognized name of the Kuna people at a national and international level and I have chose dule over tule because it reflects the emergent standard orthography. These issues will most likely change in the future, and my writing will hopefully develop with the social and political goals of the Kuna.

Comparative Case Studies

Emiskuagua soglenadake aa, UNESCO soged, yeer gayamala, anmargadbi suli, dulegadbi suli, también comunidades locales, e gaya nikna namarmogad, surgumaye, deşokwa an, ehh... abelemosundo, anmar sapingana, anmar sordamala nerga gunanaidi, na emar ambikued, ambikuedsundo.
Now they’re saying, UNESCO says, that many languages, not only our own, not only Kuna, but local communities as well, that have their own languages, are disappearing, and because of that, we need our youth, our colleagues that are specialists, to unite together, and to organize.5


The problems of creating an orthography for an indigenous language are not few, and have been waded through by many indigenous communities in the process of developing a writing system. While basic linguistic issues fuel many of the debates, as well as how accessible and compatible a writing system is with today’s technologies, there are also larger social and political issues at hand. As the development of a standard orthography for Kuna is not the first time, and certainly not the last time, that an indigenous group has dealt with these issues, I present a few case studies here in order to be able to draw some basic lines of comparison and point out areas where this research may shed potential light on issues for future studies.

Orthographic variation in Yucatec Maya is explored by Michal Brody (2004), who unpacks how and why Yucatec Maya has been written in the past and then documents how orthography and literacy are currently being developed in the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. In addition to exploring the specific written variations in Yucatec Maya, Brody points to three factors that are affecting the writers and readers of Yucatec Maya. First, Brody points to the Spanish language “not only as a body of norms and conventions but also as symbol and practices of power” (2004:87). Brody then points out

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5 The Kuna Congress is still developing an orthography, hence there is no set of rules to guide the writing systems used for Kuna in this paper. In deciding this issue, for my own transcriptions I used the as-of-yet unofficial Kuna orthography that is currently emerging from the Kuna language seminars, to be revised when the Kuna Congress comes to a decision. Published writing in Kuna is left as published.
that a lack of economic resources for social projects, such as Yucatec Maya written materials, and a general lack of appreciation for literacy in Yucatec Maya are also obstacles in developing Yucatec Maya literary practices (2004:87). In regards to variation in the writing of Yucatec Maya, Brody discusses how linguistic prescriptivism is important for many Yucatec Maya speakers, but that variation is still prevalent and does not decrease their ability to read Yucatec Maya. Although these hurdles are not small and are the result of many underlying social factors, there is more published literature in Yucatec Maya than ever and its promoters remain optimistic.

The use of the Sequoyah’s syllabary in Eastern Cherokee is documented by Margaret Bender in *Signs of Cherokee Culture*. She describes how the syllabary, developed by Sequoyah in 1821, has become symbolic, indexical and iconic for the Eastern Cherokee community, but also manifests itself materially (Bender 2002). The syllabary appears in classrooms, churches and local places of business as a semiotic marker of Cherokee culture and plays an interesting role in the tourist sector as a marker of identity. Sequoyah’s syllabary as described by Bender is reminiscent of Kuna picture-writing in the ways that it holds semiotic importance for the community, regardless of how often it is actually employed in daily life. Sequoyah’s syllabary also parallels the new emergent Kuna orthography in many ways. As Bender notes of the syllabary:

> because the syllabary has been such a potent and polyvalent symbol since its invention, because it has been taken to represent both adoption and rejection of the dominant society’s values and practices, and because it plays an important part in Eastern Cherokee self-representation through tourism and in other contexts, the syllabary is an excellent vehicle for the study of relationships between this community and the mainstream U.S. culture (2002:1).
Similarly, the emergent Kuna orthography is being designed as a system for the Kuna by the Kuna, which both adopts some of the premises of the dominant literary practices and simultaneously rejects them by using a morphophonologically-based writing system that is difficult for non-speakers to comprehend.

An case study that holds important theoretical implications for orthography studies is the history of Rechtsschreibung in German. In 1901, 1944 and most recently in 1996, German dictionary writers implemented changes to the German writing system. Some of the changes involved in Rechtsschreibung were, for example, the use of β only after a long vowel or a diphthong coupled with the use of ss after short vowels, the retention of letters in compound words such as Schiffahrt “boat ride, passage,” and changes in which words would be written together or apart and with or without initial capitalization. Indeed, many changes in orthography were implemented for German, the national language of Germany and Austria, which is spoken by approximately 120 million people, after centuries of having a written tradition. The implications of Rechtsschreibung are many for those who are developing or have recently developed a standard orthography. Although writing systems tend to be more retentive than dynamic, they are indeed given importance and substance through social processes, and are therefore subject to change through these same social processes. The most important point here, however, is that these changes are done by and for speakers of the language (although this is questionable in the case of German Rechtsschreibung). The development of a standard orthography in the case of the Kuna is a matter of self-determination, as will be any changes made to their writing system in the future.
Models of indigenous literacy and education are not ready-made templates that can be superimposed on other communities. They do, however, provide others with inspiration, help form alliances, and offer experience for communities that wish to carve out similar paths. Networking with others and sharing ideas is a key experience in this process, as reflected on by Kungiler in a letter addressed to Kuna colleagues after meeting with indigenous linguists:

Yes, as it seems, I was talking to Chatinos (indigenous people) about how they were establishing how their language should be written. Then one colleague from Guatemala said, “In my community we have been working on writing our language for a long time and we are going to establish rules for writing.” Thinking about who should develop a writing system, I believe it is the people of the community that speak the language who are the ones who will develop it well. In thinking about Kuna Yala, I would like to say something that I said 5 months ago [in a seminar]: “Who should be the ones to develop our writing system?” This is what I stood up and said to our community, to those who write in Kuna. The educated people are the first to set the example, may they be linguists, and I believe that these are the people who will pave the road ahead (2004).

Examples of other indigenous peoples establishing writing systems, bilingual education programs and new forms of literacy are not just case studies meant solely for an objective comparison. They provide inspiration through a common struggle and common goal.
Although the way that indigenous peoples identify and organize around a shared history of colonization and oppression is obviously a very intimate and intense experience that this thesis does not pretend to approximate, there will hopefully be other parallels on which communities undergoing a similar process will be able to draw.
CHAPTER 2
Contesting Oral and Written Traditions

Up until this point, the concept of “literacy” has been used unassumingly, based on presupposed understandings of both the author and the reader. What is “literacy”? What has “literacy” been made to be? There are many constructions and possible constructions of literacy. I outline here my own underlying assumptions of “literacy” as I understand them to be constructed in Western society and education systems, then deconstruct them, and end with some other possible constructions for “literacy.”

One of the first dimensions of this presupposed understanding of literacy is that of validity in relation to orality. In literate societies, oral sources are generally considered questionable and invalid. On a daily level this permeates our lives through concepts such as “hearsay” and “word of mouth,” which are questionable oral sources. Written sources are less likely to be refuted or questioned, and concepts such as “published” and “in writing” are used to substantiate ideas. This understanding of validity in relation to discourse is one that juxtaposes concepts: the spoken word and the written word; oral narratives and written histories; orality and literacy. Literacy then, is valued only through the devaluing of orality, which then becomes synonymous with illiteracy. As noted by Collins and Blot “in the modern era there is a negative sense in which "orality" equates with "illiteracy" (2003:89). This then leads to the juxtaposition of “literacy” and

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6 Oral narratives are now often called “oral histories,” a term which serves to call the divide between written and spoken histories into question.
“illiteracy/orality.” Such a dichotomy has led to the denigration of illiteracy through the
veneration of literacy:

If we view literacy/illiteracy as complementary terms, in de Certeau's sense, then
literacy has been equated with order, progress, and social potential, and illiteracy
with disorder, backwardness, and futility; literacy has been specified in terms of
years of education or specific test scores, illiteracy has been everything else, and
rarely studied in its own right (Collins and Blot 2003:93).

Orality, illiteracy and literacy, and all variants of them are derived from a basic human
understanding of our own language abilities, yet each has been socially constructed to
create hierarchical difference since the beginning of colonization in the Americas in 1492
and before.

Another dimension of a presupposed understanding of literacy, derived from the
perspective of dominant literate societies, is one in relation to reading and writing,
basically understood as the ability to read the newspaper and write one’s name. In terms
of a reading and writing-centered approach to literacy, these skills can best be understood
on a continuum, but are often only positioned in opposition to illiteracy. This reading and
writing-centered approach to literacy is the one used by census-takers to evaluate the
literacy rate of a population, which usually correlates with other factors in deciding a
country’s first or third world status. When thinking of this understanding of literacy, it is
important to consider how being able to read and write has historically been a marker of
social and economic status for languages with a long written tradition. Brody reminds us
of how prescriptivism functions in making social differentiations:

“The harder it is to acquire proficiency in the written code, the fewer the number
of people who will achieve mastery of it, enhancing the social capital of those
who do, and by extension, making the language more scarce and hence, more
valuable” (2004:268).
Through linguistic prescriptivism those who establish the rules are ensuring that the rules for literacy practices remain under their jurisdiction, which helps to maintain social distinctions if popular literacy gains hold. Such valorization of literacy through prescriptivism can also prohibit orthographic change.

Yet another dimension of this presupposed understanding of literacy is that of the high literature approach to literacy. Societies that claim to have revered writers and literary works of true brilliance are touted as being more “civilized.” Writers such as Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe are symbols of intelligent, talented and sophisticated national languages and cultures. This high literature approach to literacy not only presupposes a universal appreciation of “true” literature, but also successfully excludes other interpretations and ways of appreciation of other great literary works. As Joel Sherzer has noted of the Kuna, “No Kuna verbal artist has won the Nobel prize. And none will” (1990:13). Some in academia, however, such as Jack Goody (1987, 2000) and Walter Ong (1982), have claimed that written traditions are evidence of cultural complexity and intellectual superiority. Goody and Ong both analyze the oral and written word in metaphysical and psychological terms, attempting to create a clean philosophical break between orality and literacy. This divisive approach to language and its practice has been shown to be specious by Anthony Webster (2004), through evidence present in the works of Sherzer (1990), Briggs (1988) and Bakhtin (1981). My larger point, however, has less to do with Goody and Ong’s debates on the metaphysical properties of written and spoken words and everything to do with the social valorization of the published word and the written tradition, which Goody and Ong have helped to support.
Per the rhetoric of individualism, literacy is something obtainable through education and self-dedication. Being literate is a personal matter, linked with feelings of self-worth and adequacy. But on a larger level, as Sonja Lanehart describes in her book on black women’s understanding of literacy in the United States,

…literacy is more than self-fulfillment. Literacy is also social and political and economic in nature. Society wields its literacy more powerfully than does the individual, and a fight against the literate bureaucracy is more than, say, a fight against City Hall. Literacy neither imprisons nor frees people; it merely embodies the enormous complexities of how and why some people live comfortably and others do not (Lanehart 2002:8).

Literacy is a construction indicative of social, political and economic factors that simultaneously works to shape them, yet it is internalized and made personal to the point that the burden of literacy rests on the shoulders of the individual.

These underlying assumptions of literacy are powerful and work in powerful ways. In *The Violence of Literacy*, J. Elspeth Stuckey notes that

It is possible that a system of ownership built on ownership of literacy is more violent than past systems, however. Though it seems difficult to surpass the violence of systems of indenture, slavery, industrialism, and the exploitation of immigrant or migrant labor, literacy provides a unique bottleneck. Unlike a gun, whose least precedent is literacy, literacy legitimates itself. To be literate is to be legitimate; not to be literate is to beg the question. The question is whether or not literacy possesses powers unlike other technologies. The only way to address the question is to be literate (1991:18).

Literacy is self-legitimating and permeated by power, empowering the literate while simultaneously divesting the illiterate of their authority. The Kuna, along with other oral societies, have been subjected to this process since the beginning of colonialism and have responded by becoming literate in the dominant language, both of their own accord as a mode of self-defense and through force. As Green notes,
Se ha dicho que las lenguas son ágrafas, es decir que no tienen escrituras, porque no están dentro del sistema de la escritura alfabética. Esa forma de pensar viene desde una sola mirada de la otra cultura, que siempre ha visto que los conocimientos de las culturas indígenas son inferiores y por lo tanto los conocimientos de ellos son los que valen y son ciencias.

*It has been said these languages are grapheme-less, in other words they do not have orthographies, because they are not part of the system of alphabetic writing. This way of thinking only comes from the perspective of the other culture, which has always looked upon the knowledge of indigenous cultures as inferior, and because of this their own knowledge is what counts and is science* (Green 2002).

Green shows how Western culture has managed to discredit other epistemologies based on the fact that they do not have an alphabetic writing system. Science and knowledge have been constructed around Western epistemologies. Western ways of knowing delineate what is and is not science, discarding everything that is derived from non-Western epistemologies as inferior and unscientific. Alphabetic writing systems are seen as part of this Western-science-is-the-only-valid-science world view, whereas any society with a iconographic, hieroglyphic, pictoral, or any other kind of writing system is viewed as inferior based on a lack of phonological analysis in the writing system.

The standardization of a language, in one sense, is an extension of Western epistemologies, which find fault with irregularities and are invested in establishing one and only one scientifically, and hence culturally, “correct” system. Language academies of certain national languages such as Spanish or English, inhabited by prescriptive linguists and grammarians, are evidence of this system of standardization and its relative importance. Standardization, the search for a unified and conformed system, often creates problems, both linguistic and cultural.
As Webster notes of the development of standard writing practices among Native North American languages:

...the act of language preservation - the act of writing words down - creates a stratification within languages. It creates a "standard" and a "non-standard" and in so doing, by writing the forms down, it lends legitimacy to one group of people and excludes or marginalizes another group or groups. Linguists are thus, through artfacting the word, complicit in the act of prescription that so many deny. (Webster 2004:141).

Standardization, however, can also be utilized in other ways by indigenous groups for their own purposes. England (1996) explores the way in which standardized writing practices have become an integral part of language revitalization efforts in Guatemala among speakers of Mayan languages. As speakers of many different Mayan languages and dialects seek to form a coherent Maya movement, they have found that standardized writing systems help communication between speakers of different languages and increase pan-Maya sentiments.

The standardization of the Kuna language is problematic in some ways, including opening up the potential marginalization of those Kuna who are not literate in the standard writing practices. The larger picture, however, reveals that the Kuna language has already undergone the process of being delegitimized, excluded, and marginalized based on the construction of the Spanish language as the only legitimate “standard,” leaving Kuna and all other indigenous languages in Panama as “non-standard” dialects. In this context, the standardization of the Kuna language on behalf of the Kuna Congresses is a counter-hegemonic move to reclaim the power that was usurped from Kuna and other unwritten languages with the hegemonic implementation of writing.
New Literacies

Literacy can be conceptualized and constructed in many ways that can contribute to, justify, subvert or challenge the system established by the dominant society. When examining literacy and its relationship to society, Carrington notes that

As social artifacts, literate practices serve social functions: The literacies of all individuals and the groups to which they are affiliated are practical and socially logical responses to historical social conditions. Their arbitrariness, silences, and constructions of social difference are indicative of the symbolic violence and underlying power relationships characteristic of human societies. No set of literate practices are inherently superior; perceptions of superiority are socially constructed and allocated, the outcome of ongoing symbolic struggles between groups competing to guarantee the validity of their reality (Carrington in Freebold, ed. 2001:272).

By examining emerging Kuna orthography and literary practices we can see how its “arbitrariness, silences, and constructions of social difference” are indeed located within and constitutive of these social constructs. By examining the development of a standard orthography of *dulegaya*, the Kuna language, by the Kunas within the nation state of Panama, we can see how the Kuna are challenging Spanish and English as the official languages of Panama and transforming the preconceived notions of orthography and literacy. I argue that the process of standardizing Kuna orthography challenges these systems of power and works to transform the system in which they are embedded.

Recent work by Kuna scholars and activists is questioning the prestige associated with the colonizer’s language and literature by producing Kuna literature in the Kuna language. Renowned Kuna poets such as Arysteides Turpana Iguaiagiginya, Aiban Wagua and Aiban Velarde use both Kuna and Spanish in their poetry to explore political and social themes of the past and present. Bilingual education specialist Reuter Orán has
produced Kuna language texts for primary education in an effort to counter the predominant Spanish-only education system. Others such as Inakeliginia (Carlos López), Abadio Green, Anelio López and Iguaniginape Kungiler, along with countless others, have contributed to this growing body of Kuna literature. Artist Ologuagdi is also unforgottably present in many of these books; his images portray Kuna life, which often incorporate geometric shapes, and add another dimension to the accompanying text.

These Kuna intellectuals are working within a Kuna construction of literacy. The Kuna construction of literacy is different from that of the hegemonic Western construction of literacy in that written discourse is not self-legitimating. As Kuna linguist Reuter Orán explains:

An be soge, igala, nue be ito. Nue be itodibe a, basuli yob dakle, dakledabali, igala. Sunna be egisdo, babgan degite an neg sesgua garda suli sedsogeye? Deg selesdo asig be itodibe. Sunna be sog르ando, gwen garda basur itoleye, gwen garda wissuli, dakargua garda an abesuli .... Ibmär abe surmodo dakargua, deg garda guar nikateye, bega ibmar naid. Bega sunmakedeye. Wedi inikibardo, emiskin, aaga an be sogeteye, ibgwen a, la escritura es como un complemento.

I’m going to tell you why, listen well. If you listen well, all of this will seem unimportant, but you will see why. You can ask yourself, how were our grandfathers able to govern without knowing how to write? That’s how they governed for a long time. You can also say that literacy isn’t that important, some people are illiterate, so they say that literacy isn’t necessary... We don’t need materials and texts if we already have them in our environment. They speak to you. That’s how it should be, and now, that’s why I tell you, that writing is like a complement.

Orán deconstructs arguments for Western styles of literacy by showing that not only have Kunas effectively managed without knowing how to read or write Spanish, they have their own knowledge systems that are found in Kuna culture. Orán shows how writing
Kuna is supplemental to and not constitutive of Kuna knowledge systems, which exist apart from Western epistemologies and the conceptions of literacy.

The literacy emerging from groups such as the Kuna not only holds different meanings, but is a different literacy stemming from different epistemologies and methodologies. Reuter Orán explains how these literacies are derived from Kuna oral history and are imbued with important Kuna cultural information, saying:

*Ar garda sur bela, an Ibeorgun wisi an danikid, garda sur bela, dakargua babgan ibmar mamai sedanikid, namakarbi saklamar sedanikid, anmarse owarmasad, inamar anmarse owarmasad, daksa. Deg sokudina, we anmar ibmala, babgan ibmala, anmar narmas dibe, anmar geb daidapoed, daksa, anmar geb daidapodo, anmar iisaoed, anmar naskuoid we, degsoku an bes anmala yoo a, sued, a, nagase, anmar bin dagnaguele igi anmar gudapoe. Garda we ibmala, anmar aminaidi, an be soged, e, e, aade gardaba an neg wisgudoed. Gardaba an ibmar wis, an neg sed wisgueule ne itogedi, eskwela burwigana dogdoedi, dukin dakar ibmari amidogua...*

*Without having had these texts, I know the origin of Ibeorgun, without having had these texts our grandfathers have preserved this knowledge, the saklas have conserved this orally, and it has been passed down to us, they’ve passed down medicines to us. And because of this, all of our knowledge from our grandparents, if we write it down, then we’ll see, you see, we will see what we should do, we will keep moving forward, that’s why we haven’t understood everything completely yet, we’re still experimenting to see which road we should take. These texts that we’re collecting, I’m telling you, we will understand all this through the text. If I learn this from a text, I will know how to govern well, the children that are going to school will discover their origins...*

Orán describes the origins of the oral texts that are now being made into written texts for cultural and educational purposes, showing how cultural heritage is an important aspect of language ideologies for the Kuna. Understanding Kuna writing and literature as necessarily being related to oral Kuna history is a manifestation of part of the language
ideology that associates current language and writing practices with Kuna culture and history.

**Translating Verbal Art**

In looking at how and why the Kuna are using writing systems and writing, I wish to highlight the fact that there are countless ways, shapes and forms that this occurs, and that as with all literary systems, this will continually change. I will not attempt to delimit the ways that writing is and is not being used by the Kuna. While this is certainly a topic of interest in linguistic anthropology, it is also an extremely delicate one in the context of the Kuna *pueblo*. While much of the discourse here refers to Kuna historical, cultural and spiritual information being written in Kuna, the matter is not quite so simple. While some of this information is deemed appropriate for writing, some of it is not. This is indeed a common occurrence in many cultures for culturally specific reasons. There are, however, two theoretical points that I will explore in relation to this.

First of all, in relation to verbal art, I would like to take a closer look at the idea of linguistic, cultural and aesthetic intranslatability of oral literature to written literature. Transcribing, translating and representing verbal art is extremely difficult in many respects, even, some would claim, impossible. Webster critiques a similar viewpoint held by Scollon and Scollon, whom he likens to literature elitists Goody and Ong (2004:133). Regarding Athabaskan literacy, Scollon and Scollon state, "an Athabaskan cannot, as an Athabaskan, write easily about Athabaskan things" (1981:53). There are two parts to this statement that I want to analyze more in-depth. First, the authors are claiming that
Athabaskans cannot write about their ethnic identity. Webster is “dubious of such claims,” and I must agree. Would it be possible for an Athabaskan, as an Athabaskan, to write something not Athabaskan? Secondly, the authors are noting that Athabaskan spoken discourse is very different from the patterns that are available in written discourse structure. This, however, is true of any language, and many societies with rich verbal art still translate verbal texts to written texts, recognizing full and well that it is just an abstract representation of a human experience. As I quoted Reuter Orán before, “la escritura es como un complemento,” “writing is like a complement” (2004). In addition, such claims that oral texts are in many ways incompatible with written texts run the risk of folklorizing verbal art, making it an immutable and frozen form that cannot be used by its artists in other ways.

Many attempts have been made by those who study verbal art to represent aspects of performance in their transcription, such as loudness, pitch and quality of voice. Both Tedlock (1983) and Sherzer (1990) have called for such transcriptions, which is now a practice observed by many. The practice of transcribing texts in numbered lines as one does in poetry has become a preferred way to represent some forms of verbal art (Sherzer 1990). Reading a written transcript is a different experience from the performance of verbal art. Verbal art and a transcript of verbal art are never going to be the same thing, but at least through efforts such as the notation of performance in text, one can approximate the other even more.

Different from an inability to transcribe is that of a refusal to transcribe. Literacy practices are constructed in different societies to govern not only how writing will be
used, but how it will not be used. Writing is a way to share knowledge, and some knowledges are not to be shared. Many speakers of Navajo and Apache, for example, feel that their language should only be written and documented for their own people to learn and study (Webster 2004:142). The Cochiti Pueblo, because of complicated religious reasons, does not want Keres (Cochiti) to be written at all for educational purposes, but still uses Keres for oral language instruction in schools (Benjamin, Pecos and Ramiro 1999 in Webster 2004:124). In most cultures there are sacred or taboo verbal practices that are not supposed to be spoken outside of specific contexts, much less written.

There are, however, possible relationships between the inability and the refusal to translate verbal practices into written form. The inability to replicate an oral text in writing can indeed be grounds for permitting a certain text to be transcribed and represented as a written text. This has been an important for the Kuna, as most Kuna verbal art can never be truly translated into writing. A curing chant, when transcribed, translated and represented, even with annotated aspects of performance, will never possess curing properties. A student could hypothetically obtain such a document and through study and practice master the performance of the chant, but he would still lack the burba, which is the spiritual understanding, without which it would be useless (Kungiler 2005). Written transcriptions of curing chants and other sacred verbal practices are only abstract representations for the Kuna, and many can therefore be transcribed and translated because they are not authentic reproductions. Not all igar-knowers concur on what may and may not be written down, so that there are individuals and island
communities which may not choose to allow written documentation of some or all of the iger they know.

**Conclusions**

Writing in Kuna and writing “oral literature” is a practice that expands beyond transcribing and translating verbal art. There are many new domains for writing that are being utilized and created by the Kuna for many different reasons, although the documentation of verbal art in written form is also one of them. Every society has its own way to culturally understand texts, practice and performance, which shapes the ways that it uses and does not use writing.

The Koskunkalu center, a division of the *Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna* (Congress of the Kuna Culture), for example, is currently participating in a oral history and knowledge documentation project in collaboration with the Archive of Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas at Austin. The current *Sakla Dummad*, Eriberto González, of the *Congreso General de la Cultura Kuna* in collaboration with University of Texas Anthropology Professor Joel Sherzer has made an agreement that entails members of Koskunkalu recording, transcribing and translating Kuna verbal history and knowledge for their own documentation, to be archived on AILLA under terms established by the *Congreso*. This project is interesting in that it was conceived of and established by the Kuna *Congreso* in a way that allows them to utilize high-quality archiving resources on their own terms. As all of the recording, transcribing
and translating is being done by members of the community, they can ensure that their own goals and standards are being met in appropriate ways.
CHAPTER 3

The Case of the Kuna

In 2004 the Kuna Congress (Congreso General Kuna) began hosting a year-long series of seminars in order to establish a standard orthography and sort out grammatical issues. The first of these seminars was held at a small hotel in Panama City on the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of June. The main coordinator of the seminars is Dr. Aiban Wagua, who moderates the seminar and simultaneously contributes his linguistic knowledge to the debates. The first seminar included approximately thirty specially invited Kuna linguists, teachers, organizers and activists, with individual floor time allotted to the main orthographic specialists, Lino Smith, Reuter Orán and Abadio Green. The saklagan, Kuna spiritual and political leaders, also attended daily and contributed to the conference by performing the opening and closing everyday. The Sakla Dummad Gilberto Arias, and the second Sakla Harmodio Vivar, are highly regarded leaders who not only participate in the conference, but are called upon as authorities in Kuna oral history and tradition.

One month after the first seminar, the second seminar was scheduled with the same group in order to confirm decisions reached at the first seminar. The second seminar also included a special teacher session, which was dedicated to dialoguing with all Kuna school teachers in Panama. This teacher session enabled communication between the more linguistically oriented group and the educators who are already employing some form of Kuna-oriented education. Approximately fifty elementary and
middle school teachers from Kuna Yala traveled to Panama City to participate in the seminars. These seminars are still in progress and will conclude in 2005.

While a standard orthography does offer advantages to a community of speakers, the question arises as to whether the development of orthography is more theoretically rather than practically based. While any written form of Kuna is currently accepted by the general public, there is a popular misconception that the Kuna language cannot even be written. It is here where both an official standard orthography and published materials in Kuna both come together in challenging the oral and written tradition divide. Both theory and practical use can work together while at the same time questioning each other, resulting in a dialectic that works to produce a movement of Kuna language, literature and theory. Such a relationship can be witnessed in the seminars themselves, where linguists, teachers, writers and activists come together to arrive at both a theoretically sound and practically useful solution.

As the Kuna work towards establishing a standard orthography and other realms of writing where this orthography can be employed, it is important to consider the context from which this movement is arising. The colonial/post-colonial relationship that the Kuna have had with the colonizers over the past five hundred years is still a present and determining factor in the development of Kuna literacy practices. This colonial relationship to reading and writing began with the invasion by the colonizers and the imposed dichotomies between the colonizers and colonized, the literate and the illiterate. As Collins and Blot describe,

The framing of natives in writing as colonial subjects begins with justifying the writing process itself as imbued with the power to record history accurately and
with complete disinterest, and, simultaneously, with the claim, and demonstration in writing, that since natives had no writing they had no way to accurately record the past. Without writing, native history is delegitimated, native history is elided. (2003:126).

The process of creating Kuna literacies is one that responds to this history of deligitimization and works to challenge and subvert it. This chapter is dedicated to exploring the ways in which the Kuna have identified the development of Kuna literacy in relation to their own history and culture. There are many ways in which these topics can be discussed, and although they are by no means neatly separate matters, I have addressed them independently here for clarity.

**The Kuna and the Nation State**

Part of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is that of the nation state to the new citizens that it claims. The Kuna have had a unique relationship with the Panamanian State in terms of their success in maintaining gubernatorial autonomy through the Kuna revolution of 1925 and establishing an independent territory, which is now known as the Kuna Yala. The struggle for self-determination, however, did not end with the creation of Kuna Yala and the relationship of the Kuna to the Panamanian State continues to be a contentious issue. Discourses of autonomy are recurring in much of the literature published by Kunas in both Kuna and Spanish, emphasizing the importance of the Kuna revolution in particular.

An example of such discourse appears in a book of short stories in Kuna, *Yar Burba, Anmar Burba; Espíritu de la Tierra, Nuestro Espíritu* (Spirit of the Earth, Our Spirit), compiled and written by Iguaniginape Kungiler. As *Yar Burba, Anmar Burba* is
one of the few books of Kuna oral literature published in Kuna, various considerations had to be taken into account by the author, many of which are dissected in the forward written by Arysteides Turpana Iguaigliginya. Turpana has written a forward that not only addresses the content of the book, but explores the sociocultural and political context from which it arises. Turpana explains first in Kuna, and then in Spanish in the second half of the book, how this book speaks to the national cultural rhetoric of the Panamanian State:


Until now the Panamanian National State has predicated that “the Indian should integrate himself” (as if an independent human being were not an ontological category). That is why this book illuminates and at the same time brings under judgment the tenuous homogeneity of the Panamanian culture: the true Panamanian culture is not homogenous, on the contrary, it is heterogeneous, hence our National State is multicultural, multilingual and multinational. We must understand once and for all that integration does not mean assimilation, it is rather contribution and participation: this is the most important message we receive from Yar Burba, Anmar Burba: Espíritu de la Tierra, Nuestro Espíritu. (Turpana in Kungiler 1996:67)

Turpana’s framing of Iguaniginape Kungiler’s book shows how Kuna literature arising from Kuna experience published in the Kuna language challenges the Panamanian State and notions of Western superiority propagated through discourse of a homogeneous national culture. In this context, Kuna literature is infinitely more than just writing in a

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7 This translation has been taken from the original Spanish language text.
different language, it is imbued with a political message that objects to the centuries of written Spanish tradition imposed on indigenous cultures. This forward is a testimony to the social orderings of the dominant society that do not acknowledge Kuna culture and writing as valid. This forward discloses how these structures of power in discourse have been formulated and then serves as a counter-discourse against the dominant power structure.

Discourses of autonomy and self-determination also appear throughout Kuna literature. Oran’s book *Ue an ai 2*, a primer for grade school children, is composed of short stories and poems, all depicting aspects of Kuna culture through discourse. One of the compositions, shown in Figure 7, addresses young readers and informs them that their land was not given to them, but was fought for by their ancestors. A translation follows below.
Figure 7. “Guna Yala”: a composition on the origins of Kuna Yala (Orán 1994:6).

This land, the one that we live on, is named Guna Yala. We are Guna Dulemala. This land was not given to us. For this land our grandfathers fought, our grandfathers shed blood. We will reflect on this well.

The wagas came to this land. Our culture, the ways of living that our grandfathers had always carried with them, they came to do away with. The ways of living that we had always carried with us, they came to do away with. The
things that belonged to our grandmothers, the molas they wear, the gold nose ring, the wini bracelets, the earrings, all of this they came to do away with. The wagas saw them using dule medicine as well. Drinking inna, putting girls in the surba, everything here that is ours the wagas wanted to do away with.

This is what was happening, and so Nele Gandule and Golman thought of ways to defeat the enemy, to get rid of the wagas, to fight for our culture. On the twenty fifth of May our grandfathers fought for this land. This was sixty years ago.

This is why we should learn well. To speak about our land, to stand up and protect this land, to see what is in the ocean, to clearly understand all that our land has.

The inclusion of such compositions in a children’s primer, especially this one about the Kuna revolution of 1925, demonstrates how issues of self-determination and autonomy are central to the Kuna pueblo, and hence, Kuna literature. The revolution is a recurring theme in Kuna literature and Kuna life; it is celebrated every year in both Kuna Yala and urban communities through dramatizations and celebrations with inna. A well-known Kuna book about the revolution is Así lo vi, así me lo contaron, a book compiled and translated by Aiban Wagua as told to him by former Saila Dummad Inakeliginia (Carlos López). This book details the events of the revolution as Inakeliginia experienced them as a young man and as told in the oral histories of his elders. Poetry by Aiban Wagua, Arysteides Turpana and others are also characterized by the themes of revolution and notions of self-determination.

Despite the 1925 revolution and the relative power that the Kuna have gained through their past battles, there are obviously still problems of inequality and discrimination that afflict the Kuna pueblo. Many of these problems are due to lack of
resources, or lack of access to resources. As more and more Kunas assume roles in the
government and state systems, Kuna communities are gaining more leverage, but
advancing through the State’s bureaucratic system does not guarantee results and can
produce its own political problems.

Technology

New technologies are adding to the ways that indigenous peoples are challenging
the Western dichotomy of tradition/modernity while showing how the local and global
are intersecting in new ways. Although access to technology is a crucial factor here,
many indigenous peoples in First World countries are utilizing technology, as well as an
increasing number in Third World countries. As a large part of the Kuna population is
currently living in Panama City, the Kuna, too, are being affected by the new forms of
technology that accompany urban life. When questioned on the ways that globalization is
entering into Kuna life, such as through the internet, television, writing and other forms
of media, Reuter Orán pointed out that such technology is like a double-edged sword:

\[
\text{Aaga an be soged ibgwen yobid, es, wagmar soged, an babgan soged, es yobi. Es es be ay nuedi, sunna es begi aibinbali, es asi. Degsogguna wis be maneharsae, wis be dakargua, wiskin be dodomogargebe, daksa. An sae daken, wis an komputadora nika sii, daksa, anmar internet nika sii. Esa maquina avanzada y sofisticada, debe estar al servicio de nosotros, utilizar nosotros para nosotros, no que ellos manej en a nosotros}
\]

That’s why I tell you, that this is like a knife, like the latinos say, like the elders say, it’s like a knife. The knife can be your good friend, but the knife can also betray you, that’s how it is. That’s why you should know how to use it properly, look at it like this, you should know how to play with it, see. Look at me, I have a computer,
see, we have internet here. This advanced and sophisticated machine should be used to our service, it should be used for us and by us, and not for them to control us (Orán 2004).

Using a similar understanding of culture and change, Kungiler explains how the Kuna need to harness this new technology for their own benefit. He recognizes the potential that these technologies hold for the Kuna community, simultaneously acknowledging that the same technologies can be used by the dominant culture to oppress minority groups:

Una de las cosas que se debe considerar en estas políticas es que no es nada más falso que con la escritura podemos mantener nuestro idioma y a la inversa. Ambas deben ser un complemento para su máximo desarrollo. Nuestra cultura oral, como fuente de sabiduría debe tener todos los instrumentos tecnológicos a su favor, es a través de estos medios se debe llegar a la población dule, aunque es cierto que esto implica una inversión considerable. Pienso que todavía nuestras autoridades no han utilizado estos instrumentos a su favor, por ejemplo, la radio, la prensa escrita, el video y el cine. El tiempo esta en nuestra contra, los vertiginosos cambios son permanentes. Hasta que no se empiecen con estas iniciativas el futuro que nos espera es incierto.

One of the things that should be considered in these politics is that there is nothing more false than that with writing we will be able to maintain our language, and the inverse. Both should be complements of each other in order to enable their maximum development. Our oral culture, as a fountain of knowledge, should have all technological instruments at its favor, it is through these means that it should reach the population dule, although it is true that this implies a large investment. I think that our authorities still haven’t utilized these instruments to their advantage, like radio, newspaper, video and movies for example. Time is against us and this tornado of changes is permanent. Until we begin with these initiatives, the future that awaits us is uncertain (Kungiler 2005).

Both Orán and Kungiler are speaking to neoliberalist lines of thought that seek to measure the indigeneity of cultures through “authenticity” based on a juxtaposition of traditional and modern, of orality and literacy, of technological illiteracy and technological literacy. Orán and Kungiler recognize the difference between accepting the dominant understanding and use of technology and utilizing this same technology in new
and creative ways to benefit the Kuna pueblo. While access to technology is still very limited for the majority of the Kuna population, especially those in Kuna Yala, technology is somewhat accessible, both physically and financially, to Kunas living in urban areas. While many still lack the social resources and education needed to know how to use a computer, Panama’s economy, its status as a major internet backbone and its access to cheap imported technology through the Panama Canal has spawned dozens of low-cost internet cafes, which is helping to break down some of the financial and physical barriers to computer access.

**Language Politics and Education**

An official standard orthography could affect Kuna political issues in many ways, including the documentation of these very political matters in the Kuna language. Perhaps one of the most important political arenas where orthography has an influence is on bilingual education, where there is a great desire to teach a standardized orthographic system. Although the law establishing bilingual education was passed in the 1970s, there has been little done by the state to enact it. Some advancements in bilingual education have been made by Kuna educator Reuter Orán, who has implemented a basic program for lower grades on the island community of Tupile. The Kuna would like to expand bilingual programs to all the other island communities as well, but the government of Panama has different priorities.

In 2002 a law was passed that made English the second official language of Panama, declaring that all students in public and private schools would receive a large
part of their education in English. This policy was implemented with the intention of drawing more English-language telemarketing companies to Panama and was substantiated with the claim that Panama is actually home to many native English speakers of Antillean origin. The government has historically neglected the Afro-Caribbean population of Panama, and although they deserve to have their presence and their language recognized, they were recognized here to justify the state’s potentially lucrative actions. Apart from whether or not the state was justified in the way it recognized the Afro-Caribbean population for its native English speakers, there are seven indigenous languages in Panama that are currently unrecognized by the state. As Lanehart notes of the African-American population and other minorities in the United States,

There are many instances today among the oppressed and disempowered in which they are in school but not of it. In other words, they are allowed into schools because of state laws, but they are not really part of schools that are based on middle-class (and mostly Eurocentric) life (2002:5).

The Kuna are in the Panamanian school system, but “not of it.” The euro-centric school system only recognizes and reproduces knowledge and ways of knowing from the middle and upper class latino perspectives. The Kuna are in the school system, and are trying to increase the ways in which they are of it.

Language discrimination is a large part of how social systems such as schools discriminate against indigenous peoples. In the foreword of Iguaniginape Kungiler’s book Yar Burba Anmar Burba, Arysteides Turpana Iguagliginya condemns the injustices that have been committed against indigenous languages through language discrimination:
Inglandola *West*, sunmakedi nergualed ebinsaedba uis an sogmosundo, anmar namaked igarsik uagmar ibguen suli anmar dakedi, itigi binyesundo gaya dalabo sunmakedgine na muchubmuchub bendak sumalaye geb aa ukiba isetmassurbardibe anmar gayaga bani nodago soge, ade anmar gayade bur bipi seni nado soge geb aa uki bali gaya “aküedga” aka sunna binyebardo, gaya dule gadi gabedga binyo soge. Igig neggueburmargi gaya e daed dakedbali.


*This racist vision, just as much of literature as of language, supports the thesis of the English linguist Michael West, proving that the simultaneous, but not concomitant nor coordinated use, of two languages begets a phenomenon of devalorization of the language that is situated on an “inferior” social and intellectual level. In this case, it is the Kuna language versus Spanish, a dialect of vulgar (colloquial) Latin, which fatally embodies the degradation of Kuna that is then condemned to remain in a dormant state.*

*From the sociolinguistic point of view, Spanish as a language of internal colonialism serves as a vehicle of erroneous propaganda and ends up as a substitute for the native language, just as it happens in Nargana, “the most civilized island.” In this context, there is not an opportunity for bilingualism. From one monolingual state we move into another monolingual state. We are forced to speak broken Spanish so that we are more obedient to the orders of the master, just as the bandit named Christopher Columbus wanted. History teaches us that the linguistic politics of Spain as a step-mother country was to implant Spanish as the only language in Abya Yala, or otherwise coercive measures would be implemented against the speakers of the languages of the Americas (67).*

Turpana addresses the inequalities inherent in Panamanian language politics that reflect not only language ideologies, but larger discourses of racism, colonialism and
oppression. These language ideologies are embedded in the educational system that produces and reproduces the dominant Spanish language ideologies.

Turpana makes many arguments that demonstrate how Spanish language policies and politics have been used as a tool of oppression. Citing Michael West, a linguist who specializes in the area of language in education, Turpana points to the fact that all indigenous languages in Panama are denigrated, being called *dialecto* or “dialect” by the non-indigenous population, and, as is often the case, by indigenous people themselves as well. He brings up the issue of internal colonialism and how this has affected language practices in Kuna communities, most notably in the island community of Nargana. He speaks of the colonial forces that imposed the Spanish language as a means of control. Through these Kuna and Spanish language texts, Turpana and Kungiler are questioning the existing language ideologies and using literature as a political tool.

These inequalities are questioned not only in the actual discourse produced in this introduction, but are challenged in the format of the printed version of the book. The first half of the book, including the introduction, is in Kuna. This privileging of the Kuna language, or depriving of the Spanish translation that appears later, is a political move that embodies the same discourses that Turpana vocalizes in the introduction.

The oral traditions of the Kuna have never been dependent on writing, but the Kuna are now experimenting in order to integrate Kuna knowledge and some forms of Western-style education. The Kuna value Kuna knowledge systems but are simultaneously aware that a Western-style education and command of Spanish are of great economic value. While the two are not necessarily in conflict, it is increasingly
difficult for young children to obtain a Kuna education if they attend a state school during
the day. Knowing that the value of a Western-style education will likely not diminish in
the near future, educators such as Orán are working to incorporate Kuna knowledge
systems into mainstream education, but on their own terms. Collins and Blot have
noticed a similar general trend:

In response to colonial legacies, native peoples have adapted traditional practices
to the dominant literacies in which they have often been schooled. In so doing,
they transform the received literacy, they find a space to voice their selves within
literate practices which are never neatly oral or written, traditional or modern

The Kuna are indeed finding “a space to voice their selves within literate practices” in
ways that are challenging the dominant system of education and working to reform it.
This battle, however, is a long one, and although educators such as Orán have dedicated
over thirty years to this effort, there is still far to go on the road to widespread Kuna
language-based education.

Issues of Identity

As the Kuna community strives to validate their writing and literature in face of
the established hegemony of written languages, issues of identity arise in the process.
Identity and self-determination are inherent in the quest for recognition of the validity of
the Kuna language and its emerging literacy. As Green discusses in an interview, Kuna
literature shapes and is shaped by understandings of Kuna identity:

Anmar gwabin be narmaksogele, aa dakega, an sogsudo, deyopir anmar
gwabin. Deyob narmaksogele, igi gebe Ibelele, e gwenadgan, walabaabakad,
walaguylle, ese bergwable walabaabakad, igi yardalesmalad, gwenadgan
If we want to write our language, looking at that, I say that our language is a certain way. If we write in this way, like Ibelele in the beginning of time, with his brothers and sisters, with his eight brothers and sisters, seven, with him they were eight how the eight brothers and sisters were tricked, they weren’t ever able to get to know their mother. The Mother Frog never told him that her own son had actually killed their mother, and that’s why they were adopted by the Mother Frog. And so at that time, one day Olowaili, with her friends and family, saw themselves in the river, they saw their faces in the river and saw that they were beautiful. Olowaili’s face was so beautiful, it was very different from her mother’s face, who had a rough and bumpy complexion, she was smaller too, you see, her mannerisms were different from those of Olowaili, she didn’t resemble her in any way, she was a beautiful woman. And so she asked what happened, and what had happened to her, “Where is my mother?” she asked the grandmother, why was she different from Olowaili, and the grandmother said that it wasn’t true, that she had always been that way, see. And so [the brothers and sisters] started to plan, and I think we should do the same, that’s why I write my language, in order to see my face, to see who I am, where my grandfathers are from, where my grandparents are from. (Green 2004).

By discussing these aspects of Kuna identity from the context of Kuna history, Green illustrates how issues of orthography, literacy, culture and identity are fused. Here Green uses the example of Olowaili seeing her face in the river for the first time as a vehicle to consciously speak to others about identity and culture. His oratory is not only derived from these constructions of Kuna identity, but is simultaneously a meta-analysis of Kuna identity making.
The valuing of one’s self and one’s culture through language and literature is an essential aspect of identity, and it is one that is often challenged by the dominant language and its ideologies. As Marcial Arias states of the Kuna and the Kuna language:

\[
\text{Yoo anmala sued aa, dulemar Sundu, anmar gaya bur sunsogedi, waggayaba, amba yoo sumardo, anmar gaya sunsogedi mergi gayaba. We geb sunonimardibele, geb ittononimalodo ah anmar yeerdo.}
\]

*We haven't learned yet, we the Kuna, that our language is more important than Spanish, we haven't understood that our language is more important than English. If we come to understand this, we will valorize ourselves more* (Arias 2004).

Arias addresses the important link between language, identity and culture for indigenous peoples. Although language is no longer indicative of cultural identity for many Kunas living in the city (as discussed later in the subchapter “Urban Life”) language is still one of the most prominent and verifiable markers of identity in human societies. The devaluing of the Kuna language and other indigenous languages in Panama and elsewhere as “dialects” is more than a mere insult to the language and the study of linguistics. Languages are owned by their speakers and language discrimination here is part and parcel of ethnic discrimination. Kuna language movements and Kuna cultural movements go hand in hand, working towards the valuing of the Kuna culture through the valuing of its language, and recognizing the Kuna language through the recognition of the Kuna culture. Valuing the importance of the Kuna language, as Arias proposes, will result in the valuing of the self, of the culture, and of the Kuna *pueblo*.

In a related way, Sonja Lanehart brings up another way in which literacy is related to identity in her book on the experiences that black women have with literacy:
That is why I believe there is a relationship between confidence and literacy, confidence and language. Our perceptions of our language (and literacy) are integrated with our perceptions of our selves. Because of that, when we talk about language and literacy we should also talk about identity and goals(2) and possible selves (a subset of goals) since they are at stake - or at risk (Lanehart 2002:28).

Here Lanehart is referring to the self-worth that is inherent in being proud of one’s identity, which is also associated with the ability to read and write the language of power in a literate society. In the case of the Kuna, some may lack literacy skills in Spanish due to the inadequate education systems often provided to indigenous communities and the difficulty of learning a foreign language, which contributes to the devaluing of the Kuna language and culture. In addition, the lack of Kuna language education and literature in the face of a long-standing written tradition of Spanish coupled with other forms of discrimination leads to a devaluing of the language, and hence the self. While the Kuna language and culture is highly valued by many members of the community, there is still a large number of Kunas, many of whom are younger, who struggle to value the Kuna language in the same way due to their experiences of discrimination in the dominant Spanish language society and school system.

Writing in Kuna is part of this struggle to address issues of language and identity. Writing in the Kuna language both embodies aspects of Kuna identity and provides an outlet for cultural expression that is valued by the dominant society. Orán explains how the Kuna language, writing in Kuna and identity are related:

Epenne an bab anga sokardae, mi papá me decía, “mira vé, jamás toques eso,” o sea la pipa, o sea de coco. Mer egwanoye, ban es be danibaloeteye. Porque mi papá creció en el monte. Deisoku valor niido, todas la montañas, los ríos, valor niido. Andi dunguchulid, o sea que no tengo consciencia de esto. Emiskindi wis an askin sar an gordimoga. Dakedgi anmar guo suli, deisokudina, an binsado, anmar
A long time ago my father used to tell me, he used to say to me, “Look, never touch this,” that is to say the pipa, or coconut. “Don’t pick them off the tree, because tomorrow you’ll be returning to the same tree.” Because my father grew up in the countryside. That’s why they have worth, all of the mountains, the rivers, they have worth. I myself didn’t grow up like that, in other words, I’m not aware of those things. Now I feel like I only talk of things superficially. Looking at this I see that we can’t continue like this, and so, I think, that those of us that are here should write texts about the origins of our ancestors and their history, and write them in our language. We can’t continue without writing in our language. Why? Because what our elders say is something we should take from the soul. You can’t express that in Spanish. We should learn this in order to live with the knowledge of our origins, see. If someone, thinking of their origin, in other words, the latinos say, to be proud of your identity. You see, it’s not a whim either, because identity,... is what constitutes life. That’s why I can’t separate myself from it. (Orán 2004).

Orán speaks of writing in the Kuna language as a necessary step for the Kuna pueblo at this point in time. He envisions these texts to be written about Kuna culture and history in the Kuna language as an expression of Kuna identity. Indeed, the Kuna literature that exists follows this very line of thought and it would be nearly impossible to conceive of original Kuna literature not to be grounded in Kuna identity.
Spiritual Issues

In relation to the importance of identity for writing in Kuna, Kuna literature also holds great spiritual significance. Understandings of Kuna spirituality are shaping the ways in which Kuna orthography and literacy are being conceptualized. In an interview, Kuna educator and linguist Abadio Green elaborates on the relationship between language, culture and spirituality:

An sogdibe an an gaya narmakbie, an igar danikid wisguegala, an garda narmaknaidi, an wisi ibu narmaknai, ibu obare, deyob sogele, sunnsoged, itos, ibigala, emi anmar gwabin soged, anmar sunmakedi, bergwable danikid, Bab Dummad, Nan Dummad napa imaknaigun anmar daed danikid niinaidba, Ibelele, Bugsu, Ologwadule, Nanakabayai, Daadmago. Aaba bergwable binnisdaniki anmar gwabin...

If I say that I want to write in my language, in order to better understand my past, I am going to write, I am going to know and understand that it is important, you see, why our language today, our way of speaking, everything comes from Bab Dummad and Nan Dummad and the beginning of time our origins can be traced back to the Moon, to Ibelele, Bugsu, Ologwadule, Nanakabayai, and Daadmago. Through them our language has slowly developed..

Green’s argument points to the importance of Kuna spirituality in the development of an orthography and subsequent bodies of literature. Knowing these spiritual and historical Kuna figures is culturally important for the Kuna. Writing in Kuna necessarily takes Kuna history and spirituality into account, because as Green mentions, this is the origin of the Kuna language.

As in all cultures, Kuna has its own construction and use of religion and spirituality, which has been labeled here as such for the lack of a better term. As Kungiler
shows, discourse on Kuna spirituality plays an important role in the discourse on Kuna

literature:

La cultura dule, es por excelencia una cultura oral, es por medio de la oralidad que conocemos toda su literatura. Es allí, que esta otro de los componentes muy importantes, el lenguaje, es a través del lenguaje que podemos llegar a conocer el pensamiento de esta cultura, su cosmoentimiento y cosmovisión. Entonces, la literatura es importante como otro elemento para preservar nuestra identidad. La promoción por parte de las instancias educativas, no solo oficiales, debe ser constante. Actualmente, los jóvenes le dan poca importancia el conocer un cuento, un relato o un canto terapéutico. Es en ese conocimiento que podemos ir reencontrándonos. Pienso que en aprender y no solo transcribir estos relatos esta el futuro de la literatura dule, propiamente dicha, ya que con solo mantenerlo escrito no se puede revitalizar la esencia dule. Es mucho más que eso. Recuerdo que me dijo una vez un anciano: cada relato que uno aprende, tiene burba, tiene espíritu. No es para conservarlo en un libro, sino es para llevarlo dentro uno.

The dule culture, is in its own excellence an oral culture, and it is through orality that we come to know all of its literature. It is there that we locate another one of the important components, language; it is through language that we can come to know the thoughts of this culture, its cosmo-feeling and cosmovision. Therefore, literature is important as another element to preserve our identity. The promotion of this in educative proposals, and not only official ones, should be constant. Today, the youth does not find it important to learn a story, a narration, or a therapeutic chant. It is in this knowledge that we can continue to rediscover ourselves. I believe that in learning and not only transcribing these narrations lies the future of dule literature, better said, it is because by only maintaining them written one cannot revitalize dule essence. It is much more than this. I remember one time an elder told me: every narration that one learns has burba, it has spirit. It is not to be conserved in a book, but rather carried inside of you. (Kungiler 2005)

Kungiler talks about how spirituality informs Kuna writing and also how many people often attempt to use writing as a tool with which to preserve sacred Kuna knowledge, such as chants. Kungiler discusses how transcriptions of chants and other forms of Kuna verbal art cannot truly be represented on paper, but that through the transcription, Kunas may still continue to learn about verbal art. In this sense Kungiler is affirming that while writing in Kuna is an important task, it can never replace oral literature. Here the division
between orality and literacy is revalued, as both are important in the transcription of Kuna chants, but the oral nature of chants is essential to their efficacy and the *burba*, roughly translated here as spirit, can never be captured in writing.

**Urban Life**

In developing Kuna orthography and literature, one influential aspect has been migration to Panama City and the Kuna urban life that has developed. Education has been a major factor, which has inspired many to bring about changes in the Western education system while providing the resources to do so. Greater access to material resources has been a major factor in many respects, although the Kuna, along with other indigenous groups of Panama, remain as one of the poorest populations. Through their migration to a metropolitan center there has been greater access to important social and political networks, both national and international, enabling many to establish connections with those in power and in doing so, gain more power themselves. These effects of urban life have enabled many Kuna to pursue interests that have led to Kuna cultural movements, such as the language seminars, but has also led to language loss among the younger generations born and raised in Panama City. As Kungiler explains:

> El sistema educativo oficial tiene una presencia de casi un siglo dentro del pueblo dule, en este lapso de tiempo el pueblo dule ha vivido un acelerado cambio cultural, social político y económico. Estos cambios que no solo implican aspectos en la región de Kuna Yala, sino que han trascendido hasta la periferia de la ciudad capital, esto por la permanente migración de los dule, en busca de trabajo, educación y un bienestar familiar, son algunos de los elementos que se deben considerar en la promoción del dulegaya.

> Además, hay una generación entera que ha vivido en estos barrios marginales fuera de la ciudad capital. Jóvenes que no hablan su lengua materna, jóvenes que nunca han oído el canto de un saila. Niños que vienen creciendo en estos barrios, que siendo de madre y padre dule nunca han pronunciado nada en
dulegaya. Es cierto que la realidad es otra en la Comarca Kuna Yala, aunque su presencia en la comarca los hace estar más cerca de su cultura, la enseñanza que estos reciben es en castellano y no en su lengua materna.

Viendo toda esta realidad, creo que es importante y urgente establecer una política dentro de las instituciones dule, la promoción del dulegaya dentro de sus acciones, de la misma manera la escritura. Empezando por nuestras máximas autoridades los Congresos Generales.

The official education system has been present for almost a century in the dule pueblo, in this span of time the dule pueblo has experienced accelerated cultural, socio-political and economic changes. These changes do not only involve aspects in the Kuna Yala region, but they have also transcended to the periphery of the capital. This was because of the permanent migration of the dule in search of work, education and well-being for their family, which are some of the elements that should be considered in the promotion of dulegaya.

In addition, there is a generation that has lived in these marginalized barrios outside of the capital. Young adults that do not speak their native language, young adults that have never heard the chant of a saila. Children that grow up in these barrios, that having a dule mother and father have never spoken in dulegaya. It is true that reality is different in the Comarca Kuna Yala, and although their presence in the Comarca brings them closer to their culture, the education they receive is in Spanish and not in their native language.

Seeing this reality, I believe that is important and urgent to establish policies in dule institutions, with the promotion of dulegaya as one of its goals, and in the same way writing. It should start with our maximum authorities, the Congresos Generales.
(Kungiler 2005)

Kuna language matters have indeed become concerns for the urban population as well as for those in the Comarca Kuna Yala. As it has become apparent over the years that what was formerly thought to be a temporary migration is becoming a more permanent migration, the loss of language by the younger generations living in the city has become an increasingly important issue. Whereas those that left for Panama City in the 1970s were relatively few and often went back to Kuna Yala for longer periods, building stores and new houses with visions of one day returning permanently, many are now finding that the majority of their relatives are no longer living in their home community, even
further severing the ties they have to the community. Many children are often sent to Panama City for a year to visit relatives and learn Spanish. In general, most families living in the islands have a handful of close relatives living outside of Kuna Yala and many are financially dependent on them in some way.

Many of the urban intellectuals have been part of this process and many of the younger participants are products of this process. They are the leaders in this movement to develop Kuna literature, but due to their urban lifestyles and their separation from other more “traditional” aspects, they run the risk of having their “authenticity” questioned by greater society. This question of “authenticity” is an essential one that restricts the indigenous subject to a position of immobility, denouncing cultural change and favoring a frozen and hence “authentic” identity. Such issues are very real for Kuna youth in the city, for example, who do not speak Kuna, and many other indigenous populations in similar positions. Povenelli has documented a similar case in regards to Australian aboriginals and notions of multiculturalism propogated by the Australian state, which has used authenticity as a yardstick to measure indigeneity (2002).

While distance may indeed separate Kunas living in urban areas from those in Kuna Yala, this separation only affects aspects of certain social, political and economic issues, not identity, indigeneity or authenticity. Kungiler explains how Kuna identity is related to factors other than living in urban areas:

Una vez un anciano me dijo que para ser dule hay que sentir como dule, pensar como dule y creer en los dule. Cuando era presidente de la República el Sr. Endara Galimany, se presentó ante la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas, su esposa la acompañó vestida de mola, traje tradicional de los dule, pienso que el mundo entero pensó que era dule, aún no así, ella solo se vistió de mola. La mola la identificó como una indígena de Panamá, como dule. En otra ocasión, un
abogado de padre dule y madre americana, llegó a ocupar un alto cargo dentro del estado de Nuevo México, Estados Unidos, en ese entonces un diario de Panamá, sacó entre sus artículos: Kuna ocupa alto cargo en Estados Unidos. Ambas personas que acapararon noticias, pregunto yo, ¿podrían considerarse dule? Vuelvo a lo que me dijo el anciano, aquella tarde sentado en un poyo, esperando que su compañera le sirviera un plato de dule masi, comida kuna; que para ser un dule hay que sentir como dule. Saber que en cada conocimiento de un anciano Saila, este guarda la memoria de su pueblo: su historia su vida.

De alguna u otra manera, hemos visto en este corto tiempo que tenemos de ser promotores de la literatura dule, solo quince años, que los más comprometidos se quedan realizando el trabajo hasta el final, y de nuevo, Turpana, sus poemas escritos en dulegaya, donde habla de ternuras y rabias, Orán, promotor incansable de una escuela piloto en Kuna Yala. Aiban y Lino Smith, junto a sus iglesias acompañando a los ancianos. Abadio, conviviendo las luchas de los dule en Colombia, por más de veinte años. Si son ellos y otros más que en el alma llevan el sentir dule, aunque vivan en ciudades diferentes. Hay muchos que vienen y se van.

No importa lo lejos que estén de su tierra llevan en su sentimiento su pueblo. Sin perder su verdadera esencia y aunque tengan una formación académica occidental. Son como aquel mensaje metafórico del anciano: Toma del águila sus ojos, sus alas, sus garras y sus lágrimas, para que la utilices cuando sea necesario. Esta es la lección que nos da el anciano para los que nos formamos a la occidental.

One time an elder told me that to be dule you have to feel like dule, think as a dule, and believe in the dule. When he was president of the Republic, Mr. Endara Galimany presented himself before the General Assembly of the United Nations, his wife accompanying him dressed in a mola, the traditional dress of the dule. I believe the whole world thought that she was dule, but she isn't, she had only worn a mola. The mola identified her as an indigenous person of Panama, as dule. On another occasion, a lawyer, whose father was dule and mother was American, came to occupy an important position in the state government of New Mexico, United States, and at that time a newspaper in Panama announced in one of its articles: Kuna occupies a high position in the United States. Both people gathered new coverage, and I ask, "Could they consider themselves dule?" I return to what an elder told me one afternoon sitting on a bench, waiting for his compañera to serve him a plate of dule masi, kuna food: that to be a dule one has to feel dule. Know that in every piece of knowledge of an elder Saila the memory of his pueblo is stored: the story of his life.

In one way or another, we have seen that in this short time that we have been promoters of dule literature, only fifteen years, that the most dedicated stay realizing the work until the end, and so again we have, Turpana, with his poems written in dulegaya, when he speaks of tenderness and rage, Orán, untiring promoter of a pilot school in Kuna Yala. Aiban [Wagua] and Lino Smith, together
with their churches, accompanying the elders. Abadio [Green], living the battles together with the dule of Colombia for more than twenty years. These are the people along with others that carry the dule sentiment in their souls, even though they may live in different cities. There are many that come and go.

It does not matter how far they are from their land if they bear the sentiment of their pueblo, without losing the real essence, even though they have a Western academic formation. They are like those of the metaphoric message of the elder: "Take from the eagle its eyes, its wings, its claws and its tears, and uses them when it's necessary." This is the lesson that the elder has given to us, the ones that have had a Western formation (Kungiler 2005).

As Kungiler eloquently states, although many people working on Kuna literature live outside of Kuna Yala, the important thing is that they are dule in their spirit. This point is key in understanding dule identity and the role of urban living and other “non-traditional” influences and changes present in Kuna life. Kungiler challenges questions of authenticity by showing that the important issue here is how these people who have had different educational experiences are contributing to the Kuna battle for self-determination.

**Conclusions**

By looking at reading and writing Kuna in relation to politics, technology, education, identity, spirituality and urban life, it becomes clear how interrelated these issues truly are and how they are all aspects of Kuna life and experience. I close here with a poem by Aiban Velarde, a published poet and school teacher in Kuna Yala. Velarde’s poem *Sapi Ibe Nega* is an example of how Kuna writing, and in this case poetry, works to transform the dominant understandings of literacy by Kunacizing a genre of writing typically closed off to indigenous languages. In providing his own Spanish translation,
Velarde is able to control the representation of his poem and demonstrate the eloquence of Kuna poetry to larger Spanish-speaking audiences. In *Sapi Ibe Nega* we see the social and political issues discussed in this chapter and how Kuna writing and literature continue to function socially and politically for the Kuna *pueblo*.

*Sapi Ibe Nega (The place of the origin of things)*

*Aiban Velarde*

Kuna

Gana abisuadi na bega burba odimake daniki
Neg saila na gine unniye
Na bega inna obane guichi
Sapi dula ganagan e dutumala ogannoenaiye
Billi gamba ukunaibe negsae yob
soo wa burbured aknakue si yob

Aburaguale, pipirmakaguale
Kaigan imba gi pila dor yob gueguichi

Bo ginnid nagabali
bia sikui barru sipugan bukua
Naibe mar pipirmagna naid kalugangi

Ua bur mar bugmalad gi
Ibo yargi e naigan tada nakue sik atakenanai
Niga iboenai nana Pinwegunsose naid kalugangi
Inna di ochi ochi gobemala
Kuile sae mala ye marsosoguay negagi

Ibo yarse gannar nae ye
Nega duu e nukugine

Bogachi ibye gue nai abirgunaguale

Dula gayagan ninider soguele
gannar ulupse nan burba gi
tagdenanaigudoye.
Te hablo en el lenguaje de la primera placenta
de la primerísima morada de los espíritus
donde inhala frente a ti
hasta las hojas moradas de los árboles
en la estación profunda del parto
donde hacen estrépitos los cascabeles
el polvo se alza cual si fuera humo
se enreda y da vueltas y más vueltas
con sartales floridos de jade
junto a los cañaverales
en la cercanía de las neblinas rojas
donde vive la codorniz blanca
donde la serpiente se enroscaba
junto a la morada de los halcones
en el lugar de nuestro origen
sus ramas apuntan donde emerge el sol
sus membranas apuntan hacia el horizonte del alma
Dancemos para los dueños de la fiesta
Bebamos, bebamos la chicha dulce
de la gran estilista del arcoíris
Volveremos afincar nuestras raíces
en el seno del universo
y colgaremos todas las hamacas
girando alrededor del sol
y solo entonces
todas las voces
volverán a fermentarse en un solo útero
hasta convertirse todo en la tinaja de oro

I speak to you in the language of the first placenta
of the very first dwelling of the spirits
where I inhale in front of you
up until the purple leaves of the trees
in the deep season of birth
where the rattles make noise
the powder rises as if it were smoke

11 The English translation is derived from the original Spanish language text provided by the author.
it entangles itself and continues to spin and spin
with flowered ribbons of jade
beside the sugar-cane fields
in the surroundings of red mist
where the white codorniz lives
where the serpent coils
near the dwelling of the falcons
in the place of our origin
its branches signal to where the sun is emerging
its membranes point to the horizon of the soul
we dance for the hosts of the celebration
let us drink, let us drink the sweet chicha
of the grand designer of the rainbow
We return to plant our roots
in the breast of the universe
and we hang all of the hammocks
spinning around the sun
and only then
all of the voices
will return to become fermented in one single uterus
until everything turns into a pot of gold

(Velarde 2002)
CHAPTER 4
Kuna Orthographies

Integrated into these social and political issues are the linguistic debates that actually shape the writing of the Kuna language. When arriving at a standard orthography of Kuna, these linguistic issues cannot be separated from the social and political. A movement of Kuna intellectuals is striving to create a writing system that reflects the essence of Kuna grammar and simultaneously addresses the social and political issues that frame and shape literacy. Deciding on an alphabet or standardized orthographic practices is not an uncharged move for the Kuna. Through deciding whether Kuna should be written with a “k” or a “g,” for example, the Kuna are addressing centuries of social injustices.

Here I will offer a brief sketch of Kuna phonology and phonological processes and then look at the proposed writing systems in relation to their proponents and their realms of use. I then enter into the niceties of some of the alphabet issues, showing how and why linguistic properties of the language create issues for the use of certain letters and spellings. After going through the issues related to phonology, I briefly explore the matter of syntax. My analysis of the writing systems here is based on participant-observation in the Kuna language seminars, short sketches of the various alphabets and personal communication with the proponents of the systems.
Inventory of Sounds

In order to explore the issues surrounding the orthography, a brief introduction to the Kuna sound system will be offered, which has been informed by analyses of the Kuna language done by Holmer (1947) and Sherzer (1975, 2001). A representation of the phonetic system is presented in Table 1. There are eight stops: a voiceless bilabial (p), a voiced bilabial (b), a voiceless alveolar (t), a voiced alveolar (d), a voiceless velar (k), a voiced velar (g), a voiceless velar approximate (kʰ) and a voiced velar approximate (gʰ). All of the stops therefore occur either voiceless or voiced. There are two nasals, a bilabial (m) and an alveolar (n), both of which can occur either long or short. Kuna has a voiced alveolar tap (l̊) and a trill (r). There is one alveolar lateral approximate (l̊), which can occur either long or short. Kuna has a voiceless alveolar fricative (s) and a voiceless alveolar affricate (ɬ). The Kuna language has two approximates, one voiced bilabial approximate (w), and one voiced palatal approximate (j) which can occur long or short and is often consonant-like. There are never more than two consonants in a cluster and words may not begin with a consonantal cluster, therefore there are no “double” consonants in word initial or word final position (Sherzer 2001:36). The syllable structure of Kuna is (C)V(C).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tap</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affricate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. A phonetic representation of Kuna consonants

As seen in Table 2, there are five vowels in Kuna: high front unrounded (i), mid front unrounded (e), low central unrounded (a), mid back rounded (o) and high back rounded (u). The mid-high central unrounded vowel appears in some phonological environments as an allophone of the high front unrounded vowel. All of the five vowels can appear short or long (having two morae).
**Kuna Phonology**

Examining the phonetic inventory of Kuna in the context of its phonological processes, Kuna be characterized as having sets of single and double consonants and vowels. Analyzing the phonemic system as such, in a way that attempts depict the morphophonology present in the language, a logical pattern appears, as shown in Table 3. This table is my own interpretation of the phonological system, adapted from a combination of orthographic systems (Orán 2004; Smith 2004; Holmer 1947 and Sherzer 1990) in order to be able to show the single and double contrasts while still attempting to abide by some of the general orthographic rules being outlined in the Kuna language seminars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phoneme</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Double</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/b/ [b]</td>
<td>dub(a) [duba]</td>
<td>“string”</td>
<td>bb [p]</td>
<td>dubb(u) [dupu]</td>
<td>“island”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/d/ [d]</td>
<td>dad(a) [dada]</td>
<td>“grandfather”</td>
<td>dd [t]</td>
<td>badd(o) [bato]</td>
<td>“already”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/g/ [g]</td>
<td>dage [dage]</td>
<td>“come”</td>
<td>gg [k]</td>
<td>dagge [dake]</td>
<td>“look”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/gw/ [g’]</td>
<td>gwagwalag’a [g’ag’a]</td>
<td>“parrot”</td>
<td>ggw[k]’</td>
<td>gwaggwalag’a [g’ak’a]</td>
<td>“ready”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/m/ [m]</td>
<td>mama [mama]</td>
<td>“manioc”</td>
<td>mm [m:]</td>
<td>mommo [mom:o]</td>
<td>“weak”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/ [a]</td>
<td>nan(a) [nana]</td>
<td>“mother”</td>
<td>aa [a:]</td>
<td>baabak [ba:bak]</td>
<td>“eight”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/ [e]</td>
<td>mege [mege]</td>
<td>“lie down”</td>
<td>ee [e:]</td>
<td>mee [me:]</td>
<td>“clear”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/i/ [i]</td>
<td>-di [di]</td>
<td>topological</td>
<td>ii [i:]</td>
<td>dii [di:]</td>
<td>“water”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/ [o]</td>
<td>non(o) [nono]</td>
<td>“head”</td>
<td>oo [o:]</td>
<td>noo [no:]</td>
<td>“toad”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/w/ [w]</td>
<td>we [we]</td>
<td>3 per. sing.</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. The Kuna phonological system and double phoneme examples**
Phonological Processes

Phonological processes greatly alter the pronunciation of Kuna and in many instances can result in multiple pronunciations. Agreeing on these phonological processes has been key to the development of a unified Kuna writing system. The following information on phonological rules in Kuna is taken from Sherzer (1975, 2001), using my own examples that reflect the orthography emerging from the Kuna language seminars. A list of abbreviations appears in Appendix A.

1. Vowel Deletion

The final vowel of many stems and affixes is deleted in certain contexts.

- dad(a) $\Rightarrow$ dad “grandfather”
- mol(a) $\Rightarrow$ mor “cloth, clothing”
- bake + sa $\Rightarrow$ baksa [baysa] “bought”

2. Consonant Deletion

When more than two consonants cluster intervocally, the cluster is reduced to a cluster of two.

2a. When a ‘double’ stop consonant clusters with another consonant, the ‘double’ stop consonant is reduced to a ‘single’ stop consonant.

- bagg(e) $^{12}$ [bake] + sa $\Rightarrow$ baggsa* $\Rightarrow$ bagsa [baysa] “bought”

\[^{12}\text{Here I have used a written representation that is not being considered by the Kuna Congresses.}\]
bagge [bake] + moga + oe → baggmogoe* → bagmogoe [baymogoe]  
“buy” “too” FUT RULE 1 “will buy too”

2b. When more than two consonants cluster intervocally, all but the last two in 
the cluster are deleted. (Rule 2b. operates after rule 2a.)

sunmags(a)\textsuperscript{13} [sunmaysa] + moga → sunmagsmoga* → sunmasmoga  
“speak” (PAS) “also” [s/he] “spoke also”

3. Various assimilation rules

3a. /l/ → r /-C, -V#

mola + gala → molga* → morga  
“cloth, clothing” “for” RULE 1 “for the cloth/clothing”

mola → mor  
“cloth, clothing”

3b. /g/ → y /-C, C ≠ g

dage + ye → dagye [dagye]* → dagye [dayye]  
“come” INT RULE 1 “come”

3c. /b/ → m /-m

ibmar → immar  
“thing” “thing”

3d. /d/ → n /-n

iddoed + nega → iddoednega* → iddoennega  
“listening” “house” “listening house”


4a. Voiceless pronunciation of [bb]  
/b/ → p /-b

\textsuperscript{13} Here I have used a written representation that is not being considered by the Kuna Congresses.
gobe + -bie $\rightarrow$ gobbie [gobbie]* $\rightarrow$ gobbie [gopie]  
“drink” DES RULE 1 “want to drink”

4b. Voiceless pronunciation of [dd]  
/d/ $\rightarrow$ t/-d

nad(e) + -do $\rightarrow$ naddo  
“went” FACT [s/he] “went though”

4c. Voiceless pronunciation of [gg]  
/g/ $\rightarrow$ k/-g

igi + gudi [gude] $\rightarrow$ iggude [iggude]* $\rightarrow$ iggude [ikude]  
INTwhat happen RULE 1 “What happened?”

4d. Palatalization of [ss]$^{14}$  
/s/ $\rightarrow$ ñ/-s

wisi + suli $\rightarrow$ wissuli [wis.suli]* $\rightarrow$ wissuli [wiluli]  
“know” NEG RULE 1 “do not know”

By understanding these phonological processes and employing these understandings in the development of an orthography, the Kuna are able to arrive at a writing system that better reflects their mental understanding of Kuna phonology. A psychological understanding of Kuna phonology on such an abstract level has been demonstrated by Sherzer (1970) in looking at phonology in the Kuna word game sorsik sunmakke, or “talking backwards,” and has been examined by Sapir (1949) on a more general level. This psychological understanding of phonemes and phonological processes is reflected in examples such as Rule 4d., in which [wiluli] “do not know” is being

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$^{14}$ This also occurs with other sounds combinations with “s,” such as [ds]: /d/ $\rightarrow$ ñ/-s

Ex.: nade + sundo $\rightarrow$ nadsundo* $\rightarrow$ nadsundo [nallundo]  
“went” MOD-FACT RULE 1 “really went”
spelled *wissuli* in order to reflect underlying morpheme boundaries. While outsiders do not know that *wissuli* is actually pronounced [wiːluli], Kuna speakers have no difficulty understanding this phonological process and therefore pronounce the word correctly.

In relation to the social ways in which these rules are employed, we see that although some of these phonological rules are optional, they are almost always employed in everyday speech. Not, however, in ritual speech: by rarely employing Rule 1 (vowel deletion) in ritual speech, none of the subsequent rules are employed either, resulting in a style of speech that sounds very different from everyday Kuna in its pronunciation alone. In addition, the special vocabulary used in ritual speech also sets it apart from colloquial speech. As Sherzer notes:

> This phonological analysis reflects the relationship between Kuna ritual and everyday speech, in that the forms more characteristic of ritual, traditional speech, like form 4 above, are more abstract than underlying versions of the colloquial forms. These phonological rules, then, are not mere mechanisms for generating linguistic forms; they have sociolinguistic reality and validity in that they capture the relationship among the various Kuna varieties and styles of speaking. (Sherzer 2001:39).

So in addition to guiding the pronunciation of the language, these rules have come to form an important social distinction in Kuna speech. The phonological differences between colloquial and ritual speech, as it will be called here, are important in the Kuna language seminars for two reasons. First, words that have multiple pronunciations and spellings are problematic in arriving at writing conventions. Secondly, these multiple pronunciations are not socially equal; colloquial and ritual speech possess different social meaning and importance in different contexts. Here is where morphophonology and
etymology enter into the Kuna language seminars on a very important level, as they are used to represent not only spelling and pronunciation, but cultural values invested in these different spellings and pronunciations.

**Morphophonology and Etymology**

Because the phonological processes in Kuna can drastically change the pronunciation of a word and often times offer more than one possible correct pronunciation, Kuna linguists have looked to morphophonological writing systems to help maintain underlying structures. As shown in the following example, Kuna linguists are looking to maintain the structure of the morphemes *gobe* and *-bie* by maintaining the double “bb” in the spelling of the final word.

\[
gob(e) + -bie \rightarrow \text{gobbie} [\text{gobbie}]^* \rightarrow \text{gobbie} [\text{gopie}] \\
\text{“drink”} \quad \text{DES} \quad \text{RULE 1} \quad \text{“want to drink”}
\]

Different from morphophonology, but related, is etymology. As morphophonology can be used to “trace the roots” of words, such as was done here with *gobe*, meaning “drink,” and *-bie*, a desiderative, a similar process is often employed with the goal of discovering the origin of a word, or the etymology. While these are different concepts and processes, they are often used in combination in the Kuna language seminars to 1) show morphological roots and 2) arrive at a better understanding of the Kuna language through etymology. As mentioned before, ritual language tends to retain vowels that are often dropped in everyday speech, resulting in a style of speech which
facilitates understanding of morphophonological roots. Those who know ritual forms of speech are respected for their knowledge and wisdom, information which has been passed down through the generations from Ibelele, a great Kuna cultural hero. Using morphophonology to arrive at an understanding of the etymology of words brings one closer to the older forms and meanings of words, which are valued because of their association with traditional knowledge. The importance of morphonology and etymology will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

The Proposed Writing Systems

The proposed writing systems encompass both linguistic structures and social realities. Each alphabet is associated with its proponents, its literature and its linguistic reasoning, all of which are politically positioned. Although the seminar attempts to approach these differences from a scientific linguistic standpoint, there are personal stakes involved for the Kuna linguists and the Kuna community.

There are currently two principal orthographies being considered by the Kuna of Panama in the Kuna Language Seminars, one of which has generally been referred to as the “u/ú” writing system proposed by Reuter Orán, and the other of which is referred to as the “w/u” writing system proposed by Lino Smith. Both of the proponents are active members in Kuna linguistic circles and have been advocating Kuna language education since they began Kuna teacher training in the 1970s. Another writing system, developed

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15 Although many words have more than one correct pronunciation, the use of the longer form is sometimes context dependent, as in the case of “ritual” language or for emphasis in everyday speech, and is sometimes in free variation in colloquial speech, as in the case of mola and mor, which are the same word.
by Nils Holmer from Sweden in the early 1900s, is used by linguistic anthropologist Joel Sherzer (1990) in his representations of the Kuna language and also by Kuna scholar and activist Abadio Green. This writing system was never meant to be an official orthography by either Holmer or Sherzer, but has been used as a way to represent the Kuna language in their research. While this system is employed as an orthography in Colombia by Green, he is not advocating the implementation of this system, mostly due to his regional ties to Colombia. Apart from these three orthographies, there have been many proposed systems in the past and there currently exist other suggested writing systems, such as that proposed by the Italian linguist Luciano Giannelli (2003). But as Gianelli’s proposed writing system was developed from linguistic data and is designed as an “individual proposal” created apart from any authoritative Kuna body, it will not be examined as one of the orthographies currently emerging or being employed by the Kuna (2003:19).

The “u/ú” writing system proposed by Reuter Orán is currently in use in the bilingual education program on the island community of Tupile in Kuna Yala. Orán has published at least two grade school primers in Kuna using his writing system. A new textbook published by the Kuna Congress also utilizes this system, although it has not yet been distributed to all the Kuna community schools. The same writing system was employed in the publication of Yar Burba Anmar Burba: El Espíritu de la Tierra, Nuestra Espíritu, a book of short Kuna stories, compiled and written by Iguaniginape Kungiler. Orán’s system has been employed in various other small publications in Kuna and seems to be the most popular system among Kuna writers in Panama at the present time. As the Kuna language seminars progressed, they came to a consensus that “w” and
“u” would be a better way to represent the Kuna language, as opposed to “u” and “ú.” Orán has since changed his writing system to comply with the agreement reached by the participants in the Kuna language seminars, but I continue to describe his system as “u/ú” in this work because of the large body of work that stands behind his former writing system and because it is easily associated with his name and his work.

The “w/u” writing system proposed by Lino Smith also has a large sphere of influence in Panama, especially within evangelical circles. Smith has worked with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and has translated the Bible into Kuna using the “w/u” writing system. There has been a wide distribution of these bibles and other written materials among Kuna Protestant churches. As the Kuna language seminars progress, elements of this writing system seem to be gaining more acceptance than the others based on some convincing linguistic arguments, although it also shares many of the same conventions as those proposed by Orán.

The third writing system, developed by Nils Holmer, has largely been employed in his own extensive ethnographic and historical documentation. It is presently used in Kuna publications in Colombia, such as *An Mal Epistele Nekka Kuebur Purpaseyelikin Pinsaelkkepe*, written by various authors, including Abadio Green. This writing system has been used in American academic writing by scholars such as Joel Sherzer, James Howe and Mac Chapin. Although this specific system is not being proposed in the Kuna language seminars, Abadio Green often draws on its linguistic elements in the language seminars.
The similarities and differences in the three main Kuna alphabets that are currently in use are delineated in Table 4 and will be explained in further detail. The boldfaced letters are letters of the alphabet and the non-boldfaced letters are recognized orthographic conventions that are not officially included in the alphabet. While the differences between these systems extend far beyond the alphabet itself, this table does help separate out the occasionally overlapping systems for future reference as the Kuna phonological system is explored in relation to these orthographic representations.

Table 4. Proposed Kuna alphabets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>u/ú system</th>
<th>w/u system</th>
<th>p/pp system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R. Orán</td>
<td>p,t,k</td>
<td>p,t,k</td>
<td>pp,tt,kk,kkw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bb,dd,gg</td>
<td>bb,dd,gg</td>
<td>p,t,k,kw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voiced/voiceless</td>
<td></td>
<td>w/u system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stops</td>
<td></td>
<td>L. Smith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b,d,g</td>
<td>b,d,g</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing./double</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nasals</td>
<td>m,n</td>
<td>m,n</td>
<td>m,n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mm,nn</td>
<td>mm,nn</td>
<td>mm,nn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing./double</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liquids</td>
<td>r,l</td>
<td>r,l</td>
<td>r,10,l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rr,ll</td>
<td>rr,ll</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fricatives/affric.</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ch</td>
<td>ss</td>
<td>ch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing./double</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approximates</td>
<td>u,y</td>
<td>w,y</td>
<td>w,y</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>yy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singular vowels</td>
<td>a,e,i,o,u,ú</td>
<td>a,e,i,o,u</td>
<td>a,e,i,o,u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>double vowels</td>
<td>aa,ee,ii,oo,uu</td>
<td>aa,ee,ii,oo,uu</td>
<td>aa,ee,ii,oo,uu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Proposed Kuna alphabets

**Stops: Kuna or Guna?**

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16 Smith contends that the examples of contrasting “r” and “rr” are too few to show a definite contrast.
One of the most significant changes that these two systems have already embraced is the use of the voiced stops “b,” “d” and “g” in word initial position (although the principal debate in Kuna orthography has been addressing the use of “w” and “u” versus “u” and “ú”). Indeed, the Kuna language does not differentiate between voiced and voiceless stops in word initial position, which are generally pronounced as voiced in most variations of Kuna. While the older orthography developed by Holmer (1947) made the same distinction, the representation of the voiced stops in Kuna with “p,” “t” and “k” has overwhelming led to voiceless pronunciation of Kuna words by speakers of Spanish and other Indo-European languages. Well-known Kuna words such as Kuna, Kantule, Tule and Panama\textsuperscript{17} are pronounced with voiced stops in Kuna and according to the both of the new proposed orthographies, would be written Guna and Gantule, Dule and Panama. Seeing as how these words carry great political significance, both nationally and internationally, many participants in the Kuna language seminars hold that these words would still be written in their widely recognized voiceless forms, Kuna, Kantule, Tule and Panama, although the voiced forms have also appeared in various publications.

Both of the new proposed writing systems utilize “p, t, k” for voiceless stops and “b, d, g” for voiced stops, although they also allow for the morphophonemic representations of doubled voiced stops in order to retain the morphological roots. For example, although one would write \textit{obbie} [op.i.e] “want to bathe,” which derives from

\textsuperscript{17} Panama is popularly thought to be derived from the Kuna word \textit{bannaba}, meaning “far away.” This word is thought to have been the Kuna’s response to the Spanish when they asked where the gold, and in some cases the Pacific Ocean, was located. Although the etymology is not certain, all words beginning with stops, including Spanish borrowings, are pronounced voiced.
the words *obe* “to bathe” and –*bie*, a desiderative, in order to preserve the morphology, one would write *dupu* [du.pu] “island” because the etymological roots, if there are any, are unknown. The p/pp system, however, uses “pp” for both *oppie* and *tuppu* because they can both be analyzed as having double stops. This example, along with others, is presented in Table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stops voiceless/voiced</th>
<th>u/ú system R. Orán</th>
<th>w/u system L. Smith</th>
<th>p/pp system A. Green (Holmer/Sherzer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p,t,k</td>
<td>b,d,g</td>
<td>pp,tt,kk,kkw p,t,k,kw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bb,dd,gg</td>
<td>bb,dd,gg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[du.pu] “island”</td>
<td>dupu</td>
<td>dupu</td>
<td>tuppu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[gwi.li] “parakeet”</td>
<td>guili</td>
<td>gwili</td>
<td>kwili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[o.be]+[bi.e]=[op.i.e] “want to bathe”</td>
<td>obbie</td>
<td>obbie</td>
<td>oppie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[du.le] “human,” “kuna”</td>
<td>dule</td>
<td>dule</td>
<td>tule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[gu.na] “layer of the earth,” “kuna”</td>
<td>guna</td>
<td>guna</td>
<td>kuna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Stops in Kuna

One possibility in identifying Kuna consonants is the addition of another consonant /gʷ/, which would be pronounced as [gʷ] in its singular form and [kʷ] in its double form. This consonant, as seen in Table 5, is recognized in the pp/p system as “kkw” and “kw.” While linguistic arguments can be made for /gʷ/ as a separate consonant, this possibly is not currently being explored in the seminars, perhaps because...
of the fact that the orthography would already include independent letters for “g,” “k,” and “w.”

**Approximates**

In deciding how to write approximates, a main issue of concern has been the use of the Spanish-language conventions, “u” and “ú” to represent “w” and “u,” respectively. Oran’s orthography uses “u” and “ú,” resulting in *uaa* meaning “smoke,” and *úa* meaning “fish,” while that of Smith employs “w” and “u,” resulting in *waa* for “smoke” and *ua* for “fish.” This has been one of the most prominent issues in the Kuna language seminars as it has been a signature difference in the two main competing orthographies. After hearing arguments from both Smith and Orán concerning the w/u system and the u/ú system and conducting a short workshop on the utilization of the orthographies, the seminar participants favored the w/u system. Based on various arguments, both utilitarian and linguistic, they found the w/u system to be more appropriate. Through the workshops they noted that confusion arises when an accented “ú” occurs in a non-stressed position, which seems to draw the stress of the word, although stress in Kuna usually falls on the penultimate syllable. In the u/ú system, this occurs in words such as *úagi* [u.a□.gi] “dolphin,” spelled with a “ú.” This practice might lead the reader into stressing the first syllable of *úagi* when the stress actually falls on the penultimate syllable. In addition, the seminar participants decided that having a “w” in their alphabet, although none exists in Spanish, would be not be a problem, because different languages employ different
writing systems. It was also seen an easy practice to implement, especially among the younger generations who are apt at learning multiple languages and writing systems.

The other approximate /j/ is represented by “y” in both the w/u and the u/ú systems. This approximate appears by itself in Kuna, but it is often the product of palatalization. While both of the main writing systems utilize morphophonemic spellings that do not phonetically represent palatalization, this has been an issue in the p/pp system. Palatalization often occurs in the formation of the past tense in Kuna, where a verb such as [u.i.sa] “gave,” formed from the verb [u.ke] “give,” is written as uysa in the p/pp system, but as uksa in both the w/u and the u/ú systems. The written preservation of the palatalized consonant has been favored in the Kuna language seminars in order to better show the root of the verb which is obscured through palatalization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximates single /double</th>
<th>u/ú system R. Orán</th>
<th>w/u system L. Smith</th>
<th>p/pp system A. Green (Holmer/Sherzer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[u.a] “fish”</td>
<td>u,y</td>
<td>w,y</td>
<td>w,y yy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[wa:] “smoke”</td>
<td>uaa</td>
<td>waa</td>
<td>waa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[u.a’.gi] “dolphin”</td>
<td>uagi</td>
<td>uagi</td>
<td>uaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[gwi.li] “parrot”</td>
<td>guili</td>
<td>gwili</td>
<td>kwili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[dai.ye] “come” (come-LOC)</td>
<td>dagye</td>
<td>dagye</td>
<td>tayye / tak(e)ye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ya:.gwa] “young unmarried girl”</td>
<td>yaaghetti</td>
<td>yaagwa</td>
<td>yaakwa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Approximates in Kuna
### Vowels

Vowels in Kuna present a morphophonemic problem when they are elided in word final position. Vowel elision or deletion is very common in Kuna colloquial speech and can sometimes result in two different words having the same pronunciation after the vowel has been deleted. As shown in Table 7, *duba* “string”, which can undergo elision of the word final vowel –a, results in the allomorph *dub*. The doubled-phoneme example is *dubbu* [dupu] “island,” which can also undergo elision of the word final –u, and through the elision of the second –b to avoid a word final consonant cluster, results in the homophone *dub*. Through the elision of the final vowel, *dub* is the resulting short form for both semantic meanings. This issue usually resolves itself in context and there are very few orthographic options for addressing this issue besides writing out the word in its long form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>u/ú system R. Orán</th>
<th>w/u system L. Smith</th>
<th>p/pp system A. Green (Holmer/Sherzer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single vowels</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a, e, i, o, u, ú</td>
<td>a, e, i, o, u</td>
<td>a, e, i, o, u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Double vowels</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aa, ee, ii, oo, uu</td>
<td>aa, ee, ii, oo, uu</td>
<td>aa, ee, ii, oo, uu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| [wa:] “smoke” | | | |
| uaa | waa | waa |
| [wa.ga.] “foreigner, latino” | | | |
| uaga | waga | waga |
| [du.ru] [dub] “island” | | | |
| dupu | dup | dupu | dub |
| | | tuppu | tup (pu) |
| [du.ba] [dub] “thread” | | | |
| duba | dub | duba | dub |
| | | tupa | tup (a) |

Table 7. Vowels in Kuna
As all five vowels in Kuna occur both singly and doubly, contrast between single and double vowels in orthography is also very important. All of the three orthographies examined here represent single vowels with a single vowel and double vowel with two vowels. In writing Kuna this distinction is often difficult for Kuna speakers to remember to do because of the lack of double vowels in Spanish. As the majority of their exposure to writing has not included double vowels, it is common for Kuna speakers to forget to mark this distinction, although it is relatively easy for Kuna speakers to learn to recognize this distinction. For example, although speakers recognize the difference in vowel length between waa and waga, as seen in Table 7, it is still common to write waa with only one “a.”

**Liquids**

Liquids in Kuna pose a special issue because there are three phonemic liquids, which I call /l/, /l^2/, and /r/. As seen in Table 8, the phoneme /l/ is never doubled and has both [l] and [l] as allophones, where /l/ becomes [l] when there is no vowel elision and [l] when the final vowel is elided. This results in the possible pronunciation of /mola/ “cloth, clothing,” for example, as [mola] and [mor]. The phoneme /l^2/ only has one allophone [l] and is never reduced to [l]. Phoneme /l^2/, however, can be doubled, which is a good argument for it being a separate phoneme. The phoneme /r/ occurs as both [ɾ] and [r] and never as [l]. There are some words in which [ɾ] and [r] are in free variation and others in which they are not, as in burru “breadfruit.” There are less than five examples of words with word initial of liquids in Kuna, which may be borrowings or exceptions.
The main debate that arises with respect to liquids is whether the phoneme /l/, with both [l] and [ɾ] as allophones, should be written as “l” or “r.” Some claim that “l” is more correct, and should be used to replace “r,” as [ɾ] is a more colloquial pronunciation. Others claim that written Kuna should reflect spoken Kuna, and that “l” and “r” should be written as such when the author intends for the reader to pronounce it as such. While this issue is still being debated, it has been suggested that individuals could choose between the two in their own writing depending on their personal pronunciation or the pronunciation in context.

In practice there is actually little variation between the writing systems concerning liquids, as all three represent liquids phonetically, as seen in Table 9. Lino Smith has noted, however, that because there are so few cases of distinction between [ɾ] and [r] that it should not be represented as part of the alphabet.
Fricatives and Affricates

Kuna has only one fricative /s/, which becomes [ɬ] when doubled. Almost all occurrences of [ɬ] in Kuna are determined to be synthetic due to a double /s/, but there are some examples of double /s/ that are not assumed to be synthetic because their semantic origins are no longer known to most speakers. An example of this can be seen in the word [aɬu] “dog,,” which can no longer be simply analyzed morpheme-by-morpheme to determine if the affricate [ɬ] is actually a case of double /s/. Some suggestions as to the underlying morphemes contained in [aɬu] are as(u) su(id) “long nose,” and as(u) (a)su “nose (reduplicated),” both of which would account for the synthetic [ɬ].

There is a strong case for the orthographic use of “ss” for [ɬ], especially considering the frequent occurrence [ɬ] which is obviously synthetic in many instances. For example, consider wis(i) “know” and sul(i) “not,” which through the elision of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>u/ú system R. Orán</th>
<th>w/u system L. Smith</th>
<th>p/pp system A. Green (Holmer/Sherzer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liquids single/double</td>
<td>r,l</td>
<td>rr,ll</td>
<td>r,l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ulu]</td>
<td>ur</td>
<td></td>
<td>ur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“canoe”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[orro]</td>
<td>or *</td>
<td></td>
<td>ollo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“empty” “gold, sacred”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[mola]</td>
<td>mor</td>
<td></td>
<td>mola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“cloth, clothing”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[buru]</td>
<td>bur *</td>
<td></td>
<td>buru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ash”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[bu.le.bu.le]</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>burule</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“more, many”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Liquids in Kuna
word final vowel in *wisi* brings the two fricatives together to produce *wissuli* “don’t know,” pronounced [wiʃuli]. There are also other phonetic instances in which [ɪ] is produced, such as [ds] as is *dad(a)* “grandfather” and *se(ga)* “towards,” resulting in *dadse* “to the grandfather,” pronounced [daʃe].

Considering the concern of many of the seminar participants for the preservation of roots in orthography through a morphophonemic writing system, the use of both “ss” and “ds” to represent [ɪ] has been the most favorable. Additionally, the use of “ch” to represent [ʃ] is seen as a borrowing from Spanish that has no morphophonemic relation to Kuna. It has, however, been suggested that “ch” be used for words whose morphophonemic roots are not known. This option may make it difficult for people to decide on the orthography of words like [aʃu], that could be written as *assu* for those convinced of its origins or *achu* for those still unconvinced of its etymology.

As seen in Table 10, both Orán’s system and Smith’s system use the double “ss,” although Orán’s system still retains the “ch” for words like *ochigua* that can no longer be proved to be derived from a double “ss.” Smith’s system uses both the single and double “s,” assuming that cases of [ʃ] are still derived from double “ss,” even if they are no longer easily analyzable as such. The p/pp system does not utilize morphophonemics here, maintaining “s” for [s] and “ch” for [ʃ].
### Fricatives/Affricates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Holmer/Sherzer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| [wi.si] + [su.li] = [wi.łu.li] |
| “know” + NEG = “do not know” |
| wissuli | wissuli | wichuli |

| [o.łu.gwa] |
| “sweet” |
| ochigua | ossigwa | ochikwa |

| [da.da] +[sega] = [da.łu.e] |
| “grandfather” + DIR = “towards grandfather” |
| dadse | dadse | tut(a)se, tache |

| Table 10. Fricatives and affricates in Kuna |

### Word Order and meaning

Word order in Kuna is generally SOV, but OSV is also common. As there are no indicators of subject and object in a sentence other than a spoken emphasis, this poses a problem for written Kuna. An example given by Lino Smith is shown here:

```kuna
ua an gucha
fish 1s eat-PAS
```

SOV interpretation: “I ate the fish”
OSV interpretation: “The fish bit me”

This example can usually be determined by its context considering that the unusual event of a fish biting a person would also be marked in other ways. The case becomes more complex though, when considering examples such as the following:

```kuna
we an daksa
3s 1s saw-PAS
```

SOV interpretation: “I saw him/her”
OSV interpretation: “He/She saw me”
Lino Smith has suggested the use of a hyphen between the subject and the verb in both SOV and OSV sentences in order to stress the emphasis on the object, as is customary in spoken Kuna. The hyphen is used to string words together, necessarily making the accent fall on the second half of the hyphenated word and on independent words.

\[
\text{we-an} \quad \text{daksa} \\
3s=1s \quad \text{saw-PAS} \\
\text{“I saw him/her”}
\]

\[
\text{we} \quad \text{an-daksa} \\
3s \quad 1s=\text{saw-PAS} \\
\text{“He/She saw me”}
\]

While the practice is not currently popular because of the fact that one can generally derive the meaning of the sentence from the context, it exists as an option for the community should it decide to mark word order overtly. This creative use of a hyphen to address SOV and OSV ambiguity in Kuna is yet another example of how the Kuna orthographic system is emerging in accordance with both the linguistic characteristics of the language and the socio-cultural understanding and use of spoken and written Kuna. In addition, Smith has extended the use of the hyphen to many other circumstances that have yet to be investigated in the Kuna language seminars.

**Conclusions**

The development of a standard orthography for Kuna is indeed a complicated matter that has been even further complicated by the existing standards of writing to which the Kuna are forced to comply with to some extent. They are seeking new and innovative ways to best represent the linguistic essence of the Kuna language, taking
Kuna cultural understandings into consideration, while still feeling the pressure of pre-existing literary standards of the dominant languages.

Language ideologies are at the heart of the matter here. While the Kuna value and appreciate their language and their language practices, they understand how Western languages and the dominant society have come to sustain economic and political power through language. Language standardization is one tool of prescriptivism, which offers prestige at the expense of creativity, innovation and variation. While on the one hand prescriptivism denies the creative nature of human language, it has become a powerful marker of social status:

We who have grown up learning to read and write any of the highly standardized European languages, regardless of what mother tongue welcomed us home after our first day of school, have been deeply indoctrinated in language ideologies that privilege, indeed, almost deify prescriptive rules. Educators are the stewards of prescriptivized language and set the standards for evaluating language use. Prescriptivism demands a uniformity in writing that is neither expected nor found in speech. Prescriptivism apparatus - standardized orthography, syntax rules, perhaps even a language academy like the Académie Française or the Real Academia Española - may enhance the prestige of a language in the eyes of the world, its neighboring communities, and its own speakers (Brody 2004:267).

By creating a standard orthography, the Kuna are seeking to enhance the prestige of Kuna in new contexts, such as education. As the education system in Panama is centered around ideas of prescriptivism for Spanish, the Kuna are coopting these existing language ideologies by showing that a Real Academia Kuna is indeed a possibility. The idea of a Real Academia Kuna is humorous here because the Kuna would not only never think to truly implement such an institution, while the Real Academia Española, as an institution that touts itself to be the governing body of a powerful Western language, would shudder at the thought.
CHAPTER 5

Self-determination is Language Preservation

Ay Gwirgibipiler ar Gubyakiler ebo

Ibagwengine ay Us guinniguade Gannir neg nagaba nadapi weg dak soge
Gannir nue imas gabsii. Nue dak bali, nono sate, ber gwichiyob daklebar soge.
Miamakgwissundo Gannir e nono bina dakargu sate.

Deg arsundo e negse. Igarba danigu ieger geg ie soge. Nue soge sogeye
walagwen igarba binsadanisundo.

Banegi ay Usde nadbarsunna Gannir neg nagaba. Weg dake: Gannir guenai.
Dakargua e ibmar e wagar e dudumar gannos ito daken soge. Ay Us deg Gannir
daked bali weg gar sogdesundo:
—Be igi sae nono suli gabega. Be e burba wisirgebed.
Gannir soge:
—Bane bane gabled wachi mosdibe, an omega an sogda soge be es amiye an
nono sikegarye. Deg geb an ome metegi dii siid yakine an nono anga siidaye. We
aagala be dak soge an wagar, an dudumar, nabir daklenanaeddeye, begadgi surye.
Emide bedi bule sunna dakleye be wagar bule goro itobarye.

Deg ay Usde nue neg itosigissundo. Bule napira we dule anga sog dibeye,
gwage odimaksii sundo ay Usde. Deg gusii Gannir barwisod bur bule binsas
soge.

Deg banegine imassundo igi ega Gannir sogsa.
Gabled wachi mosgua e omede esnori dadgua bina gassundo: didsik saged e
nono! Wesega ay Us gwinniguade basursunna e ibagande bergunonisundo.
Itogua.
(Kungiler 1997:43)18

Gwirgibipiler and Gubyakiler

One day, Gwirgibipiler the Agouti,19 became curious as he walked by the
house of Gubyakiler the Rooster and saw him sitting there sleeping. He looked
again, and realized that Rooster didn’t have a head. Agouti couldn’t help but
wonder why Rooster didn’t have a head.

Agouti continued on his way home. As he walked along he couldn’t forget
what he had seen. And so he continued along, contemplating the mystery to
himself.

18 The orthography here has been changed by Kungiler according to the orthographic rules emerging from
the Kuna language seminars.
19 An agouti, known as a ñeque in Spanish, is a small mammal of the rodent family commonly found in
Panama.
The next day Agouti passed by Rooster’s home again. And sure enough, Rooster was home. But this time he was complete, with his head, feathers and all. Agouti looked at Rooster and asked him, “How do you sleep without your head? You have to have a secret way of doing it.”

Rooster replied, “Everyday when it’s time to go to bed, I tell my wife to get the knife to cut my head off. After she cuts my head off she sets it in a bucket of water. That’s why my face and my crest always look so nice, unlike you. Your face is all dirty and you look unkempt.

And so once Agouti returned home, he sat down to think. He followed his heart, and decided that Rooster really was telling the truth. And so Agouti decided to imitate Rooster.

The very next day, Agouti did exactly as Rooster had told him to do. At bedtime his wife got a big knife and Whack!, she chopped off his head. And so in the end, the mischievous Agouti was tricked into his own death.

A version of this story was told by Reuter Orán on July 31, 2002 at the Seminario Internacional: Lengua, Literatura y Educación Bilingüe Intercultural en el Pueblo Kuna (International Seminar on Language, Literature and Intercultural Bilingual Education in the Kuna Pueblo), a past seminar that is separate from the language seminars being discussed here. Orán closed the story by saying that if the Kuna pueblo tried to imitate the wagas (latinos) as Agouti had tried to imitate Rooster, they would also end up without a head. Stories are often used metaphorically in Kuna culture and are imbued with different meanings in different contexts. The story of Gwirgibipiler, the Agouti and Gubyakiler, the Rooster, is used here by Orán as a metaphor for how the Kuna pueblo should go about language, literature and educational matters in Kuna on their own terms, without trying to imitate the dominant society.

This task, however, is not an easy one. There are not only psychological blocks, but very real linguistic, social and economic impediments in language and literacy
practices as well, due to the stronghold that the dominant society has on these arenas. As Collins and Blot explain:

> Power is pervasive in the official literacies of nation states and colonial regimes, but it is a multifaceted power. It is a power of imposition, of conquest "of language and by language," but also of self-fashioning "in language." What Marx remarked long ago - that people make their own history, but they do so in conditions not of their own choosing - applies to literacy practices and identity-fashioning in colonial and postcolonial settings (2003:154).

The Kuna do indeed find themselves in a colonial/postcolonial setting not of their own choosing where they are working on finding ways to construct their own literary practices on their own terms. Marcial Arias warns of the same process, saying:

> Porque del territorio kuna deberíamos decir, Garda Gordikid aa, mege wilupindo, solo se hablará y se escribirá en idioma kuna, como nos quieren imponer también la Constitución del país, que solo el idioma oficial es el español, y nosotros en nuestro territorio, debería escribir, solo el idioma oficial es el kuna, porque así entonces podemos realmente conservar nuestro idioma. Ahora, como una salida para sensibilizar a los gobiernos, a los no indígenas, porque es una manera también de educar a los no indígenas, el bilingüismo es una alternativa, para educar también, eso va depender de nosotros, anmargi siisunnad, anmar sogde dibe, controlar anmar sae, nuestra educación bilingüe, entonces, vamos lograr nuestro objetivo, si el gobierno realmente comienza implementar, si el gobierno es el que controla, entonces seré, seguiremos bajo la política del colonialismo interno a través de la lengua española.

*Because we should say of the Kuna territory, as in the law of indigenous rights, that it should be established that we will only speak and write in Kuna just like they want to impose on us through the national Constitution that the only official language is Spanish, and so we in our territory should write only in Kuna, the official language, because that way we can really conserve our language. Now, as a way in order to raise awareness in the government, the non-indigenous population, because it is a way to educate the non-indigenous as well, bilingualism is an alternative for education as well, this will depend on us, this is sitting on our shoulders, if we say, that we’re going to be in charge of our own bilingual education, then, we will succeed in our objective, if the government really begins to implement, if the government is the controlling body, then that’s how it will be, we will remain under the politics of internalized colonialism through the Spanish language.* (Arias 2005).
Arias stresses that the Kuna language and its speakers will be subject to internal colonialism should the Panamanian State control language policies and bilingual education. In order for the educational system to function as the Kunas would have it, they have to take control of the bilingual education and resist the ways that the nation state will attempt to control future efforts in bilingual education.

The development of a standard writing system is just one of the ways that the Kunas are working to secure cultural well-being. To establish such security, the Kuna are laboring on all fronts. I would like to place this movement, however, in the context of the current efforts of language preservation and language revitalization being carried out in many indigenous pueblos throughout Abia Yala. The issue of creating an orthography is not wholly separate from language preservation, but is perhaps being conceived of quite differently. The term “language preservation” seems to imply some sort of traditional retention of a language. These movements, although sometimes led by community members, are often led by cultural outsiders and resented by community members, who may suddenly find themselves becoming living subjects. Such projects have been criticized by some as being yet another extension of colonialism that encourages native speakers to remain in a marginalized traditionalized position. The future of the Kuna language in Panama is not like that of its past or present, nor will it ever be. While those involved with Kuna cultural issues wholly support their language and culture, they do so with notions of self-determination and not self-preservation.
Kuna Culture in Orthography

In working to establish Kuna literary practices on their own terms, the Kuna have developed certain orthographic practices that are derived from Kuna culture, while simultaneously serving as a manifestation and active agent of Kuna culture. Maintaining the morphophonemic structures and etymology of words in orthography is one way that the Kuna community is looking to preserve cultural meaning. I will use it here as an example of how orthography is being used by the Kuna to express cultural knowledge.

Morphophonemic writing not only preserves underlying word structure and cultural meaning, it also resists phonetic writing systems that linguists and outsiders often impose on communities with no official writing system. Orthography here is a site of resistance, as the Kuna determine the ways in which a writing system has meaning for them and develop an orthography based on these reasons, which is some ways challenge standard conceptions of writing and literacy. Other practices, such as the writing of double vowels, are also ways in which the Kuna are stressing the essence of the Kuna language in writing. As double vowels do not exist in Spanish, some Spanish-based writing systems have only represented single vowels. While double vowels written simply as single vowels can be read and understood in Kuna, the Kuna are choosing to represent the phonemic differences in Kuna.

There are many other examples of morphophonology being retained in orthography, such as in verb construction. Verb construction in Kuna is highly agglutinative and tends to combine many morphemes together to form words. For example, the verb *gobe* “drink” and the desiderative *-bie* meaning “want to” come
together as *gobbie* “want to drink”, pronounced [gop.ie]. By maintaining the underlying morphophonemic structure, the Kuna are using writing to reflect individual morphemes that undergo phonemic changes due to the agglutinative nature of the language.

Closely related to the preservation of underlying word structure through morphophonemic writing is the preservation of etymological roots in writing. Delving into the etymology of Kuna words is interesting for the Kuna on many levels. Older words from which present day colloquial forms have emerged are considered special because they belonged to earlier generations, which are also associated with having great cultural knowledge. The etymology of many words is unknown or questionable, leaving them open to speculation and word games. Word play is entertainment in Kuna culture, and is often the center of Kuna jokes (Sherzer 2002). The search for etymological roots and written structure that will reflect them has been an important topic the Kuna language seminars. Abadio Green is especially knowledgeable in this subject and easily draws the attention of even those uninvolved in linguistics. A popular basic example of this etymological analysis is *[ma]̃ered*, which means “man”:

\[
\text{mas} \quad + \quad \text{sered} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{massered} \quad [\text{mallered}]
\]

“plantain, boy” “old” “old boy” (“man”)

The word *massered* has undergone a semantic shift in Kuna to the point where it is no longer analyzable in every day Kuna, perhaps due in part to the phonological rule that two [s] become [ʃ], but upon analysis, it is easily recognizable by Kuna speakers. Other examples are not as easily recognizable and their etymologies can still be debated, as in the example offered by Reuter Orán for *[a]̃ulu*, meaning “dog”:
In this example, the final vowels and consonants are dropped, as is common in Kuna, in addition to the phonological process of two \([s]\) becoming \(\text{[l]}\). This word is no longer analyzable in everyday Kuna and may indeed simply be \([\text{a}\text{l}\text{u}]\), lacking any modern etymological roots, although it is thought that \([\text{[l]}\) only occurs synthetically as the combination of \([s]\) with other consonants. Another possible etymology for this word has been proposed by Abadio Green as the following:

\[
\text{as(u) + (a)su} \rightarrow \text{assu [a\text{l}u]}
\]

“nose” “nose” “one who uses his nose repeatedly” (“dog”)

This possible etymology is based on the grounds that reduplication is a highly productive process in Kuna and that “nose” + “nose” can be understood as “one who uses his nose repeatedly,” such as a dog who is always sniffing.

Other examples are only analyzable on very in-depth levels, such as \text{gugle} “seven” and \text{gurgin} “hat,” for which Green has proposed etymologies based on both his linguistic and cultural studies with Kuna elders. Green explains that \text{gugle} “seven” is thought to come from \text{guli}, a set of Kuna pan pipes made of seven reeds and possibly a second meaning of \text{guli}, which means “dawn”:

\[
\text{gu(li) + g(uli) + le(le)} \rightarrow \text{gugle [gug\text{le}]} \\
\text{“pan pipes” “pan pipes” LOC}^{20} \rightarrow \text{“seven”}
\]

\(20\) -\text{lele} is a locative suffix that is especially common in ceremonial Kuna speech and appears in its shortened colloquial form –\text{le} in everyday Kuna.
Considering the tendency of Kuna to reduplicate and the fact that pan pipes are indeed made up of seven reeds, this is a very plausible etymology, albeit very removed from everyday Kuna. In addition, Green shows how *gurgin* “hat” is also related to “seven”:

\[
gul(i) + gin(e) \rightarrow gu(l)gin \text{ [gurgin]} \\
\text{“seven” POS “on”} \rightarrow \text{“on seven” (“hat’’)}
\]

Using the etymology of “seven” *guli* to reference the seven orifices of the head (the ears, the eyes, the nostrils and the mouth), Green shows how *gurgin* can be shown to be derived from a metaphor of head meaning “seven orifices.”

By looking for etymologies and cultural meaning that underlies Kuna words, linguistic analysis and the development of a standardized writing system are couched in Kuna culture. Such word play is not only a productive linguistic exercise: it serves to provoke Kuna speakers to search for meaning in their language, it draws upon important larger cultural meanings, and it entertains and intrigues audiences by being both playful and intelligent. Such examples show how Kuna writing and literary practices are being developed in ways that differ from dominant literary practices, using both culture and linguistics to inform their decisions.

In addition to this phonemic written system that the Kuna are currently developing, it is important to stress again that writing phonemically is neither constitutive of all writing systems nor all communication systems. While orality was already discussed at length and along with other phonemic writing system for Kuna, the words of Abadio Green remind us that this is part and parcel of communication systems:

Las Organizaciones Indígenas que han aparecido en distintas partes de la geografía de Apya Yala (América), han reafirmado insistentemente, que
solamente es posible la pervivencia de los pueblos, en la medida de su claridad política de su apego y a la defensa de su territorio, de su cultura y en el ejercicio de su autonomía. En ese contexto podemos afirmar a la luz de distintas disciplinas de la ciencia, que las lenguas indígenas tienen su propio sistema de escritura que han construido a lo largo de su existencia desde diferentes niveles de su comportamiento, de su conocimiento, de sus saberes ancestrales que han hecho posible que las culturas de los pueblos indígenas puedan seguir persistiendo en la sociedad actual.

The Indigenous Organization that have appeared in different geographic regions of Apya Yala (The Americas), they have insistently reaffirmed that the persistence of their pueblos is only possible through their political clarity in their dedication and of the defense of their territory, their culture, and their exercise of autonomy. In this context we can affirm through the studies of various scientific disciplines, that indigenous languages have their own system of writing that they have constructed through throughout their existence from different levels of their experience, of their knowledge, and of theirs ancestral understandings that have made it possible for the cultures of the indigenous pueblos to continue persisting in today's society (Green 2002).

Green then continues to list in detail the ways that indigenous pueblos of Abia Yala communicate visually, using examples such as how the Incas established a system of knots tied into ropes for inventories; the Emberas weave okamas that reflect daily life, society and nature; the Senues weave hats that reflect their understandings of mathematics, nature, daily life, dreams and chants; and Kuna women sew molas that depict the natural and social world through geometric designs and pictoral representations (Green 2002). These forms of communication are proof of how societies have developed and always will develop their own ways of communicating culture, regardless of whether standarized writing systems are or are not a part of their social lives. As phonetic writing has become increasingly accessible to the common population in the last century, our notions of communication systems have become narrower and more provincial to the point that Western scholars do not hesitate to make claims such as, "It is not risky to call
writing the single most consequential technology ever invented” (Coulmas 2003:1).

Because standardized writing systems are of recognizable importance for many societies in today’s world, an extra effort should be made to recognize similar human inventions that are depreciated in the process.

Hopes for the Future

There are many obstacles facing the development of Kuna writing and literature, many of which involve larger obstacles that threaten the Kuna pueblo socially and politically as well. How effective will this movement to establish Kuna literary practices actually be? This question is one that Kuna activists, however, are not at liberty to ask. Those investing their time and energy into writing in Kuna cannot hesitate and question the overall impact of their actions, but must carry on with what they know and feel is important for their people. The fruits of their labor are often small and go unrecognized, but these activists continue on, aware of the risks and the lack of benefits in the hopes that their projects, goals and dreams may one day reach their full potential. No one has as much invested in these projects, goals and dreams for the Kuna pueblo than the Kuna themselves, and so I close with words from Abadio Green, who so eloquently places the situation of the Kuna pueblo in a larger context and speaks to their concerns:


That’s how I see it too. There are many difficulties coming our way since we’re so surrounded by the latinos. I see that we’re getting worse. Itos. Those of us that are talking about this are few, itos. There are many people however, that want to make our culture and our customs disappear, itosa. The majority, itosa. This is
the first point, the second point is that the government is even worse they don't control us, but for them it is better that our culture disappears, you see. Because it is more economically advantageous. Now if we make everyone conscious, if we fight for recovery, we are going to want to tell the government that we want a budget, and just as we are, I want us to develop. If we talk about the cost, they'll respond that there is no money. That's why the government prefers that we don't talk about our culture, it is better for them, you see. That is the second point. The third point is that today all politics that deal with the environment, everything that is related to Nabgwa... who is presenting these politics? North America, all of North America wants to take over everything. They come to steal what is ours. Our current presidents do not govern, itos. And they are not going to govern, only North Americans govern, if that's how the world is turning, then how are we going to face all this? We are weak, and that's why the big companies come from over there, itos. They come to set up different industries, to make different products, to change things, you have petroleum, you have coal, you have virgin forests, you have good water, they will take these things away from us. And then how will you help your family? How are you going to defend the earth? This is what I think. If we do not act quickly on these three points that have been laid out, we will be at the point of death, itos. And because of this I say that when we talk about education, if we talk about bilingualism, that our language is on par with Spanish, but with cultural differences. It is very difficult. We do not talk about our culture anymore I see that we, I am not sure, it seems that we have come too late. But perhaps we have come at the right moment, itos. I only have to say that I will not surrender, itos. This is what I believe. There is much work to be done. If we start now, if we die during the course, it will be the will of Bab Dummad and Nan Dummad, itos. Because of this those of us who are dedicated, should not surrender or become sad. This is our work to do and we have much hard work to do, itos. Why? We are the minority. What should we do so that our brothers and sisters listen to us? Because of this I see that the only option is education. Why? If we enter into the subject of education, if we discuss this, if we make good proposals, the teachers will side with us, and the little ones will come, the children will come. In twenty years they will say that what we are doing today is not for tomorrow, but for twenty, one hundred, four hundred years from now even. What we are thinking about, if we can come to those ideas, will help us achieve well-being. Because we are going to do this work for our little ones, we will do this work for our children, we will work with them, and through this, I believe we can make this idea concrete, itos. That's why I say that the time for sleep has ended, itos. We will remain on a permanent vigil, itos. Because we have an enormous project ahead of us, this is our grand challenge, this is the end of my message, be itomargua.

(Green 2004)
Appendix A.

List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>desiderative</td>
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<tr>
<td>FACT</td>
<td>factual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUT</td>
<td>future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILOC</td>
<td>interlocative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT</td>
<td>interrogative</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOD</td>
<td>modality</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEG</td>
<td>negation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POS</td>
<td>postposition</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B.

Additional Photographs of Signs in Kuna.

All photographs by Jorge Andreve.

Figure 8. Centro Recreativo Guasirwila, of the island community Achudupu.
Figure 9. Centro Aily Kalu.

Figure 10. Fonda Kawigdi, restaurant-bar named after sakla Kawigdi
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Velarde, Aiban

Wagua, Aiban
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Webster, Anthony

Williams, Raymond

Woodbury, Tony
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