

Strung along the Caribbean coast of Panama, the San Blas Islands are the home of the Kuna Indians. The Kuna have not always lived on islands. In 1513, when the Spanish explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa first arrived in Panama, Kuna villages dotted the mainland.

*Why was our land taken away from us?
Why couldn't we be free?
We wish our fathers had been free like birds;
We want to be free as birds, as a bird's song.*
-Kuna song "Dolin Dolin Dosa"

The Kuna fought the Spaniards fiercely for control of the mainland. Storytellers say that on a beach known as Wka Nono, or the Place of the Strangers' Heads, the Kuna killed hundreds of Spaniards. Then they cut off their heads and threw them into the sea. But even that could not hold back the invaders.

About 150 years ago, the Kuna set out to sea in dugout canoes called *cayucos* to escape from the Spaniards and their descendants, the Panamanian *crillos*. The San Blas Islands offered them a safe haven where they could build villages and raise their families.

Every day, Kuna men paddle their *cayucos* to the mainland to tend their coconut plantations. When they are done, they bring back precious firewood and barrels filled with river water for their villages.

Kuna women stay at home and perform many chores. They fetch the water and carry it bucket by bucket to their huts. They cook in separate hut called a *sokakka*. There they build their own fire and prepare meals using cooking pots which rest on three stones.

Women are the center of Kuna life. When a young woman is ready to marry, she selects her husband, who is kidnapped by both of their relatives and brought to the girl's home. The young man must live in the house of his mother-in-law. Property is passed to children by their mothers.

For us, the Kuna, the earth is the mother. The mountain is the mother. Nature, the forest-as well as the earth-is a woman, not a man. The mother loves us, she helps us cultivate sugar cane, cacao, and all kinds of fruits. And then comes the mother who takes care of us in the home. She also gives us good advice.

-Delfino Davies of Sugdupu

In December, the Kuna celebrate Earth Day, which they call El Dia de la Madre, Mother's Day. For the Kuna, the earth is caring and generous, like a Kuna Mother.

Kuna women are observant and curious, and their artwork depicts many things-nature, their traditions and legends, and their daily lives. Sometimes even their dreams are told in the colorful language of a **mola**.