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*Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes, Editors*

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*Goldwork and Chibchan Identity:  
Endogenous Change and Diffuse Unity  
in the Isthmo-Colombian Area*

John W. Hoopes

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Oscar M. Fonseca Z.

UNIVERSITY OF COSTA RICA

*Introduction*

**A**n 1892 portrait of Antonio Saldaña, the last hereditary chief of the Bribri, shows him wearing a necklace of ancient bird pendants with surfaces of pure gold (see the frontispiece). His status and power permitted him to wear these ornaments, which as ancient talismans also conferred power upon him. Saldaña's use of these ornaments invoked Pre-Columbian authority, which was in turn derived from heredity and identity. It is likely that Saldaña believed the power of these *aguilas* would protect him from the aggressions of Western development in the ancestral territory of his people. The power of gold in indigenous societies of Central and South America was inextricably linked to its ability to draw upon the power of ancient identity for expressions of power in the world of the present. This attribute of gold derived from its specific place in what Eric Wolf terms the "structure of power," in which identity, mythology, and material culture are used to create ideology, "a complex of ideas selected to underwrite and represent a particular project of installing, maintaining, and aggrandizing power in social relationships" (Wolf 1999: 55).

Social identity is frequently described by reference to kinship, particularly ancestry. Wolf's examples of the Aztecs, Kwakiutl, and Nazis, as well as of the royal families of England, the Ivory Coast, and Thailand demonstrate how power can be derived from an ability to trace ancestry far back in time, including mythological time; genealogical relationships to sources of power are used to justify noble identity. For the Late Classic Maya, much power and authority derived from the ability of an *ahau* (lord) to document his lineage, tracing it to the origins of the then-present world and linking it to the identities of specific celestial bodies. The same was true of the Inka emperors, who traced their ancestry to the mythical hero Manco Capac, in turn descended from the sun (Urton 1990). Gold iconography in southern Central America and northern South America is replete with references to origins, ancestors, and relationships of kinship between powerful actors and elements of the natural world. As such, it communicates information about the identities of the individuals who used it. These identities played a critical role in the structure of power.

A useful step toward comprehending relationships between gold and power in Pre-Columbian societies is to reconstruct the “identity” of peoples within the historical and geographic spaces in which these relations were manifest. Identity derives from heredity, language, territory, and histories of common experiences. The widespread use of specific styles of gold and *tumbaga* objects in Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia suggests the existence of a certain level of identity that was common to the region as a whole. Multiple lines of evidence from linguistics, genetics, ethnohistory, and archaeology indicate significant continuities in language, population, worldview, and material culture within a portion of the Intermediate Area, offering a rich context for the interpretation of ancient identity. Such context illuminates the origins and the sixteenth-century configuration of people who distinguished themselves by the use of gold and *tumbaga* ornaments at the time of the Spanish conquest. Reconstitution of an indigenous identity also has the potential of empowering living indigenous peoples whose heritage is often interpreted as comparing unfavorably with that of Mesoamerican and Andean peoples.

The central portion of the Intermediate Area was not inhabited by an unrelated collection of independent tribes and chiefdoms, but by people who shared a common genetic, linguistic, and cultural heritage stretching back several millennia. The concept of an Isthmo-Colombian Area<sup>1</sup> is especially useful for the reconstruction of ancient identities that may have contributed to the constitution of power in ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia. This operative concept draws upon multiple lines of evidence from linguistics, genetics, ethnohistory, ethnography, archaeology, and art history. In a fashion similar to the way Mayan languages have helped define a research area, the distribution of Chibchan languages in particular can be used to outline a historical space whose “diffuse unity” provides a viable context for the interpretation of ancient goldwork, social organization, and cosmology in the region.

Linguistic patterns gleaned from ethnohistoric sources and modern field research provide an important point of departure for the investigation of historical processes in Pre-Columbian times. When these are combined with modern genetics and archaeological data, an interdisciplinary model emerges for in situ culture change associated with specific populations that challenge the concept of this region as one that was peripheral (and characterized by migration rather than relative population stability) with the notion that it was a *center*, characterized by endogenous change in populations of common ancestry who shared elements of cosmology, worldview, and distinctive forms of social organization that may inform us about the relationships among gold, power, and ideology.

The definition of an Isthmo-Colombian Area is far from problematic. Just as Mixe-Zoquean speakers framed Mayan speakers, or as the Quechua world of the southern Andes drew upon the experience of Aymara neighbors, the Isthmo-Colombian Area shared a complex dynamic that included internal linguistic frontiers between Chibchan and Chocoan speakers as well as external frontiers with Carib, Paézan-Barbacoan, and Amazonian neighbors.

<sup>1</sup> The “Isthmo-Colombian Area” does not include all of Colombia, which is also comprised of areas that may be included in the Caribbean, Amazonian, and Andean areas. The Caribbean area, for example, would include populations of the islands and littoral regions who did not speak Chibchan languages but those in the Carib and Arawakan families.

Gordon Willey (1971:278) notes, however, that for the Intermediate Area “there are no horizon styles comparable in scope to those of the Peruvian area. The closest approach to such horizontal phenomena is seen in the goldwork of Colombia and Lower Central America.” The use and symbolism of gold and tumbaga in combination with recent interpretations of linguistic and genetic evidence appear to highlight the existence of an “Isthmo-Colombian” culture area that supplants older notions. Gold artifacts have the potential to reveal common ideas whose age often predates its expression in metallurgy. Gold jewelry also existed within social and conceptual contexts in which language, kinship, and ecology conditioned the use of symbols by individuals who sought to affect relationships and behavior among others.

### *Definition of the Isthmo-Colombian Area*

There is an increasing dissatisfaction with the connotations of the terms *Intermediate Area* (Haberland 1957; Lange 1992a; Rouse 1962; Willey 1971; Willey 1959) and *Lower Central America* (Baudez 1963; Lange and Stone 1984; Lothrop 1966; Willey 1971). The Intermediate Area includes an enormous diversity of cultural groups between western Honduras and northern Peru. It was initially conceived as an area distinguished by participation in general patterns of Nuclear America, but lacking unifying, Formative “great styles,” such as those of the Olmec or Chavín (Willey 1959). Despite Willey’s noteworthy efforts at defining an “Intermediate Area Cultural Tradition” (Willey 1971:277–278), the great diversity of characteristics he describes did not include observations about ideology or worldview. Furthermore, the name *Intermediate Area* has taken on negative connotations and definition by what is *not* known rather than what *is* known of it (Sheets 1992). The term also carries implicit diffusionist and evolutionist connotations, given its position between Mesoamerica and the Andean area as a *raison d’être*—the explanation that eventually defines it.

*Lower Central America* was initially used for the region south and east of Mesoamerica, excluding South America on geographical grounds (Baudez 1963). It has its historical roots in ethnocentric formulations such as Kirchhoff’s (1943: 93) divisions of “superior cultivators” and “inferior cultivators.” The Chibchan language family, first identified by Max Uhle (1890) is the largest in this general region, and may prove to be the oldest. It inspired Kirchhoff to attempt to identify a “Chibcha” culture area in the same paper in which he presented his classic definition of Mesoamerica (Kirchhoff 1943). His notion of a culture area based upon Chibchan-speaking populations, however, was largely disregarded by area scholars, who continued to define the region not as a center but as a periphery, “lower” in a cultural evolutionary sense and “intermediate” in a geographical sense relative to the areas of “high” cultures and state societies to the north and south (Sheets 1992).

General syntheses of Lower Central America failed to account for specific cultural continuities with Colombia until Warwick Bray’s “Across the Darien Gap” (1984). The idea of defining an area based upon Chibchan populations that included portions of northern Colombia received renewed attention when his essay was translated into Spanish (Bray 1990). Upon undertaking a synthetic work on the archaeology of Costa Rica, Oscar Fonseca Z. (1992) considered it necessary, in order to organize the data known up to that moment, to

propose an alternative culture area: the Chibcha Historical Region. The nomenclature has been successively revised thus: from Región Histórica Chibcha (1992; Fonseca and Cooke 1993) to Región Histórica Chibcha-Chocó (Cooke 1993) to Área de Tradición Chibchoide (Fonseca 1994) and Área Histórica Chibchoide (Fonseca 1997; 1998).<sup>2</sup> Although Chibchan populations—defined on the basis of linguistic and genetic evidence—were central to the area’s character, there are problems with terminology linked to specific linguistic or ethnic terms. For example, *Chibcha* is an alternative name for the Muisca of highland Colombia, a group not at all typical of Chibchan-speaking populations as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The “Isthmo-Colombian” designation acknowledges the strong relationships between Central America and northern South America while avoiding conflicts inherent in the use of terms with specific cultural meanings, such as *Chibchan* or *Chibchan-Chocoan*. Isthmo-Columbia is intended, however, to emphasize the critical importance of portions of northern Colombia,<sup>4</sup> discussion of which is included in the seminal *Archaeology of Lower Central America* (Lange and Stone 1984), yet significantly underrepresented, along with Ecuador and Venezuela, in the more recent *Wealth and Hierarchy in the Intermediate Area* (Lange, ed. 1992). The *Isthmo-Colombian* designation is intentionally more restrictive than the broader Intermediate Area concept, which despite significant improvements remains limited in its interpretive value (Sheets 1992).<sup>5</sup>

Wiley drew a distinction between cultures of the Intermediate Area and those to the north and south, suggesting that cultures of “Middle America”<sup>6</sup> were “participating not only in common technical traditions but in an ideational heritage” from Late Formative times on and that Formative populations of Mesoamerica and the Andean region were “sharing in a widespread idea system and transmitting at least a part of this system to later generations and cultures” (Wiley 1959). While there may not have been a unifying great style for the Isthmo-Colombian Area, a growing body of evidence supports the notion that shared worldviews were one feature of a “diffuse unity” that conditioned the structuring of power among Chibchan-speaking peoples from the first centuries B.C. until the sixteenth century. Although the specific ideologies have been lost, elements of them remain in the iconography of gold and tumbaga ornaments. Some of these continue to play a role in indigenous identity in the region today.

The identification of culture areas as research zones has a long history in archaeology (Wissler 1938). Despite strong critiques (Creamer 1987; Lyman, O’Brien, and Dunnell 1997), they continue to structure syntheses of knowledge found in textbooks and museum exhibitions, affecting the self-identification of research professionals and the com-

<sup>2</sup> We had suggested the term *Chibcha Nuclear Area* in 1999, but this was set aside after subsequent commentary and discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Kirchhoff (1943) specifically excludes the Muisca from his “Chibcha” taxon for having “Andean cultural affinities.”

<sup>4</sup> The term *Isthmo-Colombian* does not include all of the modern nation of Colombia, which might be best divided culturally into Andean-Colombian and Amazonian-Colombian areas.

<sup>5</sup> Many of Sheets’s remarks would have to be modified to address the archaeological records of Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, which were not included in his discussion of the Intermediate Area.

<sup>6</sup> The civilizations of Middle America are defined as Lowland and Highland Maya, Monte Alban, Tajín, and Teotihuacan (Wiley 1959).

position of academic departments. Concepts such as Mesoamerica, the Intermediate Area, the Central Andes, and the Circum-Caribbean Area result from a particularistic and functionalist focus rooted in a paradigm of culture history that is heavily influenced by cultural evolutionary concerns, perspectives that guide their interpretation using morphological characteristics of archaeological remains and their distribution. By nature, they tend to privilege certain processes, such as reliance upon domesticated food sources, centralized authority, and urban settlement patterns. Concerns with the origins of state societies tend to ignore alternative trajectories.

In defining an Isthmo-Colombian Area here, priority is given to the convergence of multiple lines of evidence and to diachronic rather than synchronic elements, specifically the long-term occupation of the region by endogenous populations sharing common genetic and linguistic traits for which there is evidence of continuity of occupation but limited evidence for migration or external control. Some population movements must be acknowledged. These occurred when the area was first occupied in Paleoindian times, when Mesoamerican groups settled portions of Nicaragua and Costa Rica during the Epiclassic (Constenla 1994; Fowler 1989), when Carib populations began to occupy parts of northern Colombia (Constenla 1991), and when Chocoan Emberá and Waunaan populations moved from Pacific Colombia into the Darién (Herlihy 1985; Pardo 1987). The antiquity of Chibchan-speaking populations in the Sábana de Bogotá remains a topic of some debate (Lleras 1995). Recent linguistic and genetic data, however, suggest that the principal populations of Costa Rica and Panama were Chibchan speakers whose in situ lines of genetic descent may date back more than ten thousand years.

The linguistic and human genetic patterns that can be reconstructed for the Isthmo-Colombian Area imply a long-term dynamic of sociocultural interaction within a specific geographic-ecological unit. The linguistic and genetic affinities of its indigenous population suggest a common ancestry in terms of physical descent and consciousness. Kinship and language, which tend to be highly correlated, played essential roles in conditioning contexts for historical phenomena. Ancestral speakers of Chibchan languages, represented today by living populations with varying degrees of indigenous linguistic and cultural identity, appear to have had shared sociocultural experiences within specific spatial limits over an extended period of time. Here the term *diffuse unity* is used to refer to the effects of a cultural process distinct from territorial political centralization or dissemination of ideology from a central source. This “unity” is characterized by elements of a common worldview, historical heritage, a shared succession of endogenous cultural changes, and similar realities. The endogenous process of social change provided a way for groups that were ancestrally related to establish narrower relationships among themselves in territories of greater or smaller extent (Fonseca and Cooke 1993).

Thomas Myers was one of the first to address the issue of early cultural relationships by focusing on what was then called the Tecomate Tradition of Formative Nuclear America. He notes, “Predictably what we find is that adjacent cultures tend to resemble each other more closely than they resemble more distant cultures. Conceptually, this could be viewed as a series of overlapping cultural circles which link the civilizations at each end of the Interme-

diate Area” (Myers 1978: 205). The Isthmo-Colombian Area can be conceived as an interaction sphere within which populations were specifically related through genetic descent over time and distinguished by shared elements of a common linguistic and ethnic heritage in a context of diffuse unity, but which also had elements conditioned by a geographical cline distinguishing east from west. The concept of diffuse unity does not imply the existence of a Pax Chibcha. To the contrary, conflict appears to have been endemic, with boundary protection and maintenance a key element in marked cultural diversity and sharp contrasts between neighboring regions in spite of cosmological unity. This “unity with conflict” is similar to that expressed in the Guaymí concept of *etabalí*, or ritual brotherhood:

The *etabalí* relationship, considered as a bond of brotherhood, symbolizes, on the one hand, the union of two groups within a larger one, similar to a large kinship group that requires strong feelings of hospitality and cooperation among its members and establishes ideal notions of the comportment of relatives. On the other hand, it represents the lineage along whose length the fragmentation of the group is produced, with its inevitable consequences of opposition, aggression, and discord (Young 1978) [authors’ translation].

#### The Isthmo-Colombian Area

The Isthmo-Colombian Area is defined by populations that inhabited a geographical area within which is found evidence for long-term continuity in populations from Paleoindian times to the present. The core populations are speakers of the Chibchan language family. The Chibchan stock represents the most diverse and widely distributed language family within what previous researchers have referred to as the Intermediate Area; it is distributed from eastern Honduras to Lake Maracaibo, Venezuela,<sup>7</sup> and includes at least twenty distinct languages spoken in Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela (Constenla 1991: 30). Because information on these populations and their languages remains incomplete and fragmentary, the exact limits of this area are poorly defined. The Misumalpan and Chocoan language families are believed to have separated from Proto-Chibchan before the separation of Chibchan prior to 7000 B.P., a time when populations were small (Constenla 1991; 1995). Linguistic commonalities among the Chibchan, Misumalpan, Chocoan, and Paézán languages are best explained through their participation in a common sphere of interaction. The use of Chibchan languages by populations with evidence for long-term genetic relationships is, however, the principal marker of the Isthmo-Colombian Area.

*Northern Limits.* The northern limit of the Isthmo-Colombian Area is in eastern Honduras. The Pech (Paya) are the northernmost of the Chibchan-speaking groups (Constenla 1991). Modern Pech populations are found on the north central coast of Honduras, as well as in the Municipio Dulce Nombre de Culmí of the department of Olancho. There are also

<sup>7</sup> Inclusion of the Orinoco is suggested by some Yanomamo linguistic and genetic data (see below).

ethnic Pech in Santa María del Carbón, but the language is nearly extinct there. Whether the Pech represent a northern migration of ancient Chibchan speakers or a remnant population from what was once a larger Chibchan territory is unknown. The archaeology of eastern Honduras remains less well known than most other regions of the country, but there are important affinities between the material culture of Selin Farm and Caribbean Costa Rica. Recent work in the Talgua Valley by James Brady and the late George Hasemann revealed the existence of extensive mortuary remains in caves in association with substantial settlements, several of which have aboveground architecture (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 1997; Brady 1997; Brady, Hasemann, and Fogarty 1995). Christopher Begley (n.d.) documents numerous complex settlements in the Dulce Nombre de Culmí region dating after A.D. 1000 and identifies modern Pech as the most likely descendants of the populations responsible for these remains. There is, however, a pressing need for a genetic evaluation of Pech ancestry.

The northern frontier of the Isthmo-Colombian Area is defined by the diffuse boundaries that would have existed among Lenca, Jicaque, and Misumalpan languages and Chibchan languages. Although the former have characteristics that can be used to argue for affinities with Chibchan, they also have sufficiently distinct features that allow their classification as separate language groups. Linguistic characteristics such as postpositions and the genitive-substantive order shared with South American populations mark a clearer border with Mesoamerica (Constenla 1991: 129). Gold and tumbaga are exceptionally rare in the areas where these languages were spoken, although some elements of metallurgical iconography are present in stone and pottery. This dearth may be due to an absence of raw material, but the paucity of gold objects acquired by trade suggests that these objects did not have the same significance for northern groups as they did for those of the south. However, early Spanish references to goldworking in Taguzgalpa, a province in central-eastern Honduras, suggest the full story of gold in this region has yet to be told.

Northwestern Costa Rica is tentatively included within the Isthmo-Colombian area on the grounds that it may have been occupied by Chibchan-speaking groups throughout most of its history (Constenla 1994; Fonseca 1994). This is consistent with evidence that the principal incursions of Oto-Manguéan- and Nahuat-speaking peoples did not begin until about A.D. 800 for Pacific Nicaragua and possibly A.D. 1200 for Guanacaste (Fowler 1989). A large number of characteristics from earlier periods are shared with Chibchan-speaking regions of Costa Rica, among them goldwork (which is less well documented archaeologically in Pacific Nicaragua). The material culture of the earliest ceramic-using populations up through the end of the Zoned Bichrome period shares more patterns with regions to the south than to the north. In fact, there are significant similarities between the earliest Formative complexes from western Nicaragua southward into western and central Panama.

*The Core of the Isthmo-Colombian Area.* Costa Rica and Panama constitute the historical core and the modern center of Chibchan populations. More than 95 percent of all surviving ethnically indigenous Chibchan populations live in these two countries. Their total number may have surpassed the 500,000 estimated for the Muisca of highland Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978: 97), the other area of demographic concentration of Chibchan speakers.

Both linguistic and genetic data suggest that Costa Rica and Panama may have been the home of the original Proto-Chibchan speakers, giving this region the oldest Chibchan populations. Chocoan populations can currently be found in Darién province, eastern Panama, and along the Pacific coast of northwestern Colombia (Fig. 1). The culture history of central and eastern Panama is quite complex and includes the extinction of the Cueva (whose linguistic identity is unclear) shortly after European contact (Romoli 1987), a reoccupation of certain parts of the territory by (Chibchan) Kuna, and more recent incursions of Chocoan-speaking Waunaan and Emberá from Pacific Colombia (Pardo 1987). We may never know the linguistic identity of the ancient populations of Parita Bay or the Santa María Valley or of sites such as Sitio Conte or Cerro Juan Díaz (Cooke, personal communication, 1999). Kuna linguistics, genetics, and oral history, together with the existence of Chibchan speakers to both the east and west of this zone, suggest it was partly occupied by Chibchan populations at one time.

Adolfo Constenla Umaña has classified all of the Chibchan languages of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama into the Votic and Isthmic subfamilies. The languages in the Votic subfamily include Rama, spoken on Rama Cay in Caribbean Nicaragua, and Maleku,<sup>8</sup> spoken in the Llanuras de San Carlos of northern Costa Rica. The Isthmic languages range from Bribri and Cabécar in central and southern Costa Rica to Kuna, spoken in Darién and the Gulf of Urabá, Colombia, to the south. The Isthmo-Colombian Area may therefore include the eastern seaboard of Nicaragua, as represented in historic times by Rama at the mouth of the Río San Juan. With the exception of Maleku and the Oto-Manguean and Nahuatl populations in Guanacaste, that were the result of southward migrations from Chiapas, Guatemala, and Mexico in the Early Postclassic (Constenla 1994; Fowler 1989), all of the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica spoke Chibchan languages in Constenla's Isthmic subfamily. These include the Votic subgroup of Cabécar and Bribri as well as Boruca and Tiribí.<sup>9</sup> Constenla is of the opinion that the now-extinct Votos, whose territory in the sixteenth century included an intermediate geographic position between the Ramas and the Malekus, were also Chibchan speakers. Their territory at the time of European contact appears to have been coterminous with that of the now-extinct Huetars, the dominant Chibchan-speaking population of central Costa Rica. The most widely spoken language of sixteenth-century Costa Rica was Huetar. Studies of historically documented personal names, place names, and a small surviving vocabulary have also identified this extinct language as Chibchan (Quesada 1990, 1992, 1996). Corobicí is another extinct language that is likely to have belonged to this family.

The languages of western Panama include Tiribí, also spoken in eastern Costa Rica, the modern Guaimúic subgroup of Ngöbere,<sup>10</sup> Movere,<sup>11</sup> and Bocotá,<sup>12</sup> and the virtually extinct

<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Guatuso.

<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, Térraba, Teribe, Tirribi, Norteno, Quequexque, and Naso.

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, (Western) Guaymí, Valiente, Chiriquí, Ngábere; (Eastern) Tolé, Chiriquí, Ngábere'.

<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, Move.

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, Bokota, Bogota, Bofota, Bobota, Bukueta, Buglé, Buglere, Norteno, Murire, Sabanero, Veraguas Sabanero.

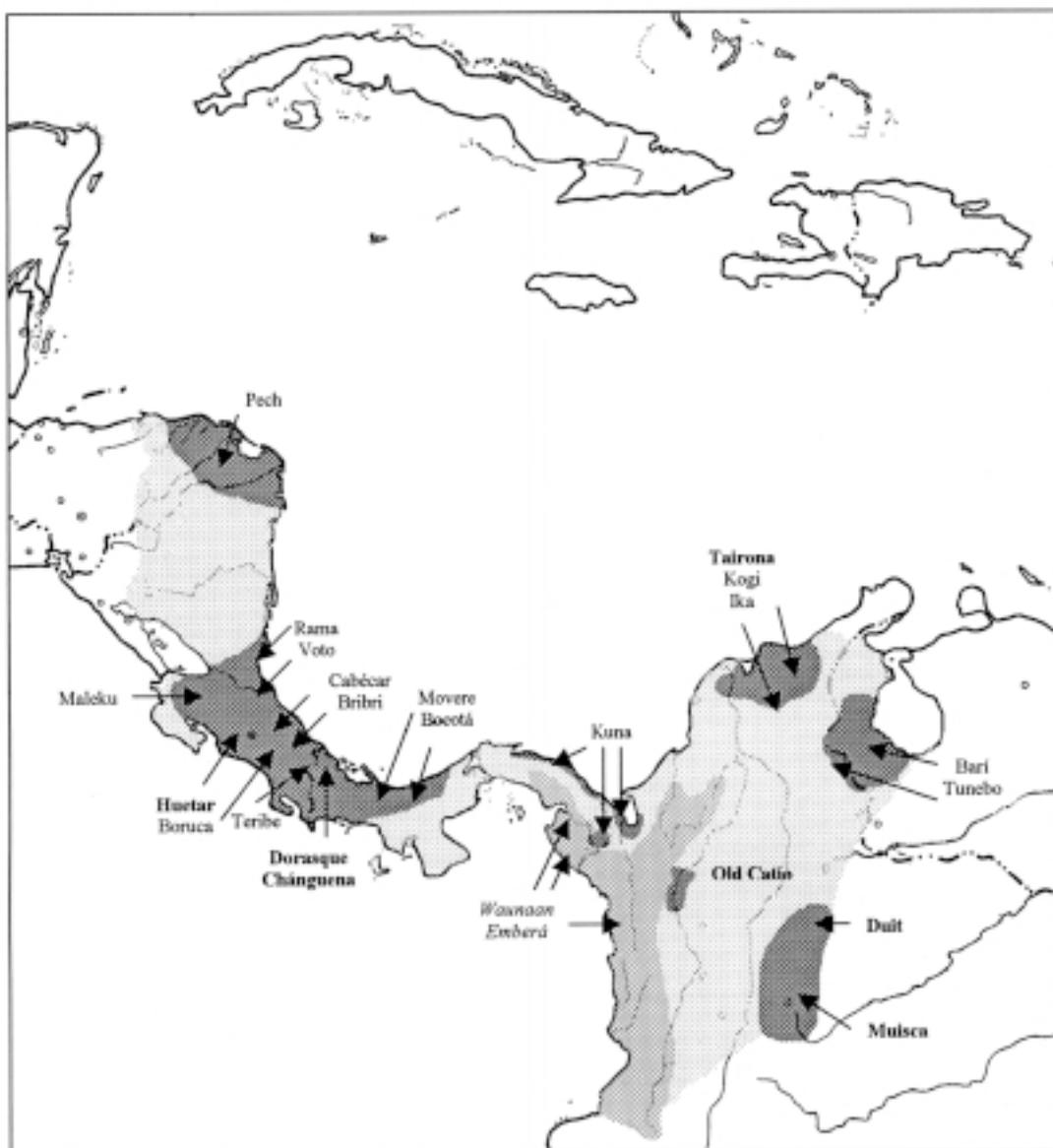


Fig. 1 Approximate areas where Chibchan (dark gray, roman type) and Chococoan (medium gray, italic type) languages are predominately spoken. Light gray areas indicate related Isthmo-Colombian territories. Extinct languages are in bold.

Doracic subgroup of Dorasque and Chánguena. Eastern Panama presents a significant linguistic frontier between Chibchan and Chococoan speakers. The principal Chibchan group is the Kuna,<sup>13</sup> who occupy the San Blás Islands and the Gulf of Urabá in neighboring Colombia. Kuna has been classified within the Isthmic subfamily, which includes most of the other Costa Rican and Panamanian Chibchan languages. To the east of Kuna, Chibchan languages are classed within the Magdalenic subfamily.

<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, Cuna, San Blás Kuna, Paya-Pucuro Kuna, Caiman Nuevo.

*Southern and Eastern Limits.* In Colombia, the Chibchan family includes languages in the Madgdalenic subfamily, which has two basic divisions: Arhuácic and Cundicocúyic. Arhuácic includes Kogi,<sup>14</sup> Ika,<sup>15</sup> and Damana<sup>16</sup>—currently spoken in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta—as well as Atanques. Cundicocúyic includes the extinct Muisca<sup>17</sup> language along with Duit and Tunebo. Old Catío, Nutabe, and Tairona may have been languages in this subfamily but are now extinct. The Isthmo-Colombian Area therefore includes the distinctive regions of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, home to the ancient Tairona and the modern Kogi, Ika, and Damana (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985; 1991b), the Sabana de Bogotá, the highland center of ancient Muisca society, and the Colombian departments of Cundinamarca, Boyacá, and Duitama.

The antiquity of Chibcha populations in the Sábana de Bogotá is currently a matter of some debate, centering on interpretations of a historical disjunction between the Herrera phase and Early Muisca populations (Langebaek 1995; Lleras 1995). The diversity that characterizes languages within the Isthmic subfamily is one of the principal reasons for identifying Costa Rica and Panama as the core of the Isthmo-Colombian Area. The greater diversity in Chibchan languages to the west and north than to the south and east suggests greater antiquity in the former. Evidence for genetic affinities of long duration with strong geographical continuity support this interpretation.

Chimila<sup>18</sup> and Barí<sup>19</sup> have also been classified as Chibchan languages (Constenla 1991; 1995), suggesting that an eastern extension of the Isthmo-Colombian Area should also include territory along the western portion of Lake Maracaibo, including the Catatumba region in Venezuela. These appear to have been Barí<sup>20</sup> territory at the time of Spanish contact, and archaeological evidence of the Berlín ceramic tradition may be associated with ancestors of the Chibchan-speaking Barí (Arvelo 1996).

*The Chocoan Frontier.* Among the principal cultural frontiers within the central and southern part of the Isthmo-Colombian Area were those between Chibchan and Chocoan speakers. Chocoan languages are found in eastern Pacific Panama and southward across northwestern Colombia to the Pacific coast as far south as the Cayapas River in Ecuador. Mary Helms notes that several scholars favor the hypothesis that “the linguistic and cultural patterns of at least eastern Panama . . . the lower and middle Atrato region, the Western Cordillera, and perhaps also the lower to middle Cauca valley could be considered a single cultural sphere” (1979: 151), citing Hermann Trimborn (1948: 47, 53, 192–193, 204) and Carl Sauer (1966: 238–239). Warwick Bray notes that “archaeologically, there is no doubt that Pacific

<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, Cogui, Coghui, Cagaba, Kagaba, and Kaggaba.

<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, Arahuaco, Aruaco, Ica, Ijca, Ijka, Ika, Ike, Bintucua, Bintukua, and Pebu.

<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, Guamaca, Guamaka, Malayo, Marocacero, Marocasero, Maracaserro, Sancá, Sanja, Sanka, Arosario, Arsario, Wiwa, Huihua.

<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, Chibcha and Mosca.

<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, Caca Weranos, San Jorge, and Shimizya.

<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, Motilón, Motilone, and Dobocubí.

<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, Dobocubí.

Darién formed a single culture province from, at latest, the time of Christ right up to the Conquest. The northern frontier of this province coincides with the limit of Cueva speech near Chame, west of the Panama Canal, and the southern boundary falls near Bahía Solano, in the Colombian Choco” (1984: 329). These territories correspond to those of Chocoan speakers, with the exception of the Chibchan Kuna.

The Chocoan family includes Emberá and Waunaan, currently spoken in Darién. Cueva, spoken in central Panama, may have represented a strong Chocoan presence there.<sup>21</sup> In Colombia, the Chocoan area is bounded to the east by the Sinú and San Jorge Rivers up to a western line delimited by the Cauca River. The inhabitants of the Sinú and Cauca Valleys appear to have been mainly Chocoan speakers. Jacinto Jijón y Caamaño (1938) was the first to note the correspondence between Chocoan languages and certain archaeological remains. The distribution of Chocoan languages corresponds to the regions of the sixteenth-century population centers of Dabeiba, Finzenú, and Panzenú and to the archaeological regions of Estorbo, Cupica, Betancí, and Calima (Constenla 1991: 48). It is at present unknown whether the classic Quimbaya of the Middle Cauca Valley were Chocoan or Chibchan speakers; there are hints in favor of each.

Chocoan speakers may have played a major role in the interactions that took place from Quimbaya to Coclé and that resulted in similarities between Coclé and Calima goldwork. The Bay of Cupica, on the Pacific coast of Colombia in the heart of a Chocoan linguistic region, appears to have played a key role in the transfer of metallurgical knowledge and styles between the Cauca Valley and central Panama. Cupica IV burials contain imported Macaracas Polychrome vessels from Coclé in central Panama along with local wares related to types from Betancí (Bray 1984: 330; Reichel-Dolmatoff and Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961). That this relationship may have a long history is suggested by the pottery styles from Cupica I burials, which are decorated with plastic techniques reminiscent of La Mula-Sarigua and Cerro Juan Díaz as well as sites in the Pacific lowlands of eastern Panama. Bray (1984: 330) hypothesizes that this ware, when it appears on the Atlantic side of Panama, may have been imported from the Pacific (Drolet n.d.: 222–227).

The linguistic affinity of the inhabitants of central Panama, particularly in the critical zone that includes early Monagrillo ceramics, the Coclé culture, and the sixteenth-century chiefdoms of Parita and Natá, remains unknown for lack of evidence. Very little linguistic data was collected in this region in the sixteenth century, and few traces of indigenous languages survive. The strongest evidence points to external contacts and exchanges with the Pacific coast of Colombia and the Quimbaya culture of the Middle Cauca, suggesting that this region may have been Chocoan rather than Chibchan. This interpretation, however, is complicated by similarities between La Mula/Sarigua ceramics and early pottery of eastern Costa Rica, an area that was historically Chibchan. Archaeological evidence from the site of El Caño, near Natá, indicates the use of rounded river cobbles to construct house mounds in a fashion similar to that in areas of Chibchan-speaking populations of Costa Rica (Fonseca

<sup>21</sup> Constenla, disagreeing with Lehmann (1920), identifies Cueva of eastern Panama as Chocoan, not Chibchan.

and Cooke 1993). There is also circumstantial evidence of cultural continuities with modern Movere and Bocotá (Buglé) populations (Cooke, personal communication, 2001).

*The Paézan/Barbacoan Frontier.* The Paézan/Barbacoan languages represent a southern frontier of the Isthmo-Colombian Area, particularly in the Upper Magdalena Valley. The site of San Agustín is located within territory that was occupied by the Paéz at the time of the first Spanish contact. While Paéz has been identified as a Chibchan language by some researchers, Constenla (1991) asserts that it belongs within the Barbacoa family. This raises the question of whether the residents of San Agustín and Tierradentro are likely to have been Chibchan or Paézan/Barbacoan. Genetic studies of Chibchan and Paézan populations support the linguistic and cultural separation of these groups (Layrisse and Rodríguez-Larraide 1995).<sup>22</sup> General similarities between San Agustín iconography and that of the Nariño region of southern Colombia and Early Horizon cultures even farther south in the Andean region have long suggested a more southerly affinity.

*The Amazonian Frontier.* Definition of the eastern frontier of the Isthmo-Colombian region is made problematic by conflicting data. Although Joseph Greenberg (1987) classifies Yanomami languages as Chibchan, Constenla disagrees. Genetic data reveal close groupings of Yanomami with Barí in Venezuela, but also with Bocotá of central Panama (Layrisse and Rodríguez-Larraide 1995), which are also genetically similar to Boruca, of southern Costa Rica. The frontier between the Isthmo-Colombian Area and the Amazonian area is marked by traits associated with the former, such as absence of gender, location of numbers after the substantive, and the exclusiveness of the subject-object-verb order (Constenla 1991: 129). The nature of interactions between Amazonian groups and those to the northwest is intriguing and merits further research.

### *Endogenous Development*

#### Linguistic Evidence for Chibchan Origins

One of the most important contributions of linguistic studies has been the identification of a hearth for Proto-Chibcha in southeastern Costa Rica and western Panama (Constenla 1991: 43). There is greater linguistic diversity among Chibchan languages within this region than in areas to the north (Honduras) or the south (northern Colombia). Languages in the Vótic and Isthmic subdivisions are found in southern Costa Rica and western Panama, while only those in the Magdalenic subdivision are found in Colombia. The beginning of the fragmentation of the Proto-Chibchan stock is estimated through glottochronology to have begun around 4000 B.C. with the separation of Paya from the main group. The fragmentation of the Vótic, Isthmic, and Magdalenic subdivisions had begun by 3000 B.C., with these divisions evident by 2000 B.C. (Constenla 1995: 44). Constenla suggests that this break can be tied to the beginnings of agriculture and the founding of permanent, sedentary villages, as

<sup>22</sup> These studies contain other puzzling results.

supported by the current archaeological data. However, it is probably wise to treat glottochronological interpretations with caution.

#### Genetic Microevolution in the Isthmo-Colombian Area

The study of human genetic diversity has revolutionized thinking about Chibchan populations, especially when combined with the above-mentioned linguistic studies. A wide variety of genetic markers, including mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), confirms that Chibchan-speaking populations of Costa Rica and Panama demonstrate strong *in situ* reproductive continuity, with few external introductions from the Early Holocene to the present. The characteristics of the Boruca, Bribri, Cabécar, Guatuso (Maleku), Teribe, and Kuna—Chibcha-speaking groups in southern Costa Rica and Panama—distinguish them from other populations in the New World (Barrantes et al. 1990: 80; Barrantes 1993: 144–145). Cluster analysis of their genetic characteristics, linguistic characteristics, geographic distribution, and a combination of the three suggests close relationships among them, with affinities ordering linearly among geographically neighboring populations along the isthmus. Ramiro Barrantes and his colleagues conclude, “Our results do not support the old view of the Intermediate Area (and lower Central America) as a well-traveled ‘frontier’ between ‘mother cultures’ to the north and south. Any such explanation would require recent waves of migration from outside the region. While there have been cultural influences from both directions, waves of migration are not compatible with either the genetic and linguistic data or with the archaeological history of the region” (Barrantes et al. 1990: 63). Their finding thus permits one to conclude that the area in which these groups are distributed had its own, endogenous dynamic of interaction (Barrantes et al. 1990: 80).

The persistence of an ancient, genetically circumscribed Chibchan population in the southern isthmus is further supported by studies of “private” polymorphisms—genetic variants specific to particular populations—and mtDNA. Private patterns in these variants suggest that there were variants in the Central American Chibcha population that had been present in the region from very early times and that a particular polymorphism, the Diego antigen (DI\*A), was widespread outside the region but absent within it. The virtual absence of DI\*A, high frequencies of antigens TF\*D-CHI and PEPA\*F (6PGD\*C), and polymorphic frequencies of five regionally restricted variants support “the idea that the peoples of this region have developed *in situ* over a very long period of time, without major intrusions from the outside” (Layrisse and Wilbert 1961). Barrantes and his colleagues note that “some of the continuity almost surely represents exchange among neighboring groups over the past 10,000 years, but the clustering within the Central American Chibcha is almost certainly due to phyletic fission” (Barrantes et al. 1990: 20). A study of twenty-two Chibchan and Paézan groups confirms a general, but not perfect, correspondence between linguistic and genetic patterns, highlighting genetic affiliations among fifteen linguistically distinct Chibchan populations (Layrisse and Rodríguez-Larraide 1995). Furthermore, “the analyses of the frequencies and distribution of polymorphic markers indicates an antiquity for the group of at least 7000 years. This supports the hypothesis that there was an *in situ* development in the

region, with a certain degree of genetic flow, or mixing between tribes, with preferences given to neighboring groups. This also favors an evolutionary model of a certain circumscribed space that did not experience great movements from north to south” (Barrantes 1998: 8).

Data from mtDNA confirm the genetic distinctiveness of Isthmian Chibchan populations (Torroni et al. 1994).<sup>23</sup> An analysis of the mtDNA of 110 Chibchan speakers shows their genetic characteristics to be significantly different from non-Chibchan groups. Of the fifteen haplotypes observed, all but four are unique to Chibchan populations. Furthermore, the range of mtDNA variation within the Chibchan group suggests a long and relatively independent process of genetic divergence, further supporting models for long-term autochthonous evolution within southern Central America. Additional mtDNA studies of Chibchan groups reveal a relatively low level of diversity, suggesting that they are descended from a specific, small founding population that was relatively isolated from genetically different populations (Batista et al. 1998: 15). Research on mtDNA from a remnant “Huetar” (Chibchan) population in Quitirrisí, Costa Rica, supports these assertions (Santos et al. 1994). Features of mtDNA and nuclear DNA indicate an initial reduction of genetic variation from the original founding population (Paleoindians of North American and ultimately Asian origin) and an increase in variation due to the subsequent appearance of new private variants, at least one of which is considered to be more recent than 8000 B.P. (Santos et al. 1994: 973). This analysis, together with the earlier recognition of serum protein variants, demonstrates “that the Huetar harbor polymorphisms of considerable antiquity, suggesting an early divergence from the regional founder gene pool for this population” (ibid.: 963). The researchers conclude that “the results argue for an in situ evolution of around 60% of the mtDNA variability” (ibid.: 975) supporting their view based on the presence of private genetic variants of a relatively isolated evolution of Chibchan populations.

A study of serum proteins from the Guaymí, Bribri, Cabécar, Teribe, Guatuso (Maleku), and Quitirrisí “Huetar” not only supports the clear separation of these Chibchan speakers from other Amerindian populations, but also confirms their variability as individually distinct populations (Bieber et al. 1996). The researchers conclude, “The two tribes of the Talamancan subgroup (Bribri and Cabécar) are closely related and are distant from the cluster of the Guatuso and Huetar tribes. These four tribes form a cluster with respect to their relations to the Teribe and the Guaymí, which are more or less loosely related to each other . . . [This] means that most of the subpopulations show relative reproductive isolation and that only between neighbors are there some affinities” (ibid.: 950).<sup>24</sup> The implication of this data is that although there is substantial evidence for the long-term in situ evolution of Chibchan populations, there is also evidence for long-term maintenance of reproductive boundaries among them. This latter hints at the importance of distinct group identities within the Isthmo-Colombian Area.

<sup>23</sup> The Torroni study did not include South American Chibchan speakers.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Bieber and her colleagues use the label *Mesoamerican* to identify the Chibchan groups, although their genetic relationships to Mesoamerican or South American neighbors were not specifically examined.

### A Holistic Approach to the Isthmo-Colombian Area

Although the data from linguistic and genetic research are impressive, they also have serious limitations. One group notes, “What emerges from our work in Central American Chibcha-speaking peoples is that the more we know about the groups in question—their demography, their geography, their history, their linguistic affinities, and their social dynamics—the better we can make sense of the genetic data we have. . . . Molecular characterization is useful, but it is no substitute for contextual understanding” (Thompson et al. 1992: 624). Confirmation of the patterns emerging from linguistic and genetic studies must come from a holistic approach to the area that synthesizes this data in the context of independent lines of evidence from ethnography, ethnohistory, and archaeology.

Archaeological models have long supported the notion of long-term population continuity in the central Isthmo-Colombian Area. Fonseca and Cooke note that the archaeological evidence argues against significant invasions or migrations in southern Central America on the basis of regional stability in space and time, shared cosmovision and technologies, the primary importance of kinship in social and political relationships, the self-sufficiency of many territories, extensive commercial networks for common and luxury items, the scarcity of sites with monumental architecture, and the conspicuous absence of state societies (Fonseca and Cooke 1993). Northern Colombia has similarly long sequences of occupation, especially in ceramic complexes following the first appearance of pottery around 6000 B.C. This continuity is not as clear in the Chibchan regions of northern Colombia. Evidence of population incursion and displacement in the Cauca and Magdalena Valleys and the origins of the Muisca in the Sabana de Bogotá are the subjects of current debate. Roberto Lleras Pérez suggests that evidence for differences in phases of occupation of the eastern Andes indicates waves of population movement from the isthmus into northern Colombia and eastern Venezuela (Lleras 1995; Sáenz and Lleras 1999).

### *Diffuse Unity in Chibchan Iconography*

Fonseca (1998; 1994) has provided summaries of continuities within the Isthmo-Colombian Area from Paleoindian times to the sixteenth century in terms of lithic assemblages, ceramic assemblages, subsistence patterns, and settlement patterns. The focus here is on iconographic continuities that merit further discussion. The evidence for strong linguistic, genetic, and archaeological continuity raises the question of whether there was also a persistence of ideas and symbols representative of diffuse unity among Isthmo-Colombian populations. Given the antiquity of shared heritage and the absence of unifying political entities in the late periods, it seems more likely that any diffuse unity in the use of gold objects may be representative of the kinds of successful ideologies manifest in the great styles of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes. Richard Cooke and Warwick Bray were the first to define the “International Style” of gold and tumbaga artifacts, noting that similar forms were distributed from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the Sinú Valley and Gulf of Urabá north-

ward into Costa Rica (Cooke and Bray 1985). Bray later notes, "From the early centuries A.D. until about 900, the vast region from central Colombia to northern Costa Rica (a straight-line distance of about 800 miles) was one metallurgical province" (Bray 1992: 39). The distribution of the International Style conforms roughly to that of historically documented Chibchan- and Chocoan-speaking peoples in northern Colombia and the southern Central American isthmus, and hence the core of the Isthmo-Colombian Area. The regionalization of gold styles after A.D. 900 maintained a continuity of content, if not form, in the expression of commonly held ideas and leitmotifs about the cosmos, shamanism, and mythology. As Bray states, "the prediction of a pan-Chibchan belief-system seems to be confirmed" (1997).

A diffuse unity of traditions is demonstrated by iconographic themes found throughout the Isthmo-Colombian Area. These themes persisted for more than fifteen hundred years in some parts of the region. While it is difficult to identify specific meanings of these themes, and it is important to keep in mind that similarities in form may not signal similarities in meaning, their presence in goldwork and other media suggests a greater ideological coherence throughout the region than has been heretofore suggested. This cannot be attributed to political unity, and explanations linked to trade networks fail to explain why certain iconographic elements persisted while others did not. This is especially true for those themes whose appearance, at least in the isthmus, precedes the use of gold metallurgy.

Cooke and Bray (1985) suggest that the objects they place within the International Group were widely distributed in part because they were not tied to a particular ideology. They state, "The iconography, stressing simple realistic animal and human figures, may have been widely acceptable because of its lack of specific imagery or mythology" (Cooke and Bray 1985: 42). Bray further suggests that "the International Group was ideologically non-aligned and therefore more widely acceptable" (Bray 1992). Although objects of the International Group may have been politically nonaligned, they may have been widely accepted precisely because they *were* linked to a general cosmological repertoire, malleable to local situations. Bray suggests that the basic elements of a cosmology persisted across the Isthmo-Colombian Area from perhaps the first centuries A.D. until the time of the conquest (and in some places for several centuries afterward).

In addition to the elements of the International Style defined by Cooke and Bray, several other themes appear in the goldwork of the Isthmo-Colombian Area, including in the Conte and Veraguas-Gran Chiriquí groups as well as in the Sinú, Tairona, and Muisca styles. Although expression of these themes varies widely, their reproduction represents a diffuse unity in elements of cosmology and worldview, the roots of which may ultimately derive from a common linguistic and genetic heritage whose manifestations were reinforced by ongoing historical interactions in similar environmental settings. These themes, and the medium of gold, played a critical role in structuring power by emphasizing or implying continuities in ideology between actors in the present and those in the past. They facilitated the communication of heritage, even among individuals from different cultures within the Isthmo-Colombian world (Helms 1992).

## Meditative Shaman

One of the most prominent of these themes features a figure in either a meditative state or undertaking personal acts associated with the practice of shamanism (Fig. 2). The individual's hands are often holding rattles, gourds, or double-scroll paraphernalia. He is usually depicted unclothed, adorned with a necklace, leg ligatures, and simple headgear (often in the form of a conical cap). The individual is shown either standing or seated, facing forward with a tranquil gaze characterized by narrowed eyes—characteristically represented by horizontal lids—and similarly portrayed pursed lips. Among the distinctive conventions used for this form are broad, angular shoulders and bent or curved elbows. The clearest and best-known representations of this theme are on finely crafted gold *poporos*, or lime containers, from the treasure of the Quimbayas, removed from two graves at La Soledad, Filandia, in the Middle Cauca Valley of Colombia in 1891 (Fig. 2b) (Bray 1978: nos. 358, 360). They are shown holding gourds with lime dippers or paraphernalia with double or quadruple spirals (Bray 1978: nos. 379, 380). The dating of these containers is problematic, but present estimates place them between A.D. 400 and 1000 (Bray 1978: 51).

This theme also appears in the stone statues from Barriles, in Chiriquí, Panama (Figs. 2a, c) (Stirling 1950; Vidal 1971). The broad, angular shoulders, front-facing pose, and sparse attire (a necklace and a conical cap), as well as the distinctive representation of the figure's face relate these to the roughly contemporaneous Quimbaya figures. These figures have been interpreted as centralized leaders in a “man-over-slave” motif (Haberland 1984), but could also represent respected elders being transported in themes related to dances or mythological events (Hoopes 1996). It is important to note that the majority of the Barriles figures are single, standing individuals. Several wear small human figures around their necks (Figs. 2a, c, f). Matthew Stirling (1950) suggests that these might be gold figures, but gold has yet to be documented in associated contexts in western Panama. Their size and lack of stylized representation make them distinct from Veraguas or Diquís figures that might date to this period. If they represent gold ornaments, the shapes and sizes of the figures worn by the Barriles statues are most similar to the Quimbaya objects with which they share stylistic elements. The fashion in which the Barriles statues wear these human figures is especially reminiscent of the way that a Quimbaya figure wears a *poporo* (Fig. 2b) (Bray 1978: no. 358).<sup>25</sup> The dating of the Barriles statuary is problematic, but most likely falls between A.D. 200–600 (Hoopes 1996). Although the chronology of the Barriles statues and the Quimbaya figures remains problematic, a parsimonious interpretation would have them contemporaneous at around A.D. 400–600. This is also contemporaneous with the Cerro Juan Díaz burials, which contain materials related to this theme (Sánchez n.d.). The Meditative Shaman is also represented in stone sculpture reportedly from Azúl de Turrialba, Costa Rica (Fig. 2e) (Benson 1981: no. 194).

<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, these small figures may be made of jade or greenstone, in a form that may predate the Quimbaya figures and is not associated with coca use. A jade figure of appropriate form and size is reported from Hakiuv, Talamanca (Benson 1981: 143, pl. 75).



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h

Fig. 2 *opposite* The Meditative Shaman theme: (a) human effigy statuary (note neck ornament on upper figure), Barriles, Chiriquí, Panama (Cavatrunci and Terenzi 1992: no. 341); (b) seated man, Quimbaya style, Filandia, Quindío (Treasure of the Quimbayas), Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 358); (c) human stone sculpture (note human effigy neck ornaments), Barriles, Chiriquí, Panama (Vidal 1971); (d) (Bray 1978: no. 380); (e) human stone sculpture, central Costa Rica (Benson 1981: 62); (f) decorated monumental metate (note neck ornaments), Barriles, Chiriquí Panama (Linares, Sheets, and Rosenthal 1975); (g) Kogi *mama*, the high priest of Mamaróngo, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pl. xii); (h) Ika *mama* (note conical sisal hat), Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1991a: 103).

Note that the use of a small, conical cap to designate occupation, rank, or status is widespread throughout the Isthmo-Colombian Area. It is found on the Quimbaya human figures in burials at Sitio Conte (Lothrop 1937: figs. 113, 114, and 148f), on ceramic figures from the Diquís Delta (Lothrop 1963: fig. 50b), and on stone statuary from Barriles (Stirling 1950; Vidal 1971) and Las Mercedes (Mason 1945: pl. 45D). The woven, conical cap worn by Ika holy men and Kogi *mama* (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pl. xiii; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1991a: 103, 105, 110) probably represents a survival of this ancient tradition (Fig. 2g–h). The cap itself has metaphorical links to the shapes of initiation huts and the thatched roofs of Kogi temples and houses (Fig. 3) (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pls. vii, xiv, xxxii; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1991a: 101, 108).

### Spiral Ornaments

Among the objects associated with the Meditative Shaman theme are double-spiral wands, usually found on staffs and nose ornaments (Fig. 4) (Bray 1978: nos. 312–318). The simplest representation of the spiral appears in some of the earliest goldwork from the isthmus, as represented by nose ornaments from Cerro Juan Díaz (Sánchez n.d.). Cooke and Bray (1985) place the double-spiral nose ornament in the Initial Group (A.D. 1–500) (Bray 1992: 34). One was recovered from a burial near La Fortuna, Costa Rica, where it was found with tumbaga artifacts in Quimbaya and Tairona styles (Baudez and Coe 1966; Stone and Balsler 1965). Another was found in a tomb in the Tonosí region of Panama (González 1971). Spiral ornaments are also known from the Tairona, Sinú, and Gulf of Urabá regions. Spiral elements remain a ubiquitous element in the goldwork of the Isthmo-Colombian Area as parts of headgear and ceremonial paraphernalia.

Figures presented frontally holding staffs with double spirals appear in goldwork of the Diquís, Quimbaya, and the Tairona. A Tairona pendant suggests that the staffs are related to the overhead spirals that also appear on these figures, especially the pair rising directly from the figure's head (Fig. 4c) (Jones 1985: no. 44). The meanings of these staffs are unclear, but Kogi *mama* use objects in the form of twisted loops and rods (*pipíska*) to provide instructions to novices about such celestial events as solstices, equinoxes, and lunar phases (Fig. 4d).<sup>26</sup> These recall double-spiral elements of tumbaga ornaments (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pls. xxxiii, xxxviii).

<sup>26</sup> "It is essentially a model of solstices and equinoxes, the two hoops representing the extreme solar



a



b

Fig. 3 (a) Bribri *palenque* residence of the late 19th century, Talamanca, Costa Rica (Hartman 1991: 28). (b) The main temple of the Kogi settlement at Takina, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pl. vii).

## Double-Headed Saurian

The theme of a double-headed reptile (Fig. 5) has a broad distribution across time and space. While not confined to the Isthmo-Colombian Area, it is perhaps the theme with the longest chronological duration and the widest geographical distribution. This figure is most often represented not as a double-headed serpent, but as a bicephalic crocodile or caiman. It can be depicted alone, but it has its greatest significance when it is used to frame or accentuate another figure. The double-headed saurian can appear either above, below, or in both locations relative to a central figure. The motif is found on ceramics, volcanic stone sculpture, jade, and goldwork.

The most recognizable elements of the double-headed saurian iconography are the nose and mouth with teeth. In its most stylized form, only these are included, to the exclusion of any references to body, scutes (the jagged skin of the crocodile), or even eyes. The nose is invariably represented as a curl as a reference to the portion of the animal's body that is visible while it lurks beneath the surface of still water. These images are clearly derived from full-figure representations, one of the best examples of which is found on a flying-panel metate, reportedly from San Rafael de Coronado, in the central highlands of Costa Rica (Fig. 5a) (Benson 1981: no. 147; Graham 1992: fig. 4), dated to ca. 400–700 A.D.

The double-headed saurian is also featured prominently in a painted design on a seated Galo Polychrome figure from Bagaces, Guanacaste, Costa Rica (Fig. 5h), probably dating to A.D. 500 and shown wearing what may be jade ear flares, a jade axe pendant suspended from his neck, and gold disks with circular repoussé designs on his chest, arms, and legs.<sup>27</sup> The use of this theme lasts well past the Spanish conquest. A wood carving in the form of a double-headed saurian taken from a seventeenth-century Kogi *adoratorio* in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is preserved at the Museo Missionario-Etnológico of the Vatican (Fig. 5b) (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pls. XLIII, XLVA; Uribe T. 1996: 30).

In some cases, the double-headed saurian is an isolated motif, as on a pair of tweezers from Costa Rica (Fig. 5d) (Karpinsky de Murillo 1997: no. 274) and a bell from Sitio Conte (Hearne and Sharer 1992: pl. 43). It is also common as an element of headdresses (Karpinsky de Murillo 1997: nos. 252, 253, 268, 269), including an example on a Darién-style pendant (Bray 1992: fig. 3.5). Other times, it appears as an appendage or accent to a larger theme, emerging from heads or thighs of human figures (Jones 1985: no. 102), from the mouth of a frog (Deletaille and Deletaille 1992: fig. 254), or from its legs (Karpinsky de Murillo 1997: no. 238). The serpent feet of a jade figure from Hakiuv, Talamanca, also echo this theme

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positions. The object is used as a mnemonic device, and as a seasonal and monthly sky calendar on which all ritual dates can be 'read' and foretold. The artifact is also used during the process of twisting the yarn for the braided cords that are sewn on men's garments, and which symbolize umbilic cords and union with the Mother. The braiding of these cords signifies alliance, unity, balance" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the objects that he is wearing are duplicated in deposits at the site of Finca Linares, which contained greenstone ear flares, an axe pendant, and a gold disk as well as a tumbaga human figurine with features in common with Quimbaya figurines and flying panel metates (Herrera 1998).



a



b



c



d



e

Fig. 4 *opposite* The double-spiral theme: (a) human-effigy lime flask, Quimbaya, Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 379); (b) transformed human holding spiral ornaments on tumbaga pendant, Palmar Sur, Diquís, Costa Rica (Fernández and Faith 1991: pl. 11); (c) masked-figure pendant, Tairona culture, Colombia (Jones 1985: no. 44); (d) double-spiral nose ornament, Tairona culture, Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 318); (e) *pipíska*, “sky calendar made of hoops and rods” in the rafters of a Kogi house, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pl. xxxviii);

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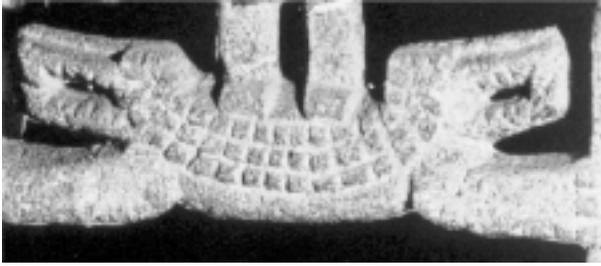
(Benson 1981: pl. 75, no. 177). An association of the double-headed saurian with transformation and flight is found in a tumbaga bat pendant from Sitio Conte, Panama, with wings represented by stylized saurian heads (Fig. 5g) (Hearne and Sharer 1992: pl. 18), a theme that also appears on a jade pendant from Guanacaste, Costa Rica (Benson 1981: pl. 86, no. 37).

A variant of the double-headed reptilian is a belt that terminates in two snake heads. One of the clearest examples of this form appears on an embossed plaque from Sitio Conte (Fig. 5i) (Hearne and Sharer 1992: pl. 1) on a figure who also has prominent leg ligatures (Graham, in this volume).

### Beak Birds

Birds with long, prominent beaks are ubiquitous in the goldwork of the Isthmo-Colombian Area (Fig. 6). The nature of the representations does not permit specific identification of species, but long, curving beaks are suggestive of toucans, vultures, or possibly hummingbirds. “Beak bird” iconography first appears in Costa Rica as a theme in Pavas and El Bosque phase pottery (Benson 1981: pls. 25, 26) (Calvo et al. 1995: no. 137; Karpinsky de Murillo 1997: no. 164) and axe god pendants (Benson 1981: pl. 67, 80–83) during the first centuries B.C.<sup>28</sup> It is a distinctive element of Costa Rican flying-panel metates, where they are sometimes shown pecking on human heads (Benson 1981: pl. 51; Graham 1992: fig. 9). Present in the Initial Group, long-beaked birds are one of the earliest themes in Chibchan goldwork. They continue as common representations on Veraguas–Gran Chiriquí goldwork (Fig. 6h–i) (Lothrop 1950) and in Sinú staff heads (Fig. 6d) (Falchetti 1995: figs. 1–14). Birds are an element of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff’s Icon A (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988), which is specifically associated with shamanistic practices. Multiple beaked birds often accompany human figures on Tairona tumbaga pendants (Fig. 6e) (Bray 1978: no. 263; Jones 1985: no. 44). An individual who has dual head eminences and a splayed-tail bird pendant is found on a repoussé Tairona pectoral, reportedly from the bank of the Río Piedras, Santa Marta, Magdalena, Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 307) (note that this figure is squatting above a double-headed serpent motif). Multiple beak birds also appear in Muisca and Tairona pendants (Bray 1978: no. 309), including the Mazaruni Dragon found in Guyana (Fig. 6f) (Whitehead 1990, 1996). Beak birds survive in goldwork as the oft-mentioned *águilas* of the conquest period

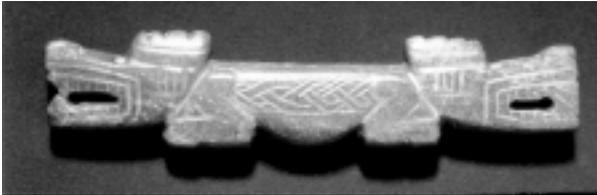
<sup>28</sup> Note that this is contemporaneous with the prominence of the Maya Principal Bird Deity iconography, to which it may be related, in areas of eastern and southern Guatemala (Parsons 1986).



a



b



c



d



e



f



g



h



i

Fig. 5 *opposite* The double-headed saurian theme: (a) flying-panel metate with double-headed crocodile motive from San Rafael de Coronado, Costa Rica (Cavatrunci and Terenzi 1992: 247); (b) double-headed saurian, wooden sculpture, 17th century, Kogi culture, Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1990: pl. xIvA); (c) double-headed crocodile of jade, northwestern Costa Rica (Calvo, Bonilla, and Sánchez 1992: no. 55); (d) gold tweezers with double-headed saurian motif, Diquís, Costa Rica (Karpinsky de Murillo 1997: no. 274); (e) bat/crocodile pendant of greenstone from Costa Rica (Calvo, Bonilla, and Sánchez 1992: no. 76); (f) masked-figure pendant, Diquís, Costa Rica (Jones 1985: no. 10); (g) bat/crocodile pendant, Sitio Conte, Panama (Hearne and Sharer 1992: pl. 19); (h) human-effigy vessel with double-headed saurian motifs, Galo Polychrome, northwestern Costa Rica (Benson 1981: cover); (i) gold disk from Sitio Conte, Panama (note double-headed belt) (Hearne and Sharer 1992: pl. 1).

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(Ibarra, in this volume), and many of them may represent harpy eagles although their disproportionate beaks retain the appearance of other species.

### Crocodile Man

As Bray notes, the Crocodile God is one of the oldest and most widely recognized of themes in Chibcha art and one of the most ubiquitous characters in the artwork of Sitio Conte. It was present before A.D. 500, represented in the earliest graves at the site (Bray 1992: 43). According to Bray, “The survival of this Crocodile God as the principal icon for more than a thousand years (in Old World terms, from the Late Roman Empire to the voyages of Columbus) demonstrates that the belief-system of the native Panamanians was almost as old as the Christian religion that came to replace it” (Bray 1992: 46). In Costa Rica, anthropomorphic figures with crocodile heads appear in flying-panel metates and carved jade (some with conical caps) (Benson 1981: no. 158) and continue to be a prominent theme in goldwork from Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.

Several artistic conventions are commonly found in representations of the Crocodile Man (Fig. 7). One of these is accentuated shoulders, either squared or peaked. As noted above, such shoulders are also found in the Meditative Shaman theme. Another is the depiction of bent elbows in an unnaturalistic U shape. One of the clearest examples of this latter convention appears on a flying-panel metate reported to come from San Rafael de Coronado, Costa Rica (Fig. 7a) (Graham 1992: fig. 4). Another comes from a metate reportedly from La Unión de Guápiles, in the Caribbean lowlands (Fig. 6e) (Graham 1992: fig. 8). Each has an anthropomorphic figure with a crocodile head. The former stands on a double-headed crocodile while the latter stands on a jaguar. The distinctive combination of squared shoulders and curved elbows on a frontal figure appears on goldwork of the Veraguas–Gran Chiriquí style (Jones 1985: no. 106). (This figure also has stylized antlers reminiscent of Coclé artwork.) One figure from the Chiriquí region has a double-saurian headdress (Jones 1985: no. 6); another displays deer antlers (Jones 1985: no. 3). Hands are often represented in the same manner as on the metates, with semicircular palms and stylized, parallel fingers executed in false filigree. The Costa Rican flying-panel metates are dated to between the first and seventh



a



b



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h



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e

Fig. 6 *opposite* The beaked bird theme: (a) pot stand with beak birds and frogs, Atlantic Watershed, Costa Rica (Calvo Mora, Bonilla, and Sánchez 1995: no. 137); (b) jade bird pendant, Costa Rica (Calvo Mora, Bonilla, and Sánchez 1995: no. 94); (c) flying-panel metate with beak birds, central Costa Rica (Deletaille and Deletaille 1992: fig. 247); (d) bird-effigy staff head, Sinú style, Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 236); (e) triple-bird pendant, Muisca style, Colombia (1992: 63, M4); (f) Mazaruni pectoral, Muisca style, Venezuela (Whitehead 1990); (g) bird pendant, Tairona, Minca, Santa Marta, Colombia (Bray 1978: no. 299); (h) bird pendant, Diquís, Costa Rica (Calvo Mora, Bonilla, and Sánchez 1995: no. 102); (i) bird pendant, Veraguas, Panama (Lothrop 1950: fig. 72b).

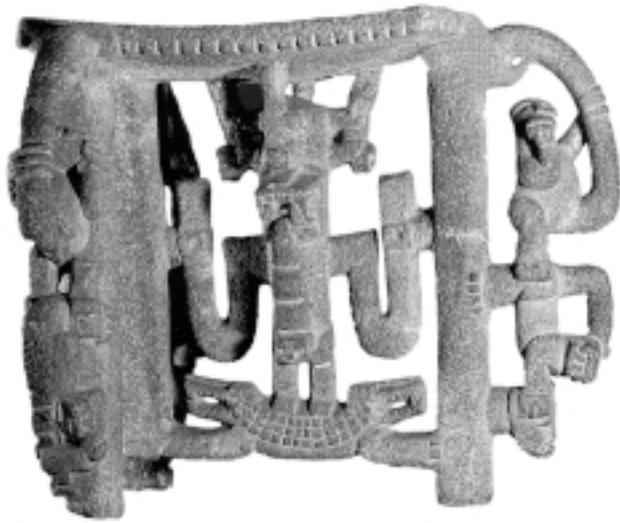
centuries, indicating that this stylistic convention, when it appears in goldwork dating from the tenth through the sixteenth centuries, is one that may have endured for almost a millennium. The particular hand shape of the figures on these objects, however, raises some chronological questions. While the U-shaped hand with long, narrow fingers makes sense in false filigree goldwork—note that this convention is also utilized in Muisca *tunjo* figures (Jones 1985: no. 42), which also have square shoulders, U-shaped elbows, and faces that recall those of the Meditative Shaman—its representation in stone is less intuitive. This raises the possibility that the designs on flying-panel metates are derived from goldwork, rather than the reverse, and that at least these elaborate examples may date much later than previously thought. (The circular objects in the hands of these figures may be repoussé gold disks.)

The Crocodile Man is frequently associated with the double-headed saurian motif, as on the metate from San Rafael de Coronado (Fig. 7a) and an example of goldwork in the Diquís–Gran Chiriquí style featuring a Crocodile Man framed with stylized double-headed reptiles above and below him (Fig. 7b) (Benson 1981: no. 273).

### Bat Man

Bat Men have been identified by Anne Legast (1993) in Tairona goldwork on the basis of a triangular, leaf-nose element and spread wings. Other iconographic conventions associated with bat figures include crescent-shaped wings, such as those on a conical ceramic stool from the Chiriquí region, decorated with a frontal image of a bat with stylized wings in the style of Veraguas–Diquís goldwork (MacCurdy 1911: pl. XLVid). Representations of bats in gold from Palmar Sur, Costa Rica, are anatomically incorrect in their placement of claws but include the crescent-wing convention in more realistic representations (Benson 1981: no. 263).

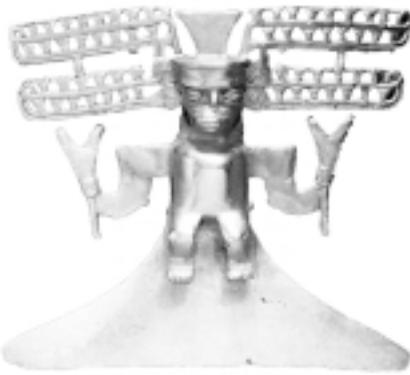
The Bat Man is a prominent figure in Tairona goldwork, where this character is shown holding the double-scroll (*pipíska?*) paraphernalia (Fig. 4c). Humans transformed into bats have been identified as representative of shamanistic flight, in which the essence of the bat becomes a guiding force in shamanistic power. Bats and birds appear to be conceptually linked in some Chibchan thought. For example, the Kogi classify them as nocturnal birds (Legast 1987: 49). These representations may be of a specific type of shaman. María Stella González de Pérez (1996: 49) has recently identified the term *supquaquyn* (glossed as *brujo* in colonial dictionaries) for “bat-priest” in Muisca terminology.



a



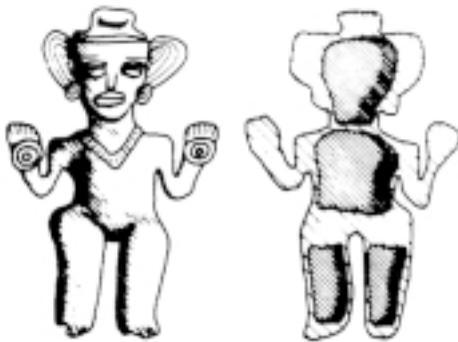
b



c



d



e



f

Fig. 7 *opposite* The Crocodile Man theme: (a) flying-panel metate from San Rafael de Coronado, central Costa Rica (note figure with upraised hands) (Cavatrunci and Terenzi 1992: 247); (b) “crocodile man” figure, Diquís, Costa Rica (Benson 1981: pl. 100); (c) human-effigy pendant, Veraguas or Dirquís (note angled shoulders and U-shaped elbows) (Jones 1985: no. 11); (d) human-effigy pendant, BCCR Cat. No. 300 (Cavatrunci and Terenzi 1992: 285); (e) human-effigy tumbaga pendant (note circles in palms), Finca Linares, Guanacaste, Costa Rica (Herrera 1998: fig. 9b); (f) flying-panel metate from La Union de Guápiles (detail) (Benson 1981: pl. 51).

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### Complex Combinations

Figures manifesting elements of multiple themes are among the most powerful images in goldwork from the Chibcha area. The standing figure from Puerto González Víquez, Costa Rica (Fig. 6b) (Benson 1981: no. 293), has the stance and head spirals that often appear on the Meditative Shaman, the curled nose, grimacing mouth, and U-shaped hands of the Crocodile Man, a leaf nose and crescent shapes on his thighs that recall the Bat Man, and a double-headed snake represented by heads on his chest connected by a twisted cord that runs through his mouth. The themes represented here are also manifest in Tairona Bat Man shaman figures.

### Summary

That the themes discussed here—the Meditative Shaman, double-headed saurians, beak birds, spiral ornaments, the Crocodile Man, and the Bat Man—appear throughout the Isthmo-Colombian Area in iconographic contexts suggests a diffuse unity of belief systems characterized by the way elements of ecology were used within structures of thought in areas where populations shared genetic and linguistic ancestry. Their antiquity, stretching back to the first centuries B.C.—at least two thousand years before the arrival of Europeans—is suggestive of early, widespread belief systems that incorporated related, common mythologies. Their persistence in the context of Chibchan-speaking populations and relative absence beyond their boundaries suggests that these themes’ recognition and use were a significant component of areal identity.

### Isthmo-Colombian Variations

Although there are a number of elements indicative of diffuse unity in religious and iconographic traditions within the Isthmo-Colombian Area, agricultural systems reveal both continuities and divisions. There is a great deal of unity throughout the region with respect to the use of specific agricultural products. Root crops, for example, were a staple. Tree crops, such as *pejibaye* (*Bactris gasipaes*), are found everywhere but in the highlands of the Muisca populations. *Chichas* were consumed throughout the Isthmo-Colombian Area. In fact, the use of maize primarily for making chicha may be a characteristic that separates this area from Mesoamerica, where maize was used primarily for masa to make tortillas and tamales. Chichas were made from products as varied as *guanabana* (*Annona* sp.) and *pejibaye*. This suggests that

their use was one that is quite ancient, dating perhaps before the production of ceramics (Hoopes 1995).

There are some significant cultural differences in plant use within the area, especially between the Isthmian Chibchan groups to the west of the present-day Chocoan area and the Colombian Chibchan groups to the east. For example, ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence highlights the importance of cacao for the western groups, who used it for a beverage prepared on special occasions. It is not known when cacao was first used, but it was probably consumed in finely crafted serving vessels, such as the tall Africa Tripods of the Atlantic Watershed region (Benson 1981: pl. 34). It was still considered a high-status ritual beverage by Talamancan peoples at the time of Doris Stone's ethnographic fieldwork (Stone 1961).

Coca, on the other hand, was a fundamental element in the ritual life of the Colombian Chibchan-speaking populations. One does not need to delve far into Kogi ethnography before the significance of coca is abundantly evident (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985; 1988). The earliest indirect evidence for its usage is the presence of *poporos* (lime containers) and lime dipping sticks in the Calima and Quimbaya cultures of Colombia (Cardale de Schrimpff et al. 1992), probably in the first centuries B.C. While there are a few references to what may have been examples of coca use in western Panama and Costa Rica, evidence of coca cultivation is practically nonexistent, and it seems clear that coca never had the central role for Isthmian Chibchan populations that it did for those of northern Colombia.

Chiriquí represents the easternmost extension of domesticated cacao, while Darién represents the northern- and westernmost extension of coca cultivation. One explanation may be ecological. The dry regions of central Panama were unsuitable for the cultivation of either cacao or coca. The north coast of Colombia is also a poor region for the cultivation of cacao. It remains difficult, however, to reconcile the relative absence of coca use in Central America and the relative absence of cacao consumption in Colombia with the apparently abundant evidence of interregional exchange of goldwork—especially in the context of shamanism—and the continuity of relationships between Isthmian and South American Chibchan populations.

An alternative explanation is that the importance of coca and cacao in these respective regions postdates the formation of the core cosmologies shared by Chibchan-speaking peoples distributed roughly north and east of the Chibchan-Chocoan frontiers. As these products became integral to the lifeways of peoples of the isthmus and northern Colombia, they were incorporated into respective cosmologies as an overlay onto more ancient belief systems. In essence, the iconographic themes are quite ancient, but their associations with specific practices are more recent.

### *Conclusions*

Bray was especially impressed by two aspects of what he terms an Isthmian Interaction Sphere, extending from Yucatan (specifically Chichén Itzá) to central Colombia: the “frontiers between discrete cultural provinces remain constant for very long periods,” and there

was constant contact between cultures in such a way that “the overall pattern does not justify any simplistic division into donor and recipient cultures” (Bray 1984: 308). It is possible that another characteristic is the existence of a pan-Chibcha worldview whose origins may be traced to a historical, nuclear population of Chibchan speakers distributed between eastern Honduras and northern Colombia. The extent to which this was shared with Chocoan and Misumalpan speakers remains to be explored.

Common roots suggest that much of the variation in social organization found in sixteenth-century Chibchan populations evolved in the context of peoples who shared a common linguistic and genetic heritage in the distant past. The motifs that appear in the gold iconography of the last millennium of the Pre-Columbian era reflect not only complex networks of communication, but expressions of common ideas, structures of thought, and explanations of the universe developed by populations that shared a common ancestry. The evidence that these ideas antedate the use of gold, together with strong evidence for autochthonous change, suggest that ideological and social structures associated with gold use echo those of earlier communities. These patterns are ones that, unlike those of Mesoamerica and the Central Andes, retained the significance of shamanistic practices such as have become evident in Olmec and Chavín traditions but did not rely upon the ideology of a patrilineal succession of centralized rule.

There are a number of themes that resonate across both media and styles. Gold and tumbaga artifacts bear iconographic evidence of a continuity of elements whose origins antedate the widespread use of gold and tumbaga and may therefore be tied to a common cultural heritage. In gold use, the medium is less important than the message, but gold becomes the favored material with which to communicate ancient and widely held ideas about the relationships among humans, the cosmos, and the natural and supernatural realms. Gold communicates the power of knowledge as held by trained shamans and visionaries, who are likely to have designed and manufactured many of the gold pieces themselves.<sup>29</sup> This was one that linked kinship, mythology, and worldviews conditioned by language and history. Most important, gold translated the result of these different heritages—identity—into the currency of power.

The definition of an Isthmo-Colombian Area in terms of related human population has a certain resonance for the indigenous people themselves. Kinship is a dominant concern in Kogi worldview, as evidenced by the fact that greetings are phrased in kinship terms. Kogi worldview divides human beings clearly into *kággaba* (people) and non-Kogis. Within the *kággaba*, there are kinsmen (*gaha*, family) and nonkinsmen (*axautshi*, different), of whom they may only marry the latter. Other indigenous people are identified as *axautshi kággaba*. The Kogi are particularly preoccupied with race (*saná*) and have a fundamentally racial worldview in which their superiority is presumed. They believe that they were created before

<sup>29</sup> The cacique Ucaraci, from Coto (or Coctu), is said to have been a talented goldsmith (Fernández B. 1881–1907). Don Diego de Sojo, captain of the guard of the governor of Veragua, traveled through Veraguas province in Panama in 1587, and noted that a cacique of the town of Ucani worked the gold himself (MacCurdy 1911; Helms 1979).

all other peoples, and therefore view themselves as “older brothers” (*duwékue*), while everyone else is “younger siblings” (*nanikue*) (Gawthorne 1985). While traditional Kogi experience led to specific terms for their Chibchan neighbors, the Ika and Damana, *kággaba* might be the appropriate term for their larger Chibchan kinship group. Today, there are about 250,000 people who belong to ethnic groups of Chibchan ancestry. More than half of these are the Ngöbe/Guaymí of Costa Rica and Panama, who number about 150,000. The second largest group is the Kuna of Panama and Colombia, numbering about 72,000, followed by the Bribri and Ika, with about 6,000 people each. The remaining populations range from 50 to 3,000 people.

The operative concept of an Isthmo-Colombian Area has proven useful for recognizing the relationships between kinship, language, and worldview as expressed in symbolic material culture among peoples with a common historical heritage. The people of the region deserve an affirmative model of their past, rather than one based upon the absence of traits, as is implied by the Intermediate Area concept. Linguistics and genetics provide useful tools for defining the identities of specific populations. There is also a growing interest among indigenous peoples in tapping the contributions of academic scholarship to the reconstructions of the history of their ancestors. The Bolivian archaeologist C. Mamani Condori writes,

A phrase which vividly expresses this is *qhiparu nayaru uñta sartañani*. Literally it means, “let us go backwards looking in front of our eyes,” but translated meaningfully it is “let us go into the future looking into the past.” . . . To look into the past, to know our history, to know how our people have lived and struggled throughout the centuries, is an indispensable condition in order to know how to orient future action. (Mamani Condori 1996)

Only in approaching the reality of the past experiences of the inhabitants of this part of the New World can one develop an effective vision that combines the past with the present as a contribution to the knowledge necessary for improving the quality of life of their societies.

Gold artifacts reveal elements of worldviews and structures of thought whose understanding is critical to the reconstruction of past and present identities. Just as gold communicated the ancient heritage of shamans in the past, it can help in reconstituting empowering identities in the present. The concepts of endogenous change and diffuse unity contribute to the active articulation of such an identity, rooted in commonalities of language, kinship, and cosmology that merit far more attention than they have heretofore received.

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