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Stories, Myths, Chants, and Songs of the Kuna Indians (Llilas Translations from Latin America Series)

Joel Sherzer

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The Kuna Indians of Panama, probably best known for molas, their colorful appliqué blouses, also have a rich literary tradition of oral stories and performances. One of the largest indigenous groups in the South American tropics, the majority of them (about 70,000) reside in Kuna Yala, a string of island and mainland villages stretching along the Caribbean coast. It is here that Joel Sherzer lived among them, photographing and recording their verbal performances, which he feels are representative of the beauty, complexity, and diversity of the oral literary traditions of the indigenous peoples of Latin America.

This book is organized into three types of texts: humorous and moralistic stories; myths and magical chants; and women's songs. While quite different from one another, they share features characteristic of Kuna literature as a whole, including appreciation of their environment and a remarkable knowledge of their plants and animals; a belief in spirits as an important component of their world in curing, magic, and aesthetics; and, especially, great humor and a sense of play.

Vividly illustrated by a Kuna artist and accompanied by photographs that lend a sense of being present at the performances, the texts provide readers with a unique aesthetic perspective on this rich culture while preserving an endangered and valuable indigenous oral tradition.

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