

The Bribri and Cabécar Balsa Ulú Healing cane



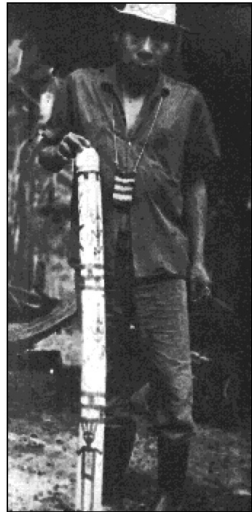
Approaching indigenous art, music and ritual from a purely aesthetic point of view risks applying irrelevant or misleading contemporary Western ideological expectations concerning the nature of the art and the role of the creator. It is basic to responsible ethnography and axiomatic to the work of the authors that "artistic" cultural manifestations be understood in their full social-cultural context, to the extent that such may be discovered. Living cultures are, of course, dynamic; composed of intelligent beings who are continually improvising new art forms and social roles, often in response to grinding poverty and the lure of trade, equally often the art undergoes transformation as a result of improvisation and the creative genius of the people, and so the task of the investigator is sometimes one of chasing after and rescuing rich material even as it is being transformed. Almost universally, the tension between what outsiders think of and seek to collect as "art objects" ;as cultural commodities—and the highly integrated traditional object making is straining the very existence of traditional indigenous cultures. Traditional music on the other hand is relatively unaffected as it does not so easily become a commodity.

In spite of their dwindling numbers and having been acculturated in various ways, the indigenous people of Central America, including Costa Rica, have



conserved in limited measure important rituals, music, dance and a few plastic art forms. Since culture is dynamic and as such continually undergoes transformation and acculturation, much of the art has become mestizo and creole mixtures of African, Spanish and autochthonous influences. Examples include the Borucan festival of the little devils (*juego de los diablitos*), an especially intense and profane three day mask ritual in

which the Conquest is enacted in such a way that the indigenous people win. I use the word festival cautiously since the content of such ritual events is deeply rooted in an unhappy history. Nevertheless, exceptionally fine Borucan masks are carved for tourist consumption by world-class craftsmen such as Ismael Gonzáles, and less "professional" masks are still made for ritual use by lesser craftsmen and common borucan people. Fascinating examples abound of mixtures of autochthonous and catholic religious concepts and iconography (Sibö=Jesus, the tree of the king becomes a cross, etc.)



Bribri awá shaman with his ulú from the 1940s



Contemporary Bribri awá-shaman Federico Reyes with his ulú.



Contemporary Cabécar jawá-shaman Rafael Luna with his ulú.

Other more subtle signs of acculturation include the very recent transformation of Guaymí tribe painted bark cloth (mastate) from purely utilitarian and decorative purposes into collectible art objects produced by individuals newly considering themselves "artists", who now sign their work and complete in what was for millennia a collective rather than individual craft. Contemporary Guaymí painted imagery from Villapalacios, Costa Rica now combines formerly sacred symbols, markings formerly used only for face painting, and scenes from daily life, such as soccer games, hummingbirds, and typical domestic dwellings. While such a mixture is interesting to the scholar, it also marks the end of marks having such intense meaning that they dare not be used so lightly. The mark of the jaguar painted on the face, for example formerly meant one had encountered a sacred power and had been transformed spiritually by it; now is is a marking like any other.

Even further acculturated, the ancient practice of carving jícara tree gourds is now practiced by indigenous and non-indigenous craftsmen alike, and typically for tourist consumption rather than to decorate domestic vessels (they now prefer plastic or tin). The imagery is undergoing pronounced graphic and stylistic metamorphosis vis-a-vis mass media and popular culture.

At the other extreme, and to the main point of what I would like to discuss, is the richly drawn bribri-cabécar healing staff, called the *bastón de examen* (*ulú* in Cabecar), and the medicinal collar (*setée*) as well as other auxiliary elements and accoutrements. The ulú healing staff is distinct from the staff of authority (called the *bastón de mando*, or *kétCá* in Cabecar). Whereas

the staff of authority is an attribute of the jawá shaman in general, and is a long smooth hardwood staff, the *ulú* is a relatively short club of balsa drawn for use in a particular healing session.

The Bribri and Cabécar tribes inhabit remote areas in the Talamanca mountains in central Costa Rica, and have been historically considered fiercely independent, often secretive and resistant to significant acculturation. Our work with these closely related tribes has progressed by degree year after year as trust has been established. The material I am about to present has apparently not been seriously studied or previously published. These apparently unchanged ancient plastic art forms and the ideas and shamanic practices that surround them,

provide wonderful insight into a deeply integrated and magic mentality neatly combining what we divide into the disciplines of art, music, ritual, mysticism, medicine and social history. The *ulú* and *setée* are made for neither display nor collection and are considered neither craft objects nor are they the result of artistic improvisation by the jawá-shaman artist-physician. Indeed, such ideas are foreign to their purpose. In fact, an adequate understanding of the implications of such autochthonous "art forms" is attainable only if the reader is able to set aside standard Western ideas about the nature of art and the usual separations between aesthetic, spiritual and medical practices. This may not be difficult for many viewers since the imagery is often coarse and hastily created for purposes that do not include our standard aesthetic gaze. My research college and I insist that these objects are nevertheless legitimate as art, but that they are also much, and that by being much more we in the mainstream Western world might be reminded of the potential for our own art to regain a function beyond decoration, the glorification of the individual, and intellectual/aesthetic entertainment.



All of the accoutrements associated with the use of the *ulú*, the jawá stool, *siwa sukia* stones, the many highly structured songs, medicinal and symbolic plants, etc.,) concentrate and document the accumulation of medical, mythic, scientific, aesthetic, historic and spiritual aspects of Cabécar-Bribri culture in a context in which associations are drawn between healthy aspects of the natural world (sharp-eyed hawks, decay-resistant cedar, the healthy heart of a chicken, etc.) and the unseen spirit world with the patient's body and spirit. The complete integration of these elements fundamentally identifies the Cabecar-Bribri peoples, and richly exhibits their cultural creativity.

Physical Characteristics: The Cabécar *ulú* is fashioned from a smooth balsa pole 7-10 cm in diameter, and may measure from a minimum of 70 c.m. to several meters in length, though a

typical *ulú* employed in a three-day healing ceremony measures about 130 c.m., depending on the particular *jawá-shaman* and their needs of the cure. Especially grave illnesses may require a long, or several *ulús*, and the imagery may be carved into the balsa rather than drawn in charcoal. The Bribri *ulú* is very similar, though is of a more consistent length, in the range of 100-130 cm.

Graphic and Aesthetic Characteristics: Figuration is rudimentary yet portrays essential attributes which identify *Sibö*, *Sula* and personifications and animal manifestations of various diseases, depending on the diagnosis. Imagery is usually executed in cedar charcoal, though vegetable dyes are sometimes used to paint the divisions between levels of the *ulú*. As reported by Bozzoli, the Bribri *ulú* is usually divided into three levels, the top-most being often devoid of imagery as the place of *Sibö*. The Cabécar *ulú* has two sections, both of which carry imagery. The many images are drawn progressively, much as one jots down a note over a period of days during the diagnosis and healing process. Aspects of the diagnosis and treatment is recorded on the *ulú*, which after the healing has been effected is buried near the rancho of the shaman.

Stylistic differences in the work of various *jawapa-shamans* shows a great deal of variation in proportion, clarity and precision. Figures exhibit head/body proportions of from 1:3 to 1:9. Though certain *jawapa-shamans* exhibit greater drawing skill and more precision in the overall graphic design than others, improvisation of elements and self-expression (in the Western sense) is irrelevant. Images are related to highly-structured songs and refer to powers greater than the creator of the *ulú*. Improvisation in how things are drawn and where they are drawn on the cane is largely a matter of discretion, though within certain graphic and structural conventions. Specific arrangements have definite meaning and implications for the patient relative to the illness under treatment.

Conventionalization of many forms, i.e. chickens, turtles, monkeys, squirrels, snakes and trees are highly abstracted, some to a point of near-unrecognizability. Graphic distinctions among tree types include branches arcing, branching or sticking straight out, though many appear the same and seem to gain their identity by proximity and context. The ubiquitous House of Fire symbol (*bö*) is invariably a domed form with crisscrossed lines, though it is sometimes a highly symmetrical and more vertical dome with a center line intersected at right angles. Divisions between levels is usually indicated by one to three lines ringing the cane, sometimes with short diagonal strokes cutting across the rings.

Figures are composed of single-line limbs, round heads with elbow, knee and ankle articulation. Figures usually show head hair drawn from around the horizon of the scalp in a variety of styles. A figure in one *ulú* seems to have feathers interspersed with points, like sparks. X-ray treatment of spines and rib cages graphically mimic tree and leaf structures, though the device is not constantly employed. The spine and tree forms are therefore mythologically as well as graphically associated with the *ulú* itself as well as the center post of the house (which is believed to extend both above and below the earth as a true *axis Mundi*).

Placement is highly conventionalized. The House of Fire (*Bö*) image is invariably on the lowest of the usual three divisions of the *ulú*, and *Sibö* is nearly always flanked by *Sula*, his brother-sister androgyne, and a third figure, figure, usually shorter than the *Sibö* and *Sula* is a personification of the disease is question. Hieratic scaling is not constant, though is sometimes employed such as when the figure of *Sibö* is enlarged to such an extent that it passes into the next higher level of the cane.

Indications of disease includes shortened and deformed legs, bulges on the body (sometimes drawn solid black in charcoal), bloated torsos, and bent limbs. Upside-down figures are graphically associated with free floating flame symbols, and often portray more deformed personifications of the disease under treatment. Most upside-down figures in our studies have been drawn at the second level amid tree symbols and and arcs of flame. Such flames are sometimes arranged along a vertical axis; occasionally symmetrically, resembling vertebrae. A single chicken symbol (*hóshcoro*) is usually drawn at foot-level next to *Sibö* and is quite stylized. Its use and significance is described elsewhere in this essay. The *siwa* bag containing the *sukia* stones is usually drawn at heart-level dangling from the neck, and may indeed may be associated with the heart as well as the testicles. Head-gear or hair arrangements seems to have little to do with the identity of the figures, though the *sukia*-bag and *bastón de mando* invariably identifies *Sibö*. *Sula* seems to be simply the other main figure at the first level, and is sometimes drawn on the same side of the cane as the House of Fire.

Inverted figures, as seen here in a drawing done on paper by Bri-bri awá shaman Federico Reyes, represent serious imbalance in the health of the patient. Illness is considered to have a somatic, social and ecological character in the local belief structure. Ethnobotanist Wade Davis recently wrote in *One River* about a nearly identical conception of illness among the Warrant tribe of the Amazon region:

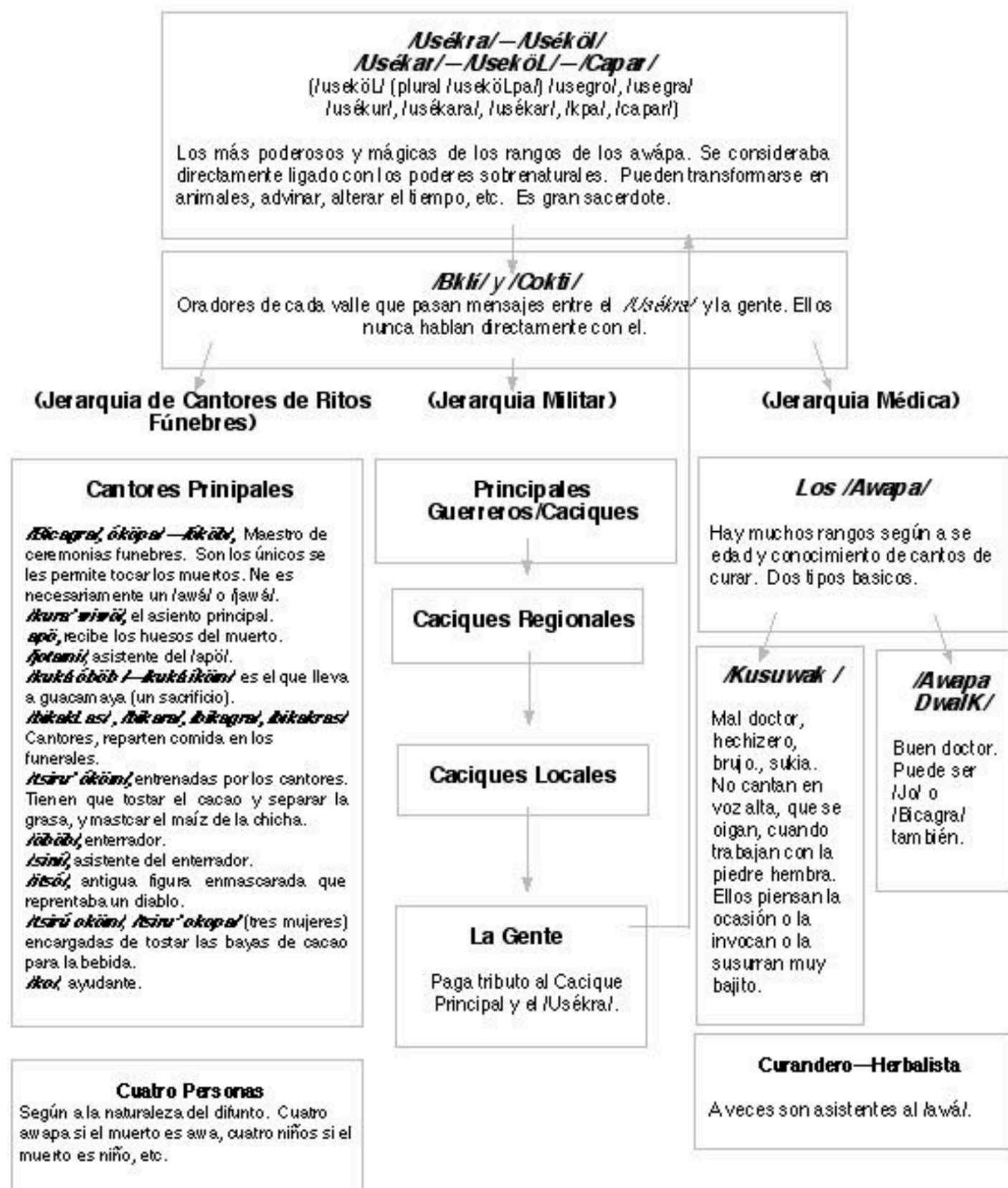
Warrant medicine operates on two quite different levels: the material and the immaterial. At the root of their system is a non-Western notion of the origin and nature of disease. For the Waorani, as for many indigenous peoples, good or bad health results not from the presence of or absence of pathogens alone but from the proper or improper balance of the individual. Health is harmony, a coherent state of equilibrium between the physical and spiritual components of the individual. Sickness is disruption, imbalance, and the manifestation of malevolent forces in the flesh.

In general, physical ailments that can be treated with herbal remedies are considered less serious than the troubles that arise when the spiritual harmony of the individual is disturbed. In such cases, it is the source of the disorder, not its particular manifestation, that must be challenged.

Conclusion: The *ulú* is perhaps one of the most original and unacculturated graphic art forms remaining in the Central American region, and is a highly concentrated cultural artifact. Whereas many other indigenous art forms in the region are undergoing gradual and in some cases rapid acculturation, the *ulú* and the *setée*, by their very nature as healing instruments have a higher purpose. Though the ethnographic details may not be long remembered by anyone but the specialist, the sense in which we are linked with nature, psychic, somatic and environmental; may remain.

Curanderos—Herbalistas

Antigua Jerarquía Social Bribri—Cabécar



Elementos Auxiliares de los Chamanes Bribri—Cabécar

Seres Sobrenaturales:

/Dwáiki/ Espíritu del buen médico; de arriba. Como loro es mensajero de */Sáw/*.

/Kus/ Espíritu del mal médico; de abajo.

Bastón de Mando—

Bastón de Curar, Examen—

El Setée—una selección de elementos naturales como huesos, maderas, plumas, piel de animales. Todo asociado con cualidades como resistencia, animales cuales son los dueños de enfermedades. De estos elementos se hace remedios en forma de collares. Cada elemento tiene su propia canto.

Humo de Tabaco—para purificar.

Soplo de Zahirillo—también, para purificar.

Piedras mágicas, oraculares— (macho y hembra) Las piedras viven, cantan, hablan de las enfermedades. Los */awá/ kus* también las usan para hacer hechizos.

Pajaros (mensajeros)—

Loro asociado con */Dwáiki/*.

Taburete (*/ufuk/*) —

Sueños—

Cantos—

Canto presentación a Dios

Canto de la enfermedad

Canto presentación de figuras (del bastón).

Los *awápa* cantan en cuatro formas:

1. */Siwa ajkúñá/* o */Siwa ajkúñá/* (apenas hablando)
2. */Siwa kulé/* (gritar siwa)
3. */Siwa ajkúñá/* o */Siwa ajkúñá/* (obre la boca o sobre los labios, cantos de 53 palabras)
Es canto melódico de enseñanza sobre los huesos, el cuerpo.
4. */Kulé/*, cantos de 103 palabras, canto de enseñanza or trabajar.

Para enseñar: "Entonces, se dice: */Siwa ajkúñá/* o */Siwa ajkúñá/* primero, el principio, y la segunda parte */Kulé/*, después */Siwa ajkúñá/*, otra vez y este se llama *kulé* también y ahora así ya lo entiendiste."

Bastones de curar, de examen /Ulú/ de los /Awá/—/Jawá/ chamanes Bribri—Cabécar

"En la tercera porción del tronco no se dibujan nada, es el cielo y se dice que cierra todo. La parte de abajo del tronco se tizan, representa la tierra. Algunos /awapa/ ponen a Sibö no abajo sino arriba en el cielo." (Bozzoli)

"En la otra parte se dibujan los seres que causan las enfermedades; por ejemplo, se dibujan monos si duelen los huesos y la cabeza; para enfermedades del estómago se dibujan los animales considerados *fíal*, el oso hormiguero (tejón), el sopilote, el zorro pelón, sapos, ranas, perico ligero (*tsina'i*); si hay gripe y calentura se dibujan a /ditekLa/, como una persona, con lanza o cuchillo en una mano, y una antorcha de fuego en la otra mano representando la antorcha por el veroliz o flor de la caña blanca. Se representan los orígenes del clan del paciente y las plantas que curan."

Se dibujan este nivel el segundo día de la curación.

"Según un informante un /awá/ hacía la representación del animal según la cola: larga, corta, apuntando hacia arriba, vuelta hacia abajo. En general, los detalles de cada dibujo pretenden lograr una representación realista del animal. Los animales se dibujan en orden de tamaño; el *sukia* debe saber de antemano los animales que va a dibujar y el orden en que deben ir. Puede hacer unos de un lado y otros del otro lado, o proceder en forma espiral alrededor del tronco, siempre en orden de tamaño. Se puede llenar todo el espacio de animales o pueden ser sólo unos pocos, según lo que se esté curando. Se tratan de representar lo más parecido a como lucen en la realidad. Se puede empezar con los gusanos, seguir con la ardilla, luego el perico ligero, los monos, la danta, etc. (Bozzoli)

Se dibujan este nivel el primer día de la curación. "En la primera de abajo para arriba se dibujan ALa y Sibö, Sibö y SuLa, o Sibö y SibóLa. Esto se interpreta como el Padre y el Hijo. Se admite que Sibö y SuLa pudo interpretarse en el pasado como Sibö y la Hermana SuLa." (Bozzoli) También pueden ir allí BuKuLu y Olobsa, intermediarios entre los *awapa* y Sibö. Olobsa es cazador que cuida la puerta este, donde se escapan los males. SuLa es hermana, madre o abuela de Sibö, diedad de abajo en la tierra, sale a la medio noche. También pueden ir allí DwaK o DuLa, seres sobrenaturales que son los dueños de los animales que causan las enfermedades. (Acevedo-Mills)



• La balsa dibujada se utiliza en las enfermedades graves.

• "La balsa (*Lichnera lagopus*) es madera blanca y suave; se corta un trozo de ella que puede tener de .75 a 1.5 metros. Para dibujarlo, el tronco se divide en tres partes. (Bozzoli)

• Dos tipos de *Ulú* que corresponden a los /awá/ *kus* y los /awá/ *DwaK*. (Acevedo, Mills)

• "Después de que hace los dibujos, el *sukia* se retira con las piedritas en una chacarita (bolsa tejida) que se cruza entre el cuello y la axila, a cantar, or sea, a llamar a Sibö y decirle que el lugar de esos espíritus de las enfermedades es donde se pone el sol, a repetir que esas enfermedades nada tienen que hacer aquí, que se devuelven a ese lugar donde se pone el sol."

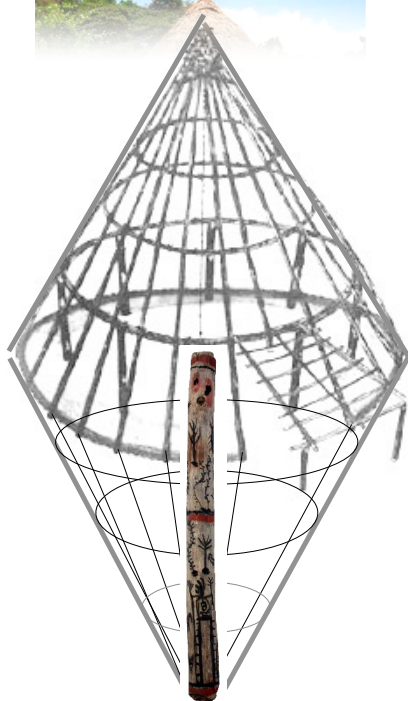
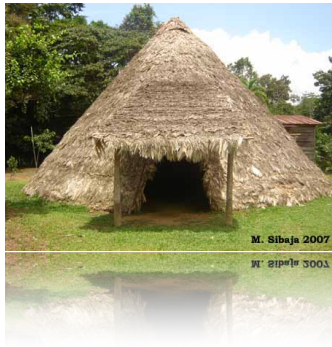
• "Los dibujos se hacen con carbón vegetal o con tinte del guijoco de ojo de buey, o a veces con achiote. Según unos informantes, el palo de balsa sólo se puede dibujar con el tizón de /uLuk/, cedro. Otros dicen que el tizón o carbón puede ser de /tatsi/, targuá, para pintar el /uLú/ o /uKukLö/. Un /awá/ en Ujarrás tenía algo parecido a un lápiz para hacer esos dibujos: a un pequeño cilindro de balsa se le hace un canal en el centro, longitudinalmente. Se le hace punta en un extremo. Por el otro se rellena el canal con polvo de carbón vegetal, y las líneas que se trazan resultan nítidas." (Bozzoli)

• "Según a Stone sobre este tema, los dibujos también puede hacer tallando con algo cortante..." (Bozzoli)

• Según a Alfredo González Chaves y Fernando González, los *ulú* corresponden al poste central en las viviendas tradicionales en la Talamanca. "Queremos plantear la hipótesis, sujeta a una futura investigación específica, que el leño de balsa (*ulú*)—pintado por el *awá* y utilizado en su labor terapéutica—podría asimilarse simbólicamente al poste central de la casa, en su versión subterránea."

• Este tronco se coloca a la par del enfermo cuya mano sostiene el curandero o bien el paciente debe sentarse sobre el leño de balsa." (Stone)

La base se pinta negro para simbolizar la tierra.



Abismo (*kadiak*)

El Ulú -bastón de curación- simboliza el "AXIS MUNDI DEL INFRAMUNDO" de la Gran Casa Cósmica -Usuré- Bribri- Cabécar.

En este elemento mágico está implícito en forma de gráficos simbólicos una gran parte del conocimiento chamánico y cosmogónico Bribri-Cabécar. Cuando el médico es llamado curar, tiene que examinar al enfermo e identificar la enfermedad. Después prepara el ulú, generalmente de madera de balsa. En el *ulú*, dibuja con carbón de madera de cedro una serie de gráficos que simbolizan deidades, espíritus en formas zoomorfas y antropomorfas, plantas y sitios sagrados, según los diferentes niveles del inframundo Bribri-Cabécar.

El extremo superior del *ulú*, imaginariamente continúa en el mundo de los vivos y el supramundo. De la misma manera, el extremo inferior continúa el abismo -*kadiak*-, donde según la cosmogonía Bribri-Cabécar habitan también espíritus y deidades.

Implicit within this magical element, in the form of a graphical symbolism, is an important part of the Bribri-Cabécar shamanica and cosmological understanding of the World. When the shaman is called to heal, he first the examines the patient and the identifies the illness. He then prepares the ulú, which is usually made of balsa wood. With cedar charcoal, he then draws upon the ulú, usually a series of graphical representations of deities, spirits in zoomorphic and anthropomorphic form, plants and holy sites, according to the different levels of the Bribri-Cabécar underworld.

The upper portion of the ulú, imaginarily continues in the world of the living and of the upper levels of the world. In a similar manner, the lowest portion of the ulú continues into the abyss -*kadiak*-, where spirits and deities live, according to Bribri-Cabécar cosmogony.