A VISION FOR EMBERÁ TOURISM

GRAPHIC ART IN THE SERVICE OF
PUBLICLY ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY

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This graphic provides a vision of indigenous tourism that does not stereotype the tourists and the indigenous people who work for it.

It draws inspiration from the experience of the Emberá in Chagres, Panama, a small cluster of indigenous communities that have developed a sustainable tourism model...

Indigenous tourism, as practiced by the Emberá at Chagres National Park, is developed with respect for the environment and the indigenous communities...

In our community, Parara Puru, we had been receiving tourists since the 1990s...

Come and see how we live our lives...
There is scope, however, for improvements in the current model of indigenous tourism at Chagres...

The Emberá practice several of their indigenous traditions, which are of interest to the tourists. But the Emberá are also modern people, living in a modern nation. They use modern technologies and are connected with our global world.

Is the traditional culture showcased in tourism representative of contemporary Emberá life? Do the tourists want to see the Emberá as these really are? Or as performers of an exotic image, indicative of an indigenous past?

The Emberá are modern indigenous people—this is how the Emberá feel...

Most tourists, too, want to see the Emberá as real people, living in the real world—although some prefer to see indigenous people as images from a museum!

Can you see me as a modern person, but also true to my indigenous identity? We can teach you how, if you want to try...
Throughout the year many groups of tourists -- from cruise ships and hotels in Panama City -- come to Chagres to see the Emberá..

The Emberá, who are renown canoe navigators, transport the tourists to their communities in the rainforest..

Under the guidance of the Emberá the tourists enjoy the rainforest, the animals of the river, the waterfalls, they learn about the medicinal properties of plants and how the Emberá have survived for centuries in this environment.
The Emberá demonstrate their traditional clothes and explain how they make their artefacts to the tourists.

But the most popular part of the tourism experience is the cultural presentations.

For example, basketry, an art that provides women with valuable income.

The Emberá share with their visitors the art of body painting, which has complex symbolism and healing properties.

Now that you are painted you are like ourselves.
THE EMBERÁ PERFORM TRADITIONAL DANCES NAMED AFTER ANIMAL SPIRITS FOR THE TOURISTS..

AND PLAY MUSIC...
THEIR DISTINCTIVE VERSION OF CUMBIA AND RUMBA...

.. AND INVITE THE TOURISTS TO DANCE WITH THEM..
Most tourists are overwhelmed by having a first-hand experience of an indigenous culture...

But some are left wondering if what they see is true and representative of Emberá culture...

It seems too perfect to be really authentic...

Is this a staged performance?

Do they dance when we are not around?

Very good! Very good!

It is great! But is this a real community?
THE EMBERÁ ARE SOMETIMES OFFENDED BY THE QUESTIONS OF THE TOURISTS...

WE DON'T LIVE IN THE 'FOREST'...

THEY REALY DON'T GET US, THOSE TOURISTS!...

DO YOU LIVE HERE IN THE FOREST EVERY DAY?

THIS IS OUR COMMUNITY...

ARE YOU DRESSED LIKE THIS ALL THE TIME?

DO YOUR CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL?

DO THEY THINK WE LIVE IN A DIFFERENT WORLD?

DO YOU GO TO THE HOSPITAL WHEN YOU ARE ILL?

THEY TREAT US AS PRIMITIVE...

WE ARE PANAMANIAN CITIZENS, WITH AN IDENTITY CARD...

NOT PICTURES IN A MUSEUM...
How can these misunderstandings occur?

Many Western visitors see traditional indigenous culture as isolated from the modern world...

...an idealisation...

This is a certain Western point of view...

We are more like you than you think...

The Emberá use modern technology. They go to church, to school, and to the markets in the city...
WHEN THE TOURISTS VISIT OUR COMMUNITY WE PUT ON OUR TRADITIONAL CLOTHES, TO SHOW THEM OUR CULTURE.

IN OUR CULTURE THIS IS THE WAY TO HONOUR ONE'S VISITORS...

WE USE SOME OF THE TRADITIONAL ITEMS OF CLOTHING IN OUR DAILY LIVES, FOR EXAMPLE, OUR BODY PAINTS AND THE 'PARUMA', A SKIRT WORN BY WOMEN.

BUT WHEN WE GO TO THE TOWN WE WEAR OUR MODERN CLOTHES...

... SOME DAYS WE HIDE OUR BODY PAINTINGS UNDER OUR MODERN CLOTHES...

OR USE MODERN DESIGNS, THAT YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE ...

LET'S TAKE THE EXAMPLE OF INDIGENOUS CLOTHES...

THIS IS HOW THE EMBERÁ DRESSED UNTIL THE 1960S, AS THE PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWING OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND TRAVELLERS DEMONSTRATE...
.. which DOES NOT MEAN WE ARE NOT EMBERÁ..

.. FOR SOME TYPES OF WORK WE PREFER MODERN CLOTHES..

.. BUT SOMETIMES WE ALSO WORK IN OUR TRADITIONAL CLOTHES, AFTER THE TOURISTS ARE GONE..

.. AT SCHOOL WE WEAR A UNIFORM LIKE ALL OTHER CHILDREN IN PANAMA..

WE USE MODERN TECHNOLOGY..

WE DRESS AS OTHER YOUNG PANAMANIAN PEOPLE..

IT DEPENDS ON THE TYPE OF WORK..
Emberá houses follow the rules of indigenous architecture. .. And some are architectural marvels..

.. constructed with artistry and natural materials...

.. yet, most contemporary Emberá houses contain modern elements..

A solar panel

.. and contain electronic devices, fit for a life in the modern world..

A combination of thatched and tin roof..
The Italian tourists who visit the Emberá are not dressed like ancient Romans... and they don’t believe in ancient gods... their modernity does not make them less Italian...

Why do you deny our modernity?

No, I believe the tourists want to know us as we really are...

Why do we hide signs of indigenous modernity from tourists?

And the Swedish or Norwegian tourists do not behave like vikings...

Maybe it is easier for the tourists to think that way...
In fact, many tourists argue that they want to meet the Emberá as the Emberá really are.

To provide such a nuanced view, we don’t need to change very much.

... but we can make modernity a bit more visible when we talk about tradition...

The dances, the cultural presentations, are part of the truth, the life of the Emberá...

... but we should also remind the tourists that the Emberá are modern-indigenous people... who have worries similar to those of the tourists themselves... problems that are part of our global world...

Our education is expensive...

I want to go to the university!

Books and notepads cost money...

Our parents, like all parents, worry about it...
THE TOURISTS WOULD BE INTERESTED TO KNOW THAT THE FABRICS OF THE PARUMA-SKIRTS ARE MADE IN ASIA, SPECIFICALLY FOR THE EMBERÁ AND ACCORDING TO EMBERÁ SPECIFICATIONS...

...BUT FROM OUR POINT OF VIEW THE 'PARUMAS' ARE AN INDIGENOUS TYPE OF DRESS...

WE CAN MAKE BEAUTIFUL COMBINATIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL PARUMA WITH MODERN TOPS...

SOME DAYS WE CHOOSE TO WEAR PARUMAS IN THE TOWN TO SHOW OTHER PEOPLE THAT WE ARE EMBERÁ...
We use all sorts of modern tools to make our canoes, according to an ancient and well-tested design.

They are beautiful!

The Emberá use their smart phones --yes, they have cellular phones too!-- to search for news and information, entertain themselves, and communicate with the world.

Children now use cellular phones from a young age and learn how to navigate technology.

What would our children inherit?

Indigenous leaders use cellular phones to organise and represent their communities.

... and unite in common projects with other Panamanian people.
...we should guide our visitors to our contemporary world...

..I use this high tech camera to help conservationists study the birds in the rainforest..

...I can also tell how similar to you we are...

WE ADMIRE YOUR DISTINCTIVE CULTURE...

DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?

MAYBE WE CAN TELL THE TOURISTS HOW THE EMBERÁ NAVIGATE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY...

...but I can also tell you we are...

WE ADMIRE YOUR DISTINCTIVE CULTURE...

keep in touch!

..we should guide our visitors to our contemporary world...

...it will not cost anything to show the tourists the complexity of Emberá life..

AND THE EDUCATION THE EMBERÁ WISH TO PROVIDE...

THIS IS ABOUT THE AUTHENTICITY THE TOURIST DESIRE..
The message:

Authenticity here does not limit itself in the performance of tradition, but embraces the complexity and challenges of contemporary indigenous life.

TO COMMUNICATE THIS MESSAGE, I HAVE USED THE MEDIUM OF GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY, WHICH INVOLVES A COMBINATION OF IMAGES AND TEXT--IDEALLY IN A MANNER THAT DE-STABILISES STATIC REPRESENTATIONS.

MY EXPERIMENTATION CAN PROVIDE INSPIRATION ABOUT HOW TO POPULARISE ACADEMIC WORK, WITHOUT STRIPPING AWAY ITS ANALYTIC POTENTIAL....

THE GRAPHIC MEDIUM PROVIDED MANY SOLUTIONS:

IT WORKED AS A VISUALLY COMPELLING MEDIUM, THROUGH WHICH WE CAN COMMUNICATE COMPLEX IDEAS IN FEWER WORDS....

ALTHOUGH THE EMBERÁ DO NOT ENJOY READING LONG TEXTS, SEVERAL OF THEM HAVE ALREADY READ THE SPANISH VERSION OF THIS GRAPHIC. TOURIST AGENTS, BUT ALSO MEMBERS OF THE NON-INDIGENOUS PANAMANIAN PUBLIC READ THE GRAPHIC TOO....

THEIR WILLINGNESS TO READ IS RELATED TO GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY’S DOUBLE NATURE, AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL AND ART...

OBSVIOUSLY HERE THE ART DIMENSION OF GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY DID THE TRICK. IT FACILITATED THE DISSEMINATION OF A POINTED MESSAGE IN A LESS PATRONISING AND MORE EASILY APPROACHABLE FORMAT.

READ IT TO ME....
The concerns of the Emberá generated additional discussion in the field, which allowed me to problematise the hierarchical view about knowledge—e.g., that academics know better...

I agree, but...

Tourism is how we make our living. Let's be careful about how we make changes...

Although many Emberá and non-indigenous Panamanians enthusiastically received the vision for a less exoticising representation in tourism, there were also those who defended the older, folkloristic model of tourism presentations, raising arguments about marketability, such as targeting and pleasing exoticising tourist audiences.

What do you think of Demetrio's graphic?

Public and community engagement is part of an ongoing dialogue, which has to remain open... The graphic medium facilitates this dialogue.

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The graphic ethnography presented here has drawn ideas from academic research; for example, work by the author on the Emberá:


2013. ‘Emberá indigenous tourism and the trap of authenticity: beyond in-authenticity and invention.’ Anthropological Quarterly 86(2), 397-426.


Dimitrios Theodossopoulos is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Kent. During the 1990s he worked in the field of environmental anthropology, studying people-wildlife conflicts and indigenous perceptions of the environment (see book Troubles with Turtles 2003). Later in his career he started new research in Panama focusing on indigenous tourism among the Emberá. This work led him to write about cultural authenticity, exoticisation, cultural representation and the nostalgia of the ethnographic project (see books Exoticisation Undressed 2016, Against Exoticism 2016, Great Expectations 2011). Beyond his work in Panama, Theodossopoulos is known for his anthropological studies of resistance, protest, austerity and populism (see books United in Discontent 2010, De-Pathologising Resistance 2015, and Democracy’s Paradox 2019).