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Tourism in the political economy of indigeneity: the case of Embera cultural performances in Panama

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Introduction

The Embera, an indigenous Amerindian ethnic group, dwell in rainforest environments. They fish, hunt, cultivate on a sustainable scale, and when a community grows too large, or when other problems occur, they split, and migrate through a network of interconnected rivers, settling in new riverside locations. This is how they have spread from lowland Colombia, their original homeland in Choco, to the Darien province in Panama, and further north in the isthmus, to the rivers that sustain the Canal. It is this strategy of migration and dispersion that helped the Embera escape assimilation by the surrounding Latin American societies during colonial times (see, Williams 2005) and secured the survival of Embera culture since then. In the last forty years, insecurity in Colombia has further increased the previous pattern of migration from Colombia to Panama (Kane 2004), and more recently has encouraged a slow movement from the most remote locations in Darien to the Panama province, including some locations in the Chagres National park, the north-westerly edge of the Embera distribution.

In the last fifteen years, those Embera settled closer to Panama City and the Canal faced a new and unanticipated opportunity, the development of cultural tourism. This prospect was systematically explored by three communities in the Charges national park, which provide an ideal setting for tourists wishing to experience an 'indigenous' Amerindian culture in the rainforest. The cultural experience is realised in short day-trips that include music-and-dance presentations, a traditional meal, and the display of Embera artefacts (*artezania*). This standard 'cultural package' is supplemented on demand with a walk in the rainforest, a swim in the local waterfalls, or some informal instruction on Embera indigenous knowledge, for example, on plants with medicinal properties. In all cases, Embera culture is at the very centre of the tourist encounter. The Embera hosts choose what parts of it to make available to the tourists and closely control the occasion with confidence and professionalism. Their relatively recent engagement with the economy of tourism has equipped them with expertise on how to handle both the representation of their culture and the visiting tourists as valuable resources.

The recent development of tourism has inspired the self- re-evaluation of Embera culture and has provided new opportunities for the Embera to enact and experiment with their 'indigenous'

identity. More importantly, these encounters with tourists have contributed to the enhancement of Embera cultural practices and confirmed that these are desired and admired by western visitors who carry hard currency and are citizens of some of the world's most powerful nations. In this respect, tourism has encouraged those Embera who are involved in it to put their culture at the very centre of their self-presentation, in the front stage of their everyday activities. They have learned that being themselves can result in economic success; they are the Embera, some indigenous inhabitants of the Americas who still respect their 'indigenous' traditions.

Adam Kuper (2003), in an inspiring and controversial article in *Current Anthropology* has criticised the use of the adjective 'indigenous' in anthropology for its discriminatory and crypto-evolutionary implications. The term 'indigenous' can be seen as a substitute for the term 'primitive', Kuper maintained, in an attempt to problematise its widespread, but often uncritical use in ethnographic writing. His position received serious opposition by anthropologists who identify with the predicament of particular indigenous groups in under-privileged positions and see 'indigeneity' as a politically successful concept, which is able to safeguard 'indigenous' rights (see among others, Kenrick & Lewis 2004). In Latin America particularly, it is the indigenous actors themselves who have accepted and contributed in the popular definition of term, in an attempt 'to further their cause for ethnic recognition and self-determination' (see, Alcida Ramos 1998: 6-7). In Panama, the term 'indigenous' is specifically applied to described Amerindian groups, people such as the Embera, the Wouanan, the Kuna, the Knobe, or the Bugle, who identify with the term and widely rely on it for their political representation. In the economy of tourism, as I will argue in this article, the term has obtain added value and significance.

I will argue that indigenous culture, as this is made visible and available in tourism, is for the Embera a valuable economic and symbolic resource, with transformative potential for the Embera identity and politics of self-representation. Within the confines of their community, the Embera who work for tourism are authors of their cultural performances and celebrate their indigenous identity with artistry and respect. At the same time, however, they appear unable to control the flow of tourism outside and in between different communities. Embera settlements in inaccessible locations remain deprived of the benefits of tourism and perceive the tourists themselves as another valuable resource, a limited good that remains beyond their reach.

In the following sections I will explore Embera cultural tourism as this take place in Parara Puru, one of the communities in the Chagres National Park that receive tourists on a frequent and systematic basis. I will situate the success of the residents of Parara Puru in the broader context of desire to develop tourism, which for several other Embera communities remains unfulfilled.

Indigenous culture as a resource

Tourism has brought about the re-evaluation of Embera culture. Until twenty or fifteen years ago, the Embera were an indigenous people in the periphery of the Panamanian nation state, occupying lands unsuitable for intensive cultivation or systematic colonisation. They were stereotyped along with other Amerindian groups as '*indios*' (indians) and occupied the bottom of the colonial, or later, national social stratification. Nowadays, the Embera figure prominently in advertisement campaigns of most national and private tourism initiatives. Their images are easily noticeable in tourist pamphlets and prospectuses, which become available to the foreign visitors in airports, tourist offices, the market place, or the internet. In this widely available visual imagery the Embera appear as representatively Embera as possible: they come into view as women, men, and children wearing traditional Embera attire, posing in front of a background of traditional Embera architecture, handling Embera artefacts, or engaging in traditional Embera activities. Like their famous neighbours the Kuna, their culture has become emblematic of 'indigenous' Panama.

Tourism advertisement campaigns have facilitated a shift in Embera representation, one that has progressively moved away from the stereotype of the '*indio*' (indian) and closer to the descriptive '*indigenas*' (indigenous), a term denoting a certain degree of acceptance and an acknowledgement of rights. This is a transformation of status. Nationally, the Embera, their artefacts and their cultural traditions are now visible within the tourist industry, and are gradually becoming more widely accepted by the wider Panamanian society as an example Panamanian cultural diversity, or Panama's 'indigenous' heritage. At the same time, this visibility in tourism, and the regular, direct contact with foreign visitors, has set a foundation for an international profile for the Embera: more people outside Panama are now familiar with Embera culture, most of whom are individuals from the wealthy and powerful nations of the North, whose acquaintance with Embera culture carries an aura of recognition, admiration, and legitimation.

This relative enhancement of the Embera national and international representation is a recent phenomenon, which I see as being directly linked with the economy and politics of tourism. A generation ago, the Embera, who have migrated from Colombia to Panama in previous centuries, were referred to by non-indigenous Panamanians as *Chocoes* (the Indians from Choco in lowland Colombia). Their position in Panamanian society was marginal, with most communities being located in the Darien; a province left deliberately under-developed to form a boundary of impenetrable, thick rainforest between Panama and Colombia,[1] a natural barrier separating the Americas which blocked the passage to domestic-livestock epidemics and unwelcome migrants. The Embera were permitted to cross and inhabit that boundary zone and share the lands of Darien with the Kuna—whom they partially replaced in their northwards migration—and the afro-Darienitas, one of the older resident groups of this inaccessible territory.

[1] A boundary that is also expected to protect a smaller nation (Panama) from the demographic expansion of its much larger neighbour (Colombia).

From Darien the Embera spread further northwards in the Panama province, while some families reached the most north-easterly point of the Embera geographical distribution, the river systems that support the water flow in the Panama Canal. Splitting, migrating and forming new settlements, as a response to population growth, external threat, or in pursuit of other advantages is an old and well established Embera strategy. The Embera settlers in the rivers close to the Canal worked in the 1970s for the US military, training solders– even astronauts–in rainforest survival techniques, and constructed dugout canoes–the most efficient means of transport in the river environments–for the Canal authorities. In 1985 they found themselves residing in a newly founded national park, the Chagres Park, which was created to protect the river ecosystems that sustained the Canals with water. In the park the Embera were prohibited to engage in systematic and extended horticulture and they were thus forced to explore other avenues to make a living.

In their search for an alternative income they were encouraged by Panamanian NGOs and the authorities of the park to experiment with tourist economy. Living closer to the capital and to the canal was once again an advantage. In cooperation with tourist operators in the city they organised cultural performances for tourists who wished to visit an indigenous community and obtain an experience of indigenous culture in the rainforest. They reorganised their scattered, existing settlements in Rio Chagres and Rio Pequeni in concentrated communities–which, as I will explain later, is a more generalised movement in Embera social and political life–and prepared to welcome the tourists.

The experiment was successful and the Embera suddenly realised that they possessed a new valuable resource: their culture. Traditional Embera architecture, attire, music, and artefacts provided the setting, the inspiration for the cultural performances, and the consumables for the tourist exchange. The Embera in these new tourist oriented communities soon became experts in cultural presentations, connoisseurs in all matters Embera and 'traditional'. And they engaged with a profitable economy, which offered them more material rewards and involved–as most of my Embera informants readily admit–more enjoyable labour than the toil invested in slush and burn cultivation. They were now able to survive by being themselves, the Embera, people with indigenous knowledge about the rainforest, with their distinctive cultural identity and traditions. What they already had–their existing knowledge about the world, their culturally specific way of life–was now in demand, and the demand was rewarding.

A community organised for tourism

Parara Puru, the community I study in the Chagres Park, was founded seven years ago by local families of Embera already established in the area. The process of establishing the community does not differ from that of other Embera villages in the Panama province or in Darien. Approximately thirty years ago, the Embera, encouraged by the government, abandoned their traditional preference for dispersed settlements to form concentrated communities (see Kane 2004). They were rewarded with the provision of primary schools

(which the Embera regard very highly), some medical care, and more importantly, with the establishment of two semi-autonomous reservations in Darien, the *Comarcas*, in which they were allowed to organise self-government and political representation. The Embera living on lands outside the *Comarcas* also formed concentrated communities in Darien, and in various locations in Panama Province, such the Chagres National Park.

The founders of Parara Puru were men and woman born in Chagres by parents who had migrated from Darien twenty or thirty years ago. They were joined by others, who had moved from Darien more recently, and were related to the former by family ties. They had chosen the location of the community after carefully evaluating the requirements of receiving and entertaining regular, small and large, groups of visitors. For example, the community was built like all Embera villages next to the river, but on a site where the current and the level of water are convenient for transporting tourists by canoe during both dry and rainy seasons. They took special care to construct their dwellings as fine and representative examples of Embera architecture, and created special reception spaces for dance and artefact presentations. In most respects, their community looks very much like any other Embera community, but the landscape, the architectural style and the arrangement of the thatched roofed dwellings has been planned with special care and attention to detail.

In fact, the appearance and spatial organisation of the community is designed to pass a clear message to the visitor: Parara Puru is first and foremost an Embera community, where Embera culture is celebrated and made available to outsiders; it is visually consumed, but also explained, respected and acknowledged. Within the community, as I will shortly argue, the Embera hold a firm control of the tourist exchange, take care of their visitors, and promote their cultural traditions. They expect a standard, set fee from every visitor for the food, hospitality and cultural presentations they offer, and share the profits fairly among the members of the community. They receive tourists daily through the year, and are equally prepared to entertain and present their culture to large groups of ninety, or a hundred+ visitors, and small groups of even three or four individuals.[2]

Although, the residents of Parara Puru admit that working with tourists is a demanding job, that keeps them busy throughout the year, and offers very few opportunities for vacations, the financial rewards of this new type of occupation are much higher than any other traditional activity undertaken by the Embera in the past. Some individuals in the community also acknowledge that it is more pleasant playing music, dancing and talking about one's own culture than investing hard labour in cultivation, of which they have good previous experience from the years before their engagement with tourism. They therefore feel lucky when they compare themselves to other Embera communities located in inaccessible areas not suitable for the development of tourism. Work in tourism, they unanimously explain, allows them to

[2] Although tourists are visiting Parara Puru throughout the year, the residents of the community distinguish a high and low period of tourist activity. From December to March, a period which coincides with the Panamanian summer or dry season, the tourist numbers are higher and the groups of visitors larger. But after April the numbers of the visitors decline and remain low until August and September, with October and November being the most rainy and less suitable for tourism months of the year.

continue practicing their traditions, and remain closely connected with their Embera identity, but without having to migrate or confine themselves to poverty.

The tourists as a resource

One morning in February, at the peak of the tourism season, I was waiting with some of the residents of Parara Puru for the tourists to arrive. The canoes from Embera Drua, a neighbouring community up the river, were ascending the stream with difficulty on the low summer waters, heavy with tourists wearing orange life jackets. We were staring at the canoes of our neighbours—all filled with generous numbers of tourists—confident that the canoes of our community were on their way, bringing a comparable load of visitors. This was good time for Embera tourism in Chagres! The discussion focussed on a comparison of Embera lifestyles in Darien and in Chagres, cultivation and tourism, and their relative merits. 'The canoes in the rivers of Darien are heavily filled with plantains', I remarked. '...But the canoes in Rio Chagres are heavily filled with tourists', pointed my Embera interlocutor from Parara Puru.

The comparison was amusing to the line of men resting in the hot summer morning. Some of them were born in Darien, others in Chagres, but they all identified with their present community and its recent success with tourism. The Embera always live by the river, it was pointed out. Like in the past, their dugout canoes carry the fruits of their labour, the productive resources of the community. The sources of wealth might change, but the processes that make life meaningful remain the same. Like before, they still continue living by the rivers, adapting to opportunities, forming new communities, expanding when the prospects are favourable. In Darien, Embera dressed with t-shirts transport their goods along the river. In Chagres, Embera dressed in traditional Embera attire transport groups of tourist up and down stream. It is difficult to tell in which setting, in which economy, the Embera culture reigns more supreme.

Yet, it is easy to distinguish the communities with better access to the new valuable resource in Embera economic life, the visiting tourists. The communities in Darien and other communities in Panama province located in greater distance to the capital cannot attract significant and sustained numbers of visitors (see Theodossopoulos, n.d.). Some remote and inaccessible villages in Darien do not receive tourists at all. And yet, many Embera in these less privileged locations desire to enter the economy of tourism. They are aware of the success of their fellow Embera in Chagres, and they wish to reproduce the cultural presentation of the latter, but they do not have a firm grasp of the procedures that rule the flow of tourists to particular sites. In other words, the Embera wishing to develop tourism in those relative inaccessible locations hold equal claim in representing Embera culture—the first prerequisite for accessing tourism—but are deprived of the second qualification for entering the tourist economy, the tourists themselves.

This unequal distribution in the flow of tourists is gradually creating an internal differentiation in the Embera world. Embera individuals in the inaccessible communities of Darien invest their

labour in producing increasing quantities of traditional artefacts, which they later sell to the Embera in the communities at Chagres. The latter are too busy entertaining successive waves of tourists to meet the tourist demand, and despite their efforts to produce some baskets, masks or carvings themselves, they have to rely to the supply of artefacts from far away Embera communities. Sometimes, women producers of *artezania*, will make the long and uncomfortable journey from Darien to the communities in Chagres to sell some of the products of their work directly to the tourists at more profitable prices. Then, before they depart for home two or three days later, they will sell the remainder to Embera woman residing permanently in Chagres.

Tourism was introduced in the Embera communities in Chagres fairly recently: in Parara Puru, seven years ago, in some neighbouring locations, three or five years longer. But its impact in the Embera society of Panama has been significant. In my comparative field trips in Darien I became aware of the strong desire of other communities to develop tourism. In the last four or three years some have been attempting to do so, but they have been unsuccessful in attracting any significant numbers so far (see Theodossopoulos, n.d.). The desire of most tourists to have an encounter with an indigenous Amerindian culture is not strong enough to confront roads in average condition, poor infrastructure, and the discomfort of travelling long distance in rainforest environments. At the moment, Parara Puru and its neighbouring communities in Chagres receive most of the tourists and are paving the future of Embera tourism.

Commodification and respect

During their encounter with the tourists, the Embera have emerged as dynamic protagonists, claiming their share of authorship in an economy based on the consumption of indigenous culture. They consciously control which aspect of their culture they wish to make available to tourism, which part of their identity to highlight in their self-representation. For people who have engaged with tourism only recently, they enter the tourism exchange with surprising confidence, closely controlling their encounter with the tourists. In all cases, they handle the existing supply of tourists with care, respect and self-assurance, and expect equal respect from their guests. In the context of cultural performances for tourists in the Chagres area, and within the territory of the local community, the Embera hosts emerge as skilful tourism professionals, secure about their 'indigenous' identity, and well aware of its value.

In the world outside the Embera communities, however, the flow of tourists remains outside the control of the Embera. It is regulated by the laws of supply and demand, competition between tourist operators, the periodic visits of cruise ships, the weather, and tourist professionals who master languages other than Spanish or Embera. Practical considerations that relate to travelling distances and time limitations in cultural tours dictate that the communities in the Chagres area are prioritised over other Embera destinations. These circumstances have facilitated the development of Embera tourism in Chagres and the establishment of communities that specialise in cultural tourism, like Parara Puru. But the residents of other Embera community observe those developments with a certain

apprehension. Although they can raise equal claims to an Embera indigenous identity, they are excluded from the direct benefits of receiving regular groups of tourists in their communities.

Even though tourism has encouraged the visibility of Embera culture within and outside Panama, and has empowered the Embera in their politics of representation, it has created some imbalances between distantly located Embera communities. The great majority of the Embera settlements lie outside the affluent zone of tourism and can benefit from it only indirectly, by producing artefacts to be made available in the few fortunate communities that do receive considerable numbers of tourists. This powerlessness in controlling the flow of tourism has contributed to developing a perception of the visiting tourist as a limited resource, a commodity that can benefit certain communities and in different degrees. In this respect, and in terms of the Embera growing desire to develop tourism, the tourists are as much commodified as the indigenous culture they consume; they are distributed between different communities, they are transferred in canoes across the river like plantains or other goods, and they are treated symbolically like the valuables that fuel the local economy.

At the same time, however, the identification with Embera culture, a qualification shared by all Embera, is now emerging as a process of empowerment and self-respect. In a previous work I had highlighted the loss of control experienced by indigenous communities in their attempt to promote their culture in tourism (see Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos 2004). But in the case of Embera cultural tourism, the consumption of indigenous culture by Western audiences of tourists does not contribute to perceived powerlessness and loss of control. On the contrary, indigenous culture, a resource available to all Embera, becomes the medium of claiming visibility, participation in the new economy of tourism, numbers of tourists, and other goods. A previously peripheral and disadvantaged ethnic group has now rediscovered the advantages of an indigenous identity maintained with struggles in past centuries. Embera indigeneity is now desired and respected by others.

Dugout canoes heavily filled with goods, plantains and tourists, are crossing the Embera rivers, as in the times before; it seems that it is still part of the Embera way of life to live by the river, to move along, and adapt to new opportunities.

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