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The Emberá, tourism and indigenous archaeology: “rediscovering” the past in Eastern Panama

Los Emberá, turismo y arqueología indígena: “redescubriendo” el pasado en el este de Panamá

Tomás Mendizábal¹
Dimitrios Theodossopoulos²

Abstract

In this article we discuss the interest of the Emberá (an Amerindian indigenous group) in collecting knowledge about material remains of the past—such as colonial and pre-colonial ceramic fragments – that are easily found in Eastern Panama. We situate this interest of the Emberá (and their desire to learn more about the past) within the context of indigenous tourism, which has inspired the articulation of new narratives about Emberá history and identity. In addition, the accidental discovery by the Emberá of ceramic fragments from past periods has instigated and facilitated archaeological investigation, a process that resulted in a reciprocal exchange of knowledge between the Emberá and the academic investigators. Such a reciprocal relationship, we argue, can contribute towards the decolonisation of archaeology, create synergies between anthropology and archaeology, and enhance indigenous representation in tourism.

Key words: indigenous archaeology; indigenous tourism; Emberá pottery; Venta de Chagres; Camino Real; Eastern Panama.

Resumen

En este artículo nos referimos al interés de los Emberá (un grupo indígena Amerindio) en adquirir conocimientos de los restos materiales del pasado – como fragmentos cerámicos coloniales y prehispánicos – que se encuentran fácilmente en el Panamá Oriental. Situamos el interés de los Emberá (y su deseo de aprender más del pasado) en el contexto del turismo indígena, que ha inspirado la articulación de nuevas narrativas sobre la historia e identidad de los Emberá. Adicionalmente, el descubrimiento accidental por los Emberá de restos materiales de períodos pasados ha instigado y facilitado la investigación arqueológica, un proceso que ha resultado en el intercambio recíproco de conocimientos entre los Emberá e investigadores académicos. Argumentamos aquí que esta relación recíproca puede contribuir a la descolonización de la arqueología, crear sinergias entre la antropología y la arqueología e incrementar la representación indígena en el turismo.

Palabras clave: arqueología indígena; turismo indígena; alfarería Emberá; Venta de Chagres; Camino Real; Panamá Oriental

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The Emberá are great explorers. They constantly search for new riverine locations to hunt, cultivate, settle and found new communities. This love of exploration has inspired their expansion from Chocó in Colombia to Darién in Panama,^{3 4 5 6 7 8} and from Darién to the lands that now comprise the Chagres National Park.⁹ In their explorations, the Emberá often discover sites that were once inhabited by other groups that lived in Eastern Panama: decimated pre-Colombian societies, Spanish colonists, escaped slaves. Eastern Panama is full of archaeological sites that have never been identified, recorded and studied, and the Emberá remain so far the most prolific explorers of this uncharted and largely unacknowledged archaeological landscape.

This article attempts to draw attention to an apparently ‘unexplored’—archaeologically—region, Eastern Panama, and show that it has indeed been partly explored; not so much by archaeologists, but by one of the Amerindian indigenous groups, the Emberá, who discover in their ceaseless investigation of their own environment the material remains of other ethnic (indigenous and non-indigenous) groups. Such a spontaneous, non-academic type of exploration calls into question the vision of ‘Western’ (non-indigenous) exploration as a unidirectional project—that involves the West learning about the Rest through a particular constellation of power ‘in which the Other become an object of knowledge for the western epistemic’.¹⁰

³ Reina Torres de Araúz. *La Cultura Chocó: Estudio Etnológico e Histórico*. Panama: Centro de Investigaciones Antropológicas, University of Panama. 1966.

⁴ Louis C. Faron. ‘Marriage, residence, and domestic group among the Panamanian Choco.’ *Ethnology* 1(1): 13-38. 1962.

⁵ Peter H. Herlihy. ‘A Cultural Geography of the Emberá and Wounaan (Choco) Indians of Darien, Panama, with Emphasis on Recent Village Formation and Economic Diversification.’ Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University. 1986.

⁶ Roberto Pineda y Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda. *Criaturas de Caragabi: Indios Chocoes, Emberáes, Catíos, Chamíes y Noanamaes*. Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia. 1999.

⁷ José Manuel Reverte Coma. *Tormenta en el Darien: Vida de los Indios Chocoes en Panama*. Madrid: Museo Profesor Reverte Coma. 2002.

⁸ Stephanie C. Kane. *The Phantom Gringo Boat: Shamanic Discourse and Development in Panama*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. 1994.

⁹ Vicente Caballero y Bolívar Arauz. ‘Inmigración de indios Chocoes en Río Pequeni y algunos aspectos de su cultura.’ *Hombre y Cultura* 1(1): 44-61. Panamá. 1962.

¹⁰ Astrid Ulloa. *The Ecological Native: Indigenous Peoples’ Movements and Eco-Governmentality in Colombia*. London: Routledge. 2005. P. 173.

‘Indigenous archaeologies’ is a term used to refer to ‘collaborations between archaeologists and indigenous communities’.¹¹ The term also embraces local (unofficial) sets of knowledge that represent an awareness of the material remains of the past, which can provide an alternative perspective and contribute to the decolonization of archaeology.¹² The use of the term ‘archaeologies’, in the plural, indicates their unofficial (local and vernacular) orientation. The desire of indigenous actors to pursue connections with the past can also help us appreciate their agency in articulating their own cultural heritage and identity in spontaneous and unofficial narratives. The recording of such information, often necessitates ‘reflexive and critical engagements with living communities’¹³—and we would add, also ‘reciprocal’—which encourage an ‘engaged’ perspective in archaeology.

Archaeological ethnography and archaeologically informed anthropology often emerge from spontaneous collaborations between local actors and academic researchers. Ian Hodder has discussed examples of such synergies, which involve locals being interested in archaeological knowledge and archaeologists being interested in local perceptions.¹⁴ The cases that we examine in this article provide additional evidence of such collaboration, in particular an indigenous group (the Emberá) collecting information from academics, and more importantly, academics being guided by indigenous experience and knowledge (of the local environment). The particular collaboration was realised at the instigation of the indigenous actors, but also involved a dialogue between anthropology and archaeology, an interdisciplinary relationship that has not always been self-evident, but one that usually provides, when pursued, remarkably fruitful results.^{15 16 17}

¹¹ Tim Murray. “Archaeologists and indigenous people: A maturing relationship?” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 363-378. 2011. P. 365.

¹² Yannis Hamilakis. ‘Decolonizing Greek Archaeology: Indigenous Archaeologies, Modernist Archaeology and the Post-colonial Critique.’ In *A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece*. D. Damaskos and D. Plantzos. Eds. Benaki Museum, Athens. Pp. 273-284. 2008.

¹³ Yannis Hamilakis. “Archaeological ethnography: A maouttemporal meeting ground for Archaeology and Anthropology.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 399-414. 2011. P. 403.

¹⁴ Ian Hodder. Archaeology and anthropology: The state of the relationship. In *Archeology and anthropology: Past, present and future*. Shankland, D. Ed. Berg, London. Pp. 65-75. 2012. P. 71-2.

¹⁵ Yannis Hamilakis. Archaeological ethnography... Op. Cit.

¹⁶ David Shankland. Introduction: Archaeology and Anthropology: divorce and partial reconciliation. In *Archeology and anthropology: Past, present and future*. Shankland, D. Ed. Berg, London. Pp. 1-18. 2012.

¹⁷ Duncan Garrow and Thomas Yarrow. Eds. *Archaeology and Anthropology: Understanding similarity, exploring difference*. Oxbow, Oxford. 2010.

In Panama, the interest of the Emberá in the past becomes better understood within the general context of indigenous tourism. Following the footsteps of the Kuna,^{18 19} and encouraged by national campaigns promoting tourism,²⁰ the Emberá have recently developed their own distinctive version of cultural tourism. This involves visits of groups of international tourists—residing in Panama City or transiting the canal on cruise ships—to Emberá communities in the general Canal area, and particularly—although not exclusively—to the Chagres National Park, a bio-diversity natural reserve on the Eastern side of the Canal. Several Emberá communities in Chagres entertain tourist groups—on a frequent basis throughout the year—and, in this process, they obtain opportunities to articulate and negotiate the presentation of their indigenous culture and identity.^{21 22 23 24}

Through daily practice and experience of presenting their culture to foreign audiences, the Emberá become increasingly aware of the value that powerful Others ascribe to their culture. They see an international audience paying attention to Emberá culture and they realise that such visibility can help them escape from peripheralization and disempowerment.²⁵ A necessary step to achieve this is the articulation of narratives about Emberá history and culture, which in turn encourages introspection, self-exploration and interest to the details of Emberá history and tradition.^{26 27} Such a general search for knowledge, rooted in the inquisitiveness of the Emberá about their intimate environment

¹⁸ Margaret B. Swain. “Gender roles in indigenous tourism: Kuna Mola, Kuna Yala and cultural survival.” In *Hosts and guests: the anthropology of tourism*. Smith, V. L. Ed. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia. Pp. 83-104. 1989.

¹⁹ Xerardo Pereiro Pérez, Cebaldo de León, Monica Martínez-Mauri, Jorge Ventocilla and Yadixa del Valle. *Estudio Estratégico del Turismo en Kuna Yala: Primera Versión del Informe de investigación 2008-2010*. Panama: SENACYT. 2010.

²⁰ Carla Guerrón-Montero. Tourism and Afro-Antillean identity in Panama. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 4 (2): 65-84. 2006.

²¹ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. “Tourism and indigenous culture as resources: lessons from Emberá cultural tourism in Panama.” In *Tourism, Power and Culture: Anthropological Insights*, Donald V.L. Macleod and James G. Carrier, eds. Channel View, Bristol. Pp. 115-133. 2010.

²² Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. “Emberá indigenous tourism and the world of expectations.” In *Great Expectations: Imagination and Anticipation in tourism*. Skinner, J. and Theodossopoulos, D. Eds. Berghahn: Oxford. Pp. 40-60. 2011.

²³ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Dance, visibility, and representational self-awareness in an Embera community in Panama.’ In *Dancing Cultures: Globalization, Tourism and Identity in the Anthropology of Dance*. Neveu Kringelbach, H. and Skinner, J. Eds. Berghahn, Oxford. Pp. 121-140. 2012.

²⁴ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Indigenous tourism as a transformative process: the case of the Emberá in Panama.’ In *Cultural Tourism Movements: New Articulations Of Indigenous Identity*. Bunten, A. C., Chio, J. and Graburn, N. Eds. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. n.d.1.

²⁵ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Tourism and... Op. Cit.

²⁶ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Emberá indigenous... Op. Cit.

²⁷ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Indigenous tourism... Op. Cit.

and enhanced by a desire to collect information to present to Others (e.g. tourists, NGOs, international supporters), has inspired some of the amateur archaeological explorations of the Emberá.

Before proceeding to the presentation of the case we examine in this article, we would like to clarify that we do not see the attempts of the Emberá to collect knowledge about the past as representing what Hobsbawm²⁸ has termed ‘invention of tradition’. Hobsbawm’s original use was coined to account for institutionalized practices in Western nation-states. However, the use of invention to account for indigenous practices can offend indigenous groups through the presupposition of inauthenticity^{29 30} or the juxtaposition of ‘invented’ to ‘genuine’ traditions, encouraged by Hobsbawm³¹. The notion of invention, when used to describe indigenous society, indirectly promotes ‘the view that the only authentic tradition is one uncontaminated by Western culture’, a position which is profoundly ahistorical.³²

The Emberá, during their continuous exploration of their immediate environment discover clues about the past: knowledge that can be used in the articulation of new narratives about identity, culture and heritage. In this respect, we argue, the Emberá do not ‘invent’ a vision of the past, but explore the possibilities (and information) that lie within their reach: they discover a fragmented past which is difficult to interpret. It is here, in a greater act of exploratory interpretation that the Emberá asked for the help of ‘their’ anthropologist (Theodossopoulos), who had to rely on the help of an archaeologist (Mendizábal). None of the three parties in this exploration—the Emberá, the anthropologist, and the archaeologist—claim absolute access to truth, as they all participate—not in inventing tradition—but in a continuous search for knowledge. The following sections outline their ‘partial’ re-discoveries.

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm. “Introduction: Inventing Traditions.” In Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 1-14. 1992.

²⁹ Jocelyn Linnekin. “Cultural Invention and the Dilemma of Authenticity.” *American Anthropologist* 93(2): 446-449. 1991.

³⁰ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Scorn or Idealization? Tourism Imaginaries, Exoticisation and Ambivalence in Emberá Indigenous Tourism.’ In *Tourism Imaginaries through an Anthropological Lens*. Graburn, N. and Salazar, N. B. Eds. Oxford: Berghahn Books. n.d.2.

³¹ Eric Hobsbawm. Introduction: Inventing... Op. Cit.

³² Fernando Santos-Granero. ‘Hybrid Bodyscapes: A Visual History of Yanesha Patterns of Cultural Change.’ *Current Anthropology* 50(4), 477-512. 2009. P. 492.

So we feel the need to make a disclaimer: our objective in this article is limited and modest. We do not attempt here to provide a coherent archaeological study of colonial and pre-colonial remains in Eastern Panama, but rather to share some information about archaeology in Eastern Panama that became available to us through our communication with the Emberá. By means of this act of sharing knowledge—in its not fully developed form—we wish to encourage archaeological research in this particular geographic region. Similarly, we do not attempt here to provide a comprehensive ethnography of Emberá social change and tourism, a task that is undertaken by Theodossopoulos in a number of recent (and forthcoming) publications.³³ Anthropological reflections are used here to contextualise and substantiate the meaningfulness of the Emberá engagement with the remains of the past, and the broader context of Emberá indigenous archaeologies.

Emberá ceramics

In Eastern Panama the most visible remnants of previous settlement are broken or intact pieces of ceramic, which the Emberá call ‘zokó’,³⁴ that is, pots made of clay. The Emberá

³³ Theodossopoulos’ ethnographic reflections are based on seventeen months of fieldwork—spread over seven years from 2005 to 2012—during which he has examined Emberá social change on a variety of topics, such as the use (or not) of the Indigenous attire [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. ‘Indigenous attire, exoticisation and social change: dressing and undressing among the Emberá of Panama.’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8(3): 591-612. 2012], the Emberá dancing tradition [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Dance, visibility ... Op. Cit.], the elusive concept of authenticity [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Emberá indigenous tourism and the trap of authenticity: beyond in-authenticity and invention.’ *Anthropological Quarterly* 86(2). 2013], the perception of Indigenous culture (and also the tourists themselves) as ‘resources’ in tourism [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Tourism and... Op. Cit.], the response of the Emberá to tourist expectations [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Emberá indigenous... Op. Cit.], and the representational self-awareness of the Emberá that are involved with tourism [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. Indigenous tourism... Op. Cit.]. He has also written about the exoticisation of indigeneity in the tourism imaginary and the parallel exoticisation of the tourists by their Indigenous hosts [Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Scorn or ... Op. Cit.]. All these topics illuminate different dimensions of Embera Indigenous tourism.

³⁴ The Emberá in Darién pronounce the word as ‘zokó’. Reverte Coma [see: José Manuel Reverte Coma. *Tormenta en ...* Op. Cit. P. 255] spells the same word, as he recorded it in Darién, as *dzokó*. Several Emberá commented, while correcting my pronunciation, that the word sounds similar to the term *Chocó*, used in Panama to refer to all Emberá and the Wounaan (as, from the Panamanian perspective, they came from Chocó in Colombia). They explained that there is no relationship between the place Chocó and word *zokó*. However, Patricia Vargas Sarmiento [see: Patricia Vargas. *Los Emberá y los Cuna: Impacto y Relación ante la Ocupación Española Siglos XVI y XVII*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología-Colcultura. 1993. P. 18] mentions that it has been suggested that this name is derived from the pitchers for *chihca* the Embera called *chokó*. Vasco Uribe [see: Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe. *Semejantes a ...* Op. Cit.], who worked with Embera-Chamí in Colombia, refers more specifically to the term *chokó* to describe one particular sub-type of pitcher. The Emberá in Darién use *zokó* in a more generic manner to refer to most types of pots made of clay.

have their own distinctive style of pottery,^{35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44} a tradition they kept alive until recently, but one that it is now dying out along with the last Emberá potters who still remember its secrets.

Theodossopoulos' original presupposition was that the knowledge of the art of Emberá pottery had died out completely—at least in Panama—and that the few remaining clay pots that he had seen while travelling in Darien—in 2005 and 2007, at rivers Sambu and Chico (respectively)—represented the last items of their kind. Such clay pots, the Emberá of Darien explained, were used in the past to store (primarily but not exclusively) *chicha de maiz* (fermented corn beer). The Emberá also explained that the availability of affordable metal and plastic bottles and utensils during the second half of the twentieth century had made the need of producing clay pots redundant.

In 2010, Theodossopoulos accidentally met an elderly Emberá woman, in the community of Alto Playon (river Chucunaque), who used to make clay pots in her youth, and still remembered this art. This incident showed that although the Emberá ceramic art had died out, the knowledge of it still remains alive. Theodossopoulos spent a couple of days taking photographs and videos of the elderly woman and her husband demonstrating and explaining how the Emberá work with clay. He found out that there were a few other elderly individuals in Darien—for example, in rivers Chicho and Venado—who remember this art. After showing the pictures and videos from Alto Playon to the Emberá in Chagres, Theodossopoulos realised that one of his closest friends and respondents, a fifty five year

³⁵ Herbert W. Krieger. *Material Culture of the People of Southeastern Panama*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, United States National Museum Bulletin 134, Washington. 1926.

³⁶ Henry Wassén. "Notes on southern groups of Chocó Indians in Colombia." *Ethnologiska Studier* 1, 35-182. 1935.

³⁷ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. 'Notas Etnográficas Sobre los Indios del Chocó.' *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 9:73-158. 1960.

³⁸ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. 'Contribuciones a la etnografía de los indios del Chocó.' *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 11:169-188. 1962.

³⁹ Reina Torres de Araúz. *La Cultura Chocó ...* Op. Cit.

⁴⁰ Reina Torres de Araúz. *Panama Indígena*. Instituto Nacional de Cultura, Panamá. 1980.

⁴¹ Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe. *Semejantes a los Dioses: Cerámica y Cestería Embera-Chami*. Centro Editorial, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. 1987.

⁴² Donald Taylor. *Embarkations: ethnography and shamanism of the Chocó Indians of Colombia*. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. 1996.

⁴³ Roberto Pineda and Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda. *Criaturas de Caragabí: Indios Chocoes, Emberáes, Catíos, Chamíes y Noanamaes*. Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín. 1999.

⁴⁴ José Manuel Reverte Coma. *Tormenta en ...* Op. Cit.

old woman from the community of Parara Puru (river Chagres), also remembered very clearly how to work with clay.

In 2011 and 2012, Theodossopoulos and the woman from Parara Puru who is knowledgeable of the Emberá ceramic art, considered that a possible revival of this art can provide the Emberá with a new type of marketable artefacts to be sold to tourists—and complement the already widespread Emberá production of wooden sculptures (from *cocobolo* wood) and weaved baskets (from *chunga* and *nahuala* fibers).^{45 46 47} The lack of appropriate clay deposits in the river Chagres—the Emberá traditionally search for clay on riverbanks—put those plans on hold, but Theodossopoulos still hopes that the incentive of earning cash from the tourist market might revive the ceramic tradition. He has shown several Emberá in the community of Parara Puru in Chagres pictures of older Emberá *zokó*—including some in anthropomorphic shape—photographed by earlier ethnographers.^{48 49 50 51} The older Emberá recognised in these pictures a distinctive Emberá art that they remember from their childhood, while the younger argued that items such as the most beautiful anthropomorphic *zokó* could be attractive to tourists. As with the other types of Emberá artefacts, the production of ceramics does not necessarily have to take place in the communities that produce the artefacts: Emberá in remote and relatively impoverished communities in Darien, sell their artefacts to communities that receive tourists; and in this respect tourism has provided impoverished actors—such as women in relatively inaccessible communities—with a valuable source of cash.⁵²

⁴⁵ Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe. *Semejantes a ...* Op. Cit.

⁴⁶ Julie Velásquez Runk. 'Wounaan and Emberá Use and Management of the Fiber Palm *Astrocaryum standleyanum* (Arecaceae) for Basketry in Eastern Panama'. *Economic Botany* 55(1): 72–82. 2001.

⁴⁷ Margo M. Callaghan. *Darien Rainforest Basketry: Baskets of the Wounaan and Emberá Indians from the Darién Rainforest in Panamá*. HPL Enterprises, Arizona. 2002.

⁴⁸ Henry Wassén. "Notes on southern groups ... Op. Cit.

⁴⁹ Reina Torres de Araúz. *La Cultura Chocó ...* Op. Cit.

⁵⁰ Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe. *Semejantes a ...* Op. Cit.

⁵¹ José Manuel Reverte Coma. *Tormenta en ...* Op. Cit.

⁵² France-Lise Colin. "Nosotros no solamente podemos vivir de cultura": Identity, Nature, and Power in the Comarca Emberá of Eastern Panama. Ph.D. dissertation, Carleton University, Ottawa. 2010.

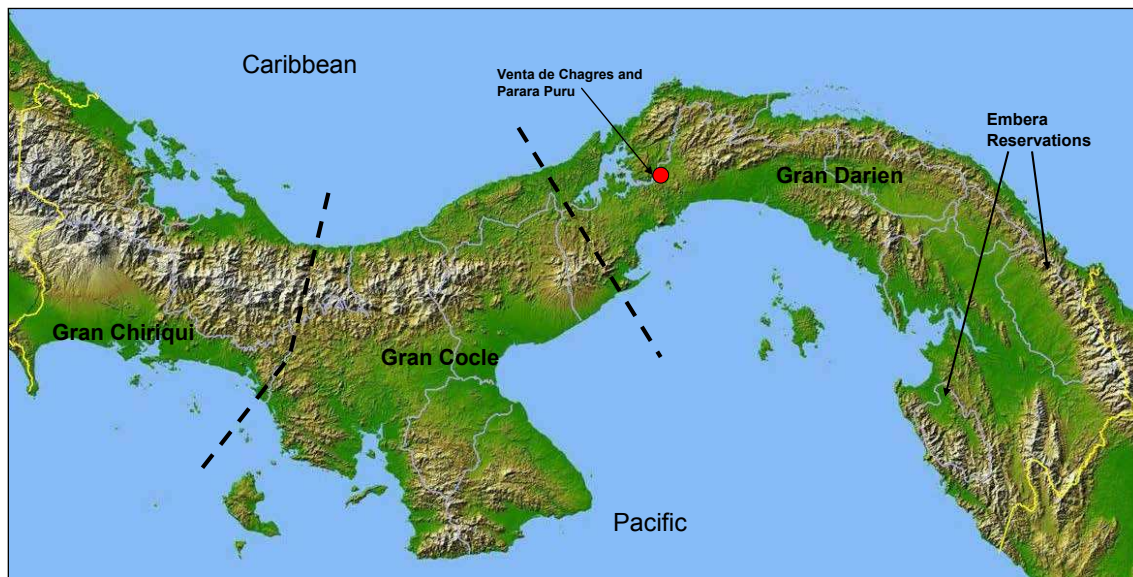


Figure 1. Map of the Republic of Panama showing the location of current Emberá Reservations, the area of Venta de Chagres and Parara Puru, and the three major Pre Columbian cultural interaction spheres (Map source: Richard Cooke).

Ceramics of the Past

Apart from their own ceramic art, the Emberá of Eastern Panama often discover—while hunting or cultivating—fragments of pottery from past eras. The objects that the Emberá discover in such unsuspecting locations—in what now looks as ‘pristine’ rainforest but was once a densely inhabited landscape—are objects from other ethnic groups that have now disappeared or abandoned their settlements. During fieldwork in Chagres and Darién, Theodossopoulos has been presented many times with pre-colonial and colonial ceramic fragments. His standard advice to the Emberá is to leave those objects where they found them, hoping that in the future archaeologists will record more thoroughly and comprehensively the rich material culture of ancient Eastern Panama.^{53 54 55}

The vast number of such ceramic fragments in the tributaries of Chucunaque indicates that Eastern Panama was in pre-colonial times heavily populated, albeit by indigenous groups

⁵³ Richard. G. Cooke. “Cupica (Choco): a Reassessment of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff’s Fieldwork in a Poorly Studied Region of the American Tropics.” In *Recent Advances in the Archaeology of the Northern Andes*, (eds) Oyuela-Caycedo, A. and Scott Raymond, J. The Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles. Monograph 39. Pp. 91-106. 1998.

⁵⁴ Juan Guillermo Martín Rincón. ‘Panamá La Vieja y el Gran Darién’. *Revista de Arqueología de Panamá la Vieja*. Patronato Panamá Viejo, Panamá, August. CD-ROM. Pp. 230-250. 2002.

⁵⁵ Juan Guillermo Martín Rincón, y L. A. Sánchez. ‘El Istmo Mediterráneo: Intercambio, Simbolismo y Filiación Social en la Bahía de Panamá, durante el Período 500-1000 D.C.’ *Revista de Arqueología del Área Intermedia* 7: 113-122. 2007.

that have now been extinct due to the violent nature of European colonisation in the sixteen century and the subsequent spread of European disease.^{56 57 58} The Emberá are aware that the pieces of ceramics that they discover on their land are from the indigenous people of the past—as much as they are aware of their own recent colonisation of certain parts of Darien, such as the Westernmost tributaries of Chucunaque, which were until the early twentieth century settled by Kuna,⁵⁹ with the Embera arriving in the second part of the twentieth century, and in some rivers after the 1960s.⁶⁰

In such a recently settled (by the Emberá) tributary of river Chucunaque, river Ucurganti, and in particular in the outskirts of the community of Tortuga, Theodossopoulos witnessed in 2010 evidence of earlier settlement in an accidental dig. The local Emberá were digging a trench⁶¹ in the yard of a newly erected Church, part of missionary work sponsored by the Church of Christ (a non-charismatic, evangelistic, but not evangelical protestant Church, with missionary activity in Panama). The US-born pastor who was organising the building of the church was interested in archaeology, and invited Theodossopoulos to have a look at the site. Theodossopoulos, in turn, shared this evidence with Mendizábal, an archaeologist from Panama City, who remarked that records of ancient remains at such depth in Darien are highly unusual because they are impossible to reach during archaeological surveys. These remains were found in an archaeological stratum, presumably a habitation layer, with a charcoal/burned earth matrix 2 feet deep, beneath 5 feet of alluvial deposits. They were pottery fragments that lacked painted decoration, but instead display plastic decorations that include incisions, modelling and appliqué, techniques typical of known Darien⁶² ceramic

⁵⁶ Sauer, Carl. *The Early Spanish Main*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 1966.

⁵⁷ Kathleen Romoli. *Los de la Lengua de Cueva: Los Grupos Indígenas Del Istmo Oriental en la época de la Conquista Española*. Ediciones tercer Mundo, Bogotá. 1987.

⁵⁸ Joaquín García Casares. *Historia del Darién: Cuevas, Cunas, Españoles, Afros, Presencia y Actualidad de los Chocoes*. Editorial Universitaria, Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro, Panama. 2008.

⁵⁹ James Howe. *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States and the San Blas Kuna*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1998.

⁶⁰ Peter H. Herlihy. 'A Cultural Geography ... Po. Cit.

⁶¹ At coordinates 18 P 199910 937252 (WGS84 Datum)

⁶² Darien province lies within an archaeological region known as Gran Darien. As a concept, Gran Darien describes a "cultural interaction sphere" or one of three different "semiotic tradition zones" in which the country has been divided in Precolumbian times [see: Richard G. Cooke. Panamá: Region Central. Vínculos, *Revista de Antropología del Museo Nacional de Costa Rica*. Vol. 2, No. 1. Pp. 122- 140. 1976. P. 122; Richard G. Cooke, Richard, G. Archaeological Research in Central and Eastern Panamá: A Review of Some Problems. In *The Archaeology of Lower Central America*. Lange, F. W. and Stone, D. Z. Eds. A School of American Research Book, Advanced Seminar Series. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. Pp. 263-305. 1984. P. 263-265]; it was created together with Gran Cocle and Gran Chiriquí to try to order,

assemblages,^{63 64} even if the motifs seen in this sample were unknown or seldom seen, a fact which precluded a precise dating of the feature or the shreds.



Figure 2. Five feet deep layer of ancient settlement in Tortuga, River Ucuganti.

understand and explain the cultural diversity evident in the Panamanian Precolumbian archaeological record. Of the three zones or regions, Gran Darien is the one least studied by archaeologists due to – principally – practical and logistical factors such as difficulty of access, a dense forest cover and recently, armed conflict. Gran Darien covers both Atlantic and Pacific coastlines, extending from Chame in western Panama Province, to the western shores of the Gulf of Uraba in Colombia.

⁶³ Robert Drolet. Cultural Settlement along the Moist Caribbean Slopes of Eastern Panama. PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 1980.

⁶⁴ Tomás Mendizábal. Panama Viejo: an analysis of the construction of archaeological time in Eastern Panama. PhD Dissertation, University of London. 2004.

In the days following this event, Theodossopoulos was invited to speak at a community gathering at Tortuga. He was encouraged by the Emberá leaders to explain to the other Emberá living in the community the importance of maintaining—and not selling or breaking—ancient pots that are found in their lands. Theodossopoulos, the pastor of the Church of Christ, and the Emberá considered the possibility of erecting a traditional Embera house to serve as a museum, where broken and unbroken pottery discovered in the vicinity will be stored in the future. The Emberá of Tortuga hoped that such a museum will serve as an attraction to Western travellers interested in ecotourism. However, the distance of the community—eight hours of travelling by dugout canoe—from the main road arteries of Darien, makes such dreams particularly difficult to become realised. Nevertheless, this incident shows that the possibility of developing some form of tourism is seen very favourably by the Emberá leadership in Darien—even among very inaccessible communities⁶⁵—and that the archaeology of Darien (which remains so far underdeveloped) is imagined as an attraction to aid tourism development.



Figure 3. Ceramic fragments found at Rio Ucurganti.

⁶⁵ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. 'Encounters with authentic Embera culture in Panama.' *Journeys* 8 (1-2), 93-115. 2007.

Three years earlier, in 2007, Theodossopoulos, while travelling in Darien with archaeologists Mark Horton and Carlos Fitzgerald, witnessed another archaeological site⁶⁶ on the banks of river Chico close to Yaviza. Horton and Fitzgerald, in their unpublished report, explained that this was a large (250 m long), deeply stratified Precolumbian site, buried deep beneath alluvial deposits that had been exposed by river erosion on its banks. The site yielded numerous artefacts, including apparently complete pots, many pottery sherds and worked stone implements, and was a rather important find, as there are no known sites this deep into Darien which can offer detailed and deep stratification. Sites such as the one reported by Horton and Fitzgerald provide opportunities for obtaining varied pottery types and establishing detailed ceramic chronologies, a goal archaeologists have sought for decades, as it may help better understand the Precolumbian history of Gran Darien.

The Emberá in river Chico, as the Emberá in river Ucургanti, were very much aware that the annual inundation of ‘their’ rivers uncovers ceramic pots from the river banks, most of which fall and break, creating debris fields that are carried away by the next inundation the following year. Such observations, as we will see in the next section, can guide future archaeological research, which has lots to gain from taking seriously local indigenous knowledge, ‘the indigenous archaeologies’ of Darien.

‘Re-discovering’ Venta de Chagres

In the Chagres river valley, where Theodossopoulos has been working over the last seven years, the Emberá have come across many sites of previous human settlement, and share stories about them. The Chagres river valley archaeological landscape is better known than that of Darién however, representing layers of colonisation by Amerindian, European and African settlers; the Emberá themselves being the most recent successors [and guardians] of this land. In April 2012, Theodossopoulos, following the advice of the Embera, visited a little island completely covered with broken ceramics. This island, which the Emberá call ‘Isla Roja’ emerges out of the lake only when the water level is low.

⁶⁶ Around coordinates 18 P 205077 902424 (WGS84 Datum). See: Horton, Mark, Carlos Fitzgerald, and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Darien Rivers Project: Report of Reconnaissance of Rio Chico and Rio Tuirre, Darien’. Unpublished report. 2007.

A few days later, Theodossopoulos visited the ‘Isla Roja’ again, this time accompanied by Mendizábal, with the explicit intention of surveying the site. Mendizábal, an expert in pre-colonial and colonial ceramics, immediately identified the broken artefacts as principally ceramic roof tiles and several other types of 16th century wares, such as tin enamelled earthenwares (like Panamanian *majolicas* and the type known as Columbia plain), stonewares and olive jars.^{67 68 69 70 71 72}

What is most interesting, however, is that Isla Roja lies immediately to the south of the ancient course of the Chagres river – on its eastern bank – exactly on the route of the Camino Real, a small part of which is now submerged under the water of Alajuela Lake.⁷³ Isla Roja turns out to be the site of the ancient town known as Venta de Chagres,⁷⁴ which was one of the various stopovers or rest stops along the Camino Real, the road linking Panamá City and – originally – the town of Nombre de Dios, and then Portobello after 1597.^{75 76 77 78 79 80 81}

⁶⁷ Kathleen Deagan. *Artifacts of the Spanish Colonies of Florida and the Caribbean, 1500 - 1800*. Vol 1. Smithsonian Institution. Washington. 1987.

⁶⁸ Beatriz Rovira. ‘La cerámica histórica en la ciudad de Panamá: tres contextos estratigráficos’. In *Recent Developments in Isthmian Archaeology*, (ed.) F. Lange. British Archaeological Reports, International Series, Oxford. Pp. 288-315. 1984.

⁶⁹ Beatriz Rovira. ‘Hecho en Panamá: la manufactura colonial de mayólicas’. *Revista Nacional de Cultura*, Panamá 27: 67-85. 1997.

⁷⁰ Beatriz Rovira. ‘Presencia de mayólicas panameñas en el mundo colonial. Algunas consideraciones acerca de su distribución y cronología’. *Latin American Antiquity* 12(3): 291-303. 2001.

⁷¹ Beatriz Rovira. ‘Caracterización química de cerámicas coloniales del sitio de Panamá Viejo. Resultados preliminares de la aplicación de activación neutrónica experimental.’ *Canto Rodado* 1: 101-131. Panamá. 2006.

⁷² Beatriz Rovira and J. Mojica. *Encrucijada de estilos: la mayólica panameña. Gustos cotidianos en el Panamá colonial (Siglo XVII)*. Canto Rodado 2:69-100. Panamá. 2007.

⁷³ Which originated by the damming of the Chagres in 1935.

⁷⁴ Located at coordinates 17 P 656368 1020735 (WGS84 Datum).

⁷⁵ Alfredo Castellero Calvo. ‘El transporte transístmico y las comunicaciones regionales.’ In *Historia General de Panamá*, Volume I Tome I. Comité Nacional del Centenario de la República de Panamá. Pp. 355-398. 2004.

⁷⁶ Luz Graciela Joly and B. Bohn II. ‘Patrones de construcción del Camino de Cruces y el Camino Real y su relación histórica.’ In *Actas del V Simposium Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología y Etnohistoria de Panamá*. Universidad de Panamá. Pp. 323-356. 1978.

⁷⁷ Ronald Dennis Hussey. ‘Caminos Coloniales en Panamá.’ In *Revista Lotería*. No. 60. Lotería Nacional de Beneficencia. Panamá. Pp. 104-126. 1960.

⁷⁸ María del Carmen Mena García. ‘La sociedad de Panamá en el siglo XVI.’ Publicaciones de la Excelentísima Diputación Provincial de Sevilla. Sección Historia. V Centenario del Descubrimiento de América. Número 3. Sevilla. 1984.

⁷⁹ María del Carmen Mena García. ‘La ciudad en un cruce de caminos: Panamá y sus orígenes urbanos.’ Publicaciones de la Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos. Sevilla. 1992.



Figure 4. Fragment of Map of Tierra Firme or Castilla de Oro (Panama) in 1785, by Don Juan Lopez, showing the route of the Camino Real from Panama City to Portobelo, and the Chagres river (Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE SH 18 PF 143 DIV 10 P 6).

The Camino Real is the overland trail that connected the terminal cities on both oceans across the isthmus, Panamá on the Pacific and Nombre de Dios on the Atlantic. Its passage was swifter but much more expensive than travelling along the Camino de Cruces – the cheaper, longer, safer, more comfortable and better historically known route – which connected the same destinations but through a mixed terrestrial and fluvial way along the Chagres river. They were both used from the third decade of the 16th century onwards, when the Camino Real was simply an open path through the jungles until it was partially paved at the end of the century.⁸² These trails were crucial in maintaining the commercial, tributary and political links between Spain and its South American empire, and witnessed the passing of over 60% of all the gold and silver taken to Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries,⁸³ especially so over the Camino Real which was designated as the only possible

⁸⁰ Christian Strassnig. 'Rediscovering the Camino Real of Panama: Archaeology and Heritage Tourism Potentials'. *Journal of Latin American Geography* 9 (2): 159-168. 2010.

⁸¹ Edwin Webster. 'El Sitio de Venta de Chagres'. In *Actas del IV Simposium Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología y Etnohistoria de Panamá*, 1973. Universidad de Panamá. 1973. English version in <http://www.indrakeswake.co.uk/Society/Research/ventadechagre.htm> accessed on 09/05/2012.

⁸² María del Carmen Mena García. 'La ciudad en ... Op. Cit. P. 208.

⁸³ Alfredo Castellero Calvo. El transporte transístmico ... Op. Cit. P. 356.

route for the royal treasure in 1587.^{84 85} Although there existed a maintenance crew for the upkeep of the Camino Real, it was never fully paved.⁸⁶



Figure 4. Theodossopoulos, Antonito Zarco and Mendizábal on Isla Roja or Venta de Chagres.

Venta de Chagres was described by Francis Drake, who pillaged the town in February 1573.⁸⁷ The account describes the town as having “forty or fifty houses, which had both a Governor and other officers and some fair houses, with many storehouses large and strong for the wares, which brought thither from Nombre de Dios, by the river of Chagres, so to be transported by mules to Panama: beside the Monastery, where we found above a thousand bulls and pardons, newly sent from Rome”.⁸⁸ The pirates were in town for about an hour and half, had a chance to impress “three gentlewomen” – Spanish ladies on their way to Nombre de Dios – with Drake’s charm, and got “some good pillage”, leaving just before dawn.⁸⁹

Webster thinks that to some degree, the raiders could have exaggerated the scale of the town, as they were extremely busy during the night to come away with exact details of its

⁸⁴ María del Carmen Mena García. ‘La sociedad ... Po. Cit. P. 164

⁸⁵ Alfredo Castellero Calvo. El transporte transísmico ... Op. Cit. P. 361.

⁸⁶ María del Carmen Mena García. ‘La ciudad en ... Op. Cit. P. 208.

⁸⁷ Although he refers to it as Venta de Cruces, it becomes clear from the description and later Spanish documents that it is in fact Venta de Chagres.

⁸⁸ Philip Nichols. *Sir Francis Drake Revived*. Nicholas Bourne Publishers. London. 1653.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*. P. 64-5.

characteristics.⁹⁰ However he continues, the impression of a well-established, prosperous community is probably correct. This agrees with what the authors of this article observed in the field. Although there are no above ground structural remains left in Venta de Chagres, there is the surface scatter of roof tiles and to a lesser extent pottery, that covers a roughly V-shaped area of about 1400 m², with each leg of the V measuring up to 60 m.⁹¹ There is evidence then of a sizable and long established occupation and the fact that the roof tiles are still there – the upper layers of a stratified collapsed house – indicates that although the varying water levels of the lake have probably eroded much of the outskirts of the town, its core could still be relatively intact. The authors even found evidence of recent looting in the form of pits dug by treasure hunters, a nefarious activity that goes back to the mid 20th century⁹² and negatively impacts the archaeological and touristic potential of the site.

Little is heard again of the story of Venta de Chagres in the documentary sources. One of the last Spanish maps to show it as an occupied site is that of Juan Lopez in 1785 (Carta Marítima del Reino de Tierra Firme u Castilla del Oro). It probably lost importance after the Panamanian route was abandoned in 1739 in preference for the Cape Horn route to deliver the silver and gold train to Spain. Although the Camino Real continued to be used as a local transportation route, it was completely abandoned after 1855 when the Panama Railroad was built.⁹³

The Emberá took Mendizábal and Theodossopoulos to one of the North-eastern banks of the lake, where a portion of the Camino Real can be seen in good condition. Here one can see its full paved width of between 1.2 to 1.5 m, aligned by “*piedras maestras*” or master stones, which are larger slabs of rock buried on their sides that guide the trail and provide “walls” for its



Figure 5. Antonito Zarco on the Camino Real

⁹⁰ Edwin Webster. ‘El Sitio ... Op. Cit.

⁹¹ During the field visit in April 2012, up to 8800 m² of the former hill, now island, where Venta de Chagres stood, were above the waters of Lake Alajuela.

⁹² Edwin Webster. ‘El Sitio ... Op. Cit.

⁹³ Alfredo Castellero Calvo. El transporte transístmico ... Op. Cit. P. 382.

inner fill of irregularly shaped boulders of the same stone.⁹⁴ At this point the Camino divides into two stone paths just before the top of a small hill, which may very well be the town of San Juan, approximately 120 meters from the Northern edge of the bank,⁹⁵ and on the southern flanks of San Juan hill. The main (and wider) trail continues northeast probably towards the Caribbean coast, and the narrower path (between 60 and 90 cm) heads northwest to an old riverbed.



Figure 6. Antonito Zarco on the narrower subdivision of the Camino (towards San Juan)

The Emberá are interested in knowing more about the history of the Camino Real. Lake Alajuela is the water avenue they use to bring groups of international tourists to their communities. ‘Many tourists are interested to see the Camino’, said Antonito Zarco, the leader responsible for tourism in the community of Parara Puru. A short stop that allows the tourists a glimpse of the Camino Real can enhance the growing appeal of tourism in Chagres, adding an element of archaeology to what is currently advertised as an ‘indigenous’ experience. Strassnig has recognised the tourism potential of the Camino Real,⁹⁶ without referring to the Emberá and Emberá tourism, which is already developed in the area.

Independently of the possibility of including Venta de Chagres in the tourist itinerary, knowledge about the past, and in particular the past of the Chagres region, is vital to the Emberá. As we mentioned before, the Emberá aspire to become tourist guides—not mere entertainers—and to control the narratives about their culture and its representation.^{97 98} While guiding tourists in their landscape—in dugout canoes or by foot—the Emberá understand the need and importance of articulating a story about their landscape and its history. Before the cultural presentations that they are perform for the tourists that visit their communities, an Emberá leader always undertakes the responsibility to deliver a

⁹⁴ See: Christian Strassnig. ‘Rediscovering the ... Op. Cit.

⁹⁵ At coordinates 17 P 657339 1022218

⁹⁶ Christian Strassnig. ‘Rediscovering the ... Op. Cit.

⁹⁷ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Emberá indigenous...* Op. Cit.

⁹⁸ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Indigenous tourism...* Op. Cit.

speech (*charla, explicacion*), which introduces the tourists to the basics of Emberá culture, lifestyle, attire, and methods of artefact construction. In the context of this speech, and especially during the question time that follows the speech, the Emberá have to satisfy the historical curiosity of their visitors, and offer precise answers in a confident manner.⁹⁹ It is in such contexts, that knowledge about history and archaeology is important for the negotiation of Emberá representation.

Tourism, visibility and indigenous archaeology

Christian Strassnig, in a recent article entitled ‘Rediscovering the *Camino Real* of Panama: Archaeology and Heritage Tourism Potentials’, provides a short account of the condition of this ancient transportation route and outlines its history. The use of the term ‘rediscovering’ in his title has inspired our use of the same term in ours, which we have put within quotation marks, in an attempt to challenge the assumption that knowledge about the past is the sole privilege of Western academia. As we have shown in this article, indigenous actors, such as the Emberá, are in many cases, the first to ‘discover’ the material remains of the past. It is also interesting to note, that despite Strassnig’s reference to heritage and cultural tourism there is no mention in his article of the Emberá, who have established themselves close to the *Camino Real*,¹⁰⁰ and have already developed successfully indigenous tourism at a professional level.

Tourism has, in fact, revitalised Emberá cultural practices, providing opportunities to perform and perfect their dancing and music tradition,¹⁰¹ their art of body-painting,¹⁰² and several other aspects of Emberá culture that were previously in decline.^{103 104 105 106} More

⁹⁹ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Emberá indigenous...* Op. Cit.

¹⁰⁰ Strassnig [see: Christian Strassnig. ‘Rediscovering the ... Op. Cit. P. 162] refers only to ‘peasant villages’, not the indigenous local inhabitants, who explicitly distinguish themselves in ethnic terms from their peasant (*campesino*) neighbours. There are five ethnically homogenous Embera communities within Chagres National Park, and two additional ones in the general Canal area (in Gamboa and Gatun). There are also many Emberá living in ethnically mixed communities in Chagres National Park.

¹⁰¹ See Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Dance, visibility ... Op. Cit.*

¹⁰² For a detail account of the Emberá art of body painting, see: Astrid Ulloa. *Kipará: dibujo y pintura: dos formas Emberá de representar el mundo*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia. 1992; for a shorter account of Emberá body painting in Panama, and its transformations, see: Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Indigenous attire ... Op. Cit.*

¹⁰³ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Tourism and... Op. Cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Emberá indigenous... Op. Cit.*

¹⁰⁵ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. *Indigenous tourism... Op. Cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Scorn or ... Op. Cit.

importantly, tourism has provided the Emberá with the confidence to project their distinctive identity to the wider world: they now realise that audiences of wealthy foreigners are interested in their culture, and also, that their nation acknowledges their contribution to the development of Panamanian tourism. Through this process an underprivileged indigenous group is gaining wider visibility, which in turn brings a certain acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of Emberá culture. Thus, the Emberá of the twenty-first century share some good incentives—such as the rewards of tourism—to project their indigenous identity outwards, make new international allies, and reach out to the world.¹⁰⁷

In this general context of cultural revaluation, the systematic charting of the archaeological landscape in Chagres—to which Strassnig’s interdisciplinary research team is making a great contribution¹⁰⁸—can bring further success to cultural tourism in Panama. Yet, ‘anthropological ethnography’,¹⁰⁹ and an overall attention on the perspective of indigenous actors, can help us appreciate the contribution of indigenous knowledge to archaeology and challenge the invisibility of this contribution in academic accounts. It is not surprising that our recent survey of Venta de Chagres had been realised at the insistence of the Emberá, who were eager to learn more about the history of those broken pieces of ceramic that they notice so frequently in their intimate landscape. When ‘their’ anthropologist (Theodossopoulos) ran out of explanations, they wanted to hear more from a specialist on Precolumbian ceramics and archaeology (Mendizábal). The new information now available to them has become incorporated in spontaneous narratives developed by the Emberá to accommodate tourism, and more broadly in the continuous re-articulation of a contemporary Emberá identity. Anthropological fieldwork in the forthcoming years will follow such developments.

Thus, the interest of the Emberá to learn about the past of their land—even if this past involves other ethnic groups—can become better contextualised through the perspective

¹⁰⁷ Dimitrios Theodossopoulos. ‘Introduction: United in Discontent.’ In *United in discontent: Local Responses to Cosmopolitanism and Globalization*. D. Theodossopoulos and E. Kirtsoglou, Eds. Berghahn, Oxford. Pp. 1-19. 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Christian Strassnig. ‘Rediscovering the ... Op. Cit.

¹⁰⁹ Yannis Hamilakis. ‘Archaeological ethnography ... Op. Cit.

offered by ‘indigenous archaeologies’.¹¹⁰ Such a perspective makes visible local sets of knowledge about the material remains of the past, which often (and partly) evade official and nationalist narratives.¹¹¹ ‘Colonialism and nationalism’, Hamilakis observes, ‘have worked in unison’.¹¹² The practice of taking seriously local knowledge about the past—indigenous understandings and interpretations of past material evidence—can contribute to the decolonization of archaeology. Here, our attention to the interest of the Emberá in the ceramic heritage of Eastern Panama, represents our (anthropological and archaeological) desire to take their knowledge seriously, learn from it, allow them to guide us to their local environment. The possibilities of such cooperation can produce a much ‘richer’ archaeology—with respect to evidence, information and perspective—and encourage further archaeological research in a region—such as Eastern Panama—where it is so desperately needed. This article has made available the experience of such cooperation in the hope of encouraging further interdisciplinary research in the particular geographic area.

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¹¹⁰ Tim Murray. “Archaeologists and ... Op. Cit.

¹¹¹ Yannis Hamilakis. ‘Decolonizing Greek Archaeology ... Op. Cit.

¹¹² Ibidem. P. 274.

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