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A VISION FOR EMBERÁ TOURISM
GRAPHIC ART IN THE SERVICE OF
PUBLICLY ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY

DIMITRIOS THEODOSSOPOULOS
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.

Come and see how we live our lives.

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

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

How do we want to see indigenous people?

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 of 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 renowned 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 survive for centuries in this environment.
The Emberá explain to the tourists their traditional clothes and the ways in which they make their artefacts.

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 DANCE FOR THE TOURISTS TRADITIONAL DANCES NAMED AFTER ANIMAL SPIRITS...

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...

What an amazing experience!

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...

Do you live here in the forest every day?

Are you dressed like this all the time?

Do your children go to school?

Do you go to the hospital when you are ill?

They treat us as primitive...

We are Panamanian citizens, with an identity card...

We don't live in the 'forest'...

How they think of us, those tourists!

This is our community...

Do they think we live in a different world?

Not pictures in a museum...
How 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 technologies, go to church, to school, to the markets of the big 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, the body painting, and the 'Paruma', the skirt of the women.

But when we go to the town we wear our modern clothes.

Some days we cover our body painting under our modern clothes...

Or use modern designs, that young people like...

This is how the Emberá dressed until the 1960s, as the photographs and drawings of anthropologists and travellers demonstrate...
WE DRESS AS OTHER YOUNG PANAMANIAN PEOPLE...

...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...

...it depends on the type of work...

WE USE MODERN TECHNOLOGIES...
Emberá houses follow the rules of an 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 you deny our modernity?

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

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

Why do we hide from the tourists indigenous modernity?

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 nuance 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 these of the tourists themselves... problems that are part of our global world...

Our education is expensive...

I want to go to the university!

Our parents, like all parents, worry about it...

Books and notepads cost money...
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?

We live in the same global world...

But from our point of view the 'Parumas' are an indigenous type of dress...

The Emberá, an indigenous group, are part of the global economy...

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.

Indigenous leaders use cellular phones to organise and represent their communities. What would our children inherit? And unite in common projects with other Panamanian people.
Would the tourists like to know that...

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

We should guide our visitors to our contemporary world.

I can also tell how similar to you we are.

But we can tell the tourists how the Emberá navigate between tradition and modernity.

Maybe we admire your distinctive culture.

Do you want to know?

We should guide our visitors to our contemporary world.

Keep in touch!

Gracias por su Visita!

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

This is about the authenticity the tourist desire.

And the education the Emberá wish to provide.
The medium of graphic ethnography, which involves a combination of images and text—ideally in a manner that de-stabilises static representations—provided many solutions.

My experimentation can provide inspiration about how to popularise academic work, without stripping away its analytic potential...

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.

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...

Obviously 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.

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

It worked as a visually compelling medium, through which we can communicate complex ideas in fewer words.

Graphic art can be playful, disarming and self-reflexive...

Read it to me...

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.
Graphic art can convey critical irony with subtle representational politeness, which allows the receiving audience to disagree or debate the message promoted.

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

I agree, but...

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...

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.

