

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 22: Anthropology and Development Studies		
Title of case study: Empowering Indigenous Self-Representation for the Emberá People of Panama		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dimitrios Theodossopoulos	Professor of Social Anthropology	September 2010-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Ethnographic research undertaken by Professor Theodossopoulos has contributed to redefining the representational narratives of a cluster of six indigenous Emberá communities in Panama, located in the Chagres National Park. By sharing this ethnographic knowledge with the communities and the NGOs supporting them, Theodossopoulos's research has been utilised to: (1) facilitate the political representation of the communities by assisting their legal claim to ancestral land titles; (2) initiate a community dialogue that examines how to recognise and discard primitivist stereotypes from their tourism offering; and (3) directly contribute to the revival of forgotten cultural practices, genealogical facts, and life histories.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The introduction of indigenous tourism at the turn of twenty-first century instilled in the Emberá – an indigenous people of Panama and Colombia, little studied by anthropologists – an awareness of a global interest in their culture. A cluster of six communities (population 1,150), based in Chagres, now entertains groups of international tourists by delivering cultural presentations that include dances and narratives about Emberá history and practices. This model of tourism constitutes the primary source of income for these communities.</p> <p>Professor Theodossopoulos has been conducting anthropological fieldwork in Panama for over a decade. As his ethnographic work progressed, he noticed that the cultural performances that the Emberá enacted were limited, including only certain traditional practices. In addition, the Emberá were instructed by tourist agents to actively conceal their modernity from tourists, so that they presented an exoticising and atemporal image of themselves as quintessential rainforest natives completely isolated from the world. Accordingly, to meet the expectations of certain tourists, the Emberá frequently represented themselves in a static manner, exclusively showcasing past practices, and portraying stereotypes of primitiveness [R1, R2, R6]. In some instances, there are tourists who detect the omission of modernity from their narrative and see the Emberá presentations as artificially staged [R3-R5]. This omission thus works against their initial interest to discover the authenticity of the Emberá, as any of the tourists wish to learn about the Emberá in complex and nuanced terms [R2, R3, R6]. As a result of this conflict – the historical loss of certain cultural practices paired with the superimposition of a stereotypical image – the Emberá's identity came to be misrepresented.</p> <p>Theodossopoulos's research responded to an ethnographic gap within anthropology, as</p>		

previous anthropological studies of this indigenous group was under-researched. Through archival research and field trips to other parts of Panama inhabited by other Emberá communities, he amassed a body of visual records of cultural practices (such as dances and body paint designs), artefacts, and styles of adornment and dress. The genealogical method applied in his ethnographic work also revealed key findings and knowledge on the oral history and geography of the Emberá. Collectively, the findings of this research enabled Theodossopoulos to determine with relative precision the timeline of Emberá migration to Chagres and the length of their settlement – a timeline not previously known [R1, R2, R6].

Theodossopoulos's research assesses indigenous representation in the modern context of exoticisation, which includes communication with tourist audiences [R5, R6]. He refers to the resulting articulation of indigenous and non-indigenous practices as 'indigenous modernities' – a term that points to the complementarity of modernity and indigeneity (and avoids the simplistic opposition of tradition and modernity) [R1, R2]. As noted above, the unrealistic exclusion of modernity in tourism narratives encourages many tourists to doubt the authenticity of the Emberá communities – a phenomenon that Theodossopoulos identifies as the 'trap of authenticity' [R4]. Yet, Theodossopoulos argues, to recognise that the Emberá see themselves as both indigenous and modern does not diminish but opens up new avenues for the proliferation of indigenous identities in a globalised world [R2, R3, R5].

Theodossopoulos's ethnographic and theoretical work makes the case for a strengthened sense of indigeneity for the Emberá. Indigenous tourism, enriched both with rediscovered ancestral practices and the articulation of 'indigenous modernities', has provided the Emberá in Chagres with national and international visibility. Equally, it has fostered a renewed confidence in their identity – a process of empowerment that Theodossopoulos has contributed significantly to shaping.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Theodossopoulos, D. (2018). 'Indigenous Tourism as a Transformative Process: The Case of the Emberá in Panama'. In: Alexis C. Bunten and Nelson Graburn (eds), *Indigenous Tourism Movements*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 99-116.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/52389/>

[R2] Theodossopoulos, D. (2016). *Exoticisation Undressed: Ethnographic Nostalgia and Authenticity in Emberá Clothes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 240pp. ISBN 978-1-5261-0083. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/51039/>

[R3] Theodossopoulos, D. (2013). 'Emberá indigenous tourism and the trap of authenticity: beyond inauthenticity and invention'. *Anthropological Quarterly* 86(2): 397-426.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/34014/>

[R4] Theodossopoulos, D. (2013). 'Dance, visibility, and representational self-awareness in an Emberá community in Panama'. In: Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, and Jonathan Skinner (eds). *Dancing Cultures: Globalization, Tourism and Identity in the Anthropology of Dance*. Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 121-140. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/33135/>

[R5] Theodossopoulos, D. (2012). 'Indigenous attire, exoticisation and social change: dressing and undressing among the Emberá of Panama'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(3):. 591-612. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/31509/>

[R6] Theodossopoulos, D. (2011). 'Emberá indigenous tourism and the world of expectations'. In: Jonathan Skinner and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (eds.). *Great Expectations: Imagination and Anticipation in Tourism*. Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 40-60. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/52067/>

Grants

The above research was in part funded through an ESRC Research Grant for a project entitled 'Global Awareness and Social Change in an Embera Community in Panama' (2010-12), RES-000-22-3733); value: £94,511.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Since **2014**, Professor Theodossopoulos's anthropological research at Chagres has enabled a remarkable and ongoing representational process. The people of the Emberá have used his research [R1-R6] to progress their tourism practices and engagement; to enhance their past and modern cultural identity, and to advance their political representation – all of which have been highly significant in improving their income and quality of life.

Assisting indigenous representation through a legal claim to ancestral land

Records of Emberá settlement are scarce and Theodossopoulos ethnographic data established a reliable record of Emberá habitation in Chagres. He also presented the Emberá leaders of the six local communities with high-resolution maps, genealogical data, and oral histories [R1, R6]. From 2010 to 2015, this information was used by local leaders to solidify a common narrative about their history in the National Park. In turn, this initiated a process of visualising a future indigenous reservation, and inspired a desire to apply for legal ownership of these lands [R2].

In **2018**, the plans for the claim took a more defined form and a Danish NGO, Forests of the World, provided assistance to the community leaders in drafting a land claim: 'In 2018, we approached Professor Theodossopoulos to provide consultation and evidence in support of our proposal to the Panamanian government on behalf of the Emberá communities. Theodossopoulos' anthropological work provided us with genealogical confirmation, derived from his systematic study of the Emberá families in the Chagres watershed. This information demonstrated the chronology of indigenous occupation of the lands in question' [d]. From then on, Theodossopoulos was called upon to provide advice to both the indigenous leadership and Forests of the World on a regular basis [c]. The final land claim document, produced in **2020**, quotes Theodossopoulos's data as evidence, and comprises the thrust of the argument regarding the chronology of Emberá settlement in Chagres. The land claim was presented to the Panamanian authorities on 2 December 2020 [e]. Irrespective of its outcome, this land claim constitutes the first legal document to establish the residence of the Emberá at Chagres, and thus it has created a legal precedent. The positive impact of Theodossopoulos's work on the land claim is also evidenced by one of the local leaders: 'I also like the way he helps us with our land claims. We need evidence to prove how long we have been here for. Demetrio [Theodossopoulos] has written information on this in his book which he shared with us in 2018' [a].

Facilitating the re-evaluation of indigenous tourism practice

To make his argument of 'indigenous modernity' more accessible [R2], Theodossopoulos translated his ideas into an easy-to-read graphic booklet entitled *A Vision for Emberá Tourism* [f]. In **2019**, this booklet prompted conversations in the community about indigenous identity, ways to present themselves to the world, and opportunities to re-evaluate representational practices. The younger generation showed themselves particularly open to change. So much so that by the end of the **summer 2019**, the younger members of the community had started using the Spanish word 'authenticity' not as merely indicative of past traditions, but as representative of what modern-indigenous people do. This transition indicates a conceptual broadening of their identity. As a result, older individuals, such as the leaders explaining local history to tourists, started including in their narrative, along with references to a pre-modern past, examples of modern practices. In the words of one of the elders: 'Some people in our community [now] think that we should tell the tourists about our modern lives: that we are Panamanian citizens, that our children go to school and that we go to the hospital when we are

sick' [a].

Enabling the generation of a representational narrative about Emberá identity and heritage through the rediscovery of past cultural practices

Theodossopoulos shared his new ethnographic knowledge related to lost cultural practices with the communities at Chagres, which they progressively integrated into their practices from 2011 to 2019. As an elder explained: 'We saw these photos [...] and we remembered the past' [b]. This comparative material has been used by the Emberá to revive declining cultural practices at Chagres, such as dance and body-painting designs, and to create a more structured and historically aware narrative of local history [a].

1. *Dance*. In 2011, the Emberá consulted Theodossopoulos's video archive, which included dances from many Emberá communities in Eastern Panama. They debated which style of the dances was 'more authentic', before standardising their practice from 2012 onwards. Between 2011 and 2016, small changes to other established dances, such as the Emberá's 'animal-dances', also took place [R2, R4, a].
2. *Body-painting designs*. In 2011, the Emberá noticed that Theodossopoulos's fieldnotes and photo-archive included a wide variety of Emberá body-painting designs selected from various communities in Eastern Panama and by Colombian anthropologist Astrid Ulloa. They produced laminated cards of the designs, which have been in use ever since and which Theodossopoulos renewed at their request in 2019 [R2, R5, a].
3. *Local history*. From 2011 to 2016, Theodossopoulos shared Emberá history such as place names, relations with the Spanish and with other indigenous groups, and the Emberá change of settlement patterns in the late twentieth century [R1-R3]. Since 2016, it has formed part of their tourist narrative.

This ethnographic material adds depth and context to the Emberá community's tourism narrative, enhancing the success of the tourism encounter, which is their main source of income at Chagres. As another leader states: 'His [Theodossopoulos's] knowledge has been of great help to us not only with regards to our land claim projects, but also with our weekly communications with tourists' [b].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] Letter from an indigenous community leader, Chagres National Park. This letter identifies the impact of Theodossopoulos's research on the community's knowledge, tourism practices, and land claim application.

[b] Letter from the regional leader (*cacique regional*), Chagres National Park. This letter identifies the impact of Theodossopoulos's research on the community's land claim, cultural knowledge, and tourism practices.

[c] Letter from the Coordinator of the Forum of the Congresses and Boards of the Seven Indigenous Peoples of Panama, Assessor of the Congresses and Board. This letter explains how Theodossopoulos's research has informed the land claim and improved their cultural representation.

[d] Letter from the Danish NGO Forests of the World. This letter provides details on Theodossopoulos's contribution to the preparation of the land claim application.

[e] Land Claim (*Expediente de titulación y visión emberá para el territorio tradicional emberá Éjuã So*), with accompanying letter and map, as well as proof of submission to the authorities in Panama. All references to Theodossopoulos's research have been translated from Spanish into English in a separate document (included as part of the corroborating evidence).

[f] Graphic booklet *A Vision for Emberá Tourism*. This booklet translates into an easy-to-read format Theodossopoulos's ideas about indigenous modernity within their tourism context.