

# **Chapter 3**

## **EMBERÁ INDIGENOUS TOURISM AND THE WORLD OF EXPECTATIONS**

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### **Introduction**

Parara Puru, an Emberá community in the Chagres National Park in Panama, is a site where tourists from economically powerful nations have an opportunity to experience aspects of an Amerindian culture. The tourists meet the Emberá inhabitants of the community in the context of half-day organized trips, during which the residents of Parara Puru offer a standard 'cultural package' that includes a music-and-dance presentation, a traditional meal, and a display of handmade Emberá artefacts. This cultural package is adaptable, and the Emberá hosts are prepared to provide extras to meet additional expectations at the request of their visitors: a tour in the rainforest, some guidance on Emberá medicinal knowledge or informal instruction on other aspects of indigenous lifestyle. In this respect, the varied and particular types of tourist encounter provide opportunities for the Emberá to investigate the expectations of their guests and, in an effort to satisfy those expectations, explore additional dimensions of their culture and enhance its representation.

In this chapter I am concerned with how the residents of Parara Puru investigate and anticipate the expectations of their tourists. I pay particular attention to questions asked by the tourists during the tourists' encounter – for example, those that indicate 'a quest for the authentic Indian' (Ramos 1998: 84) or an ambivalence about the position of indigenous people in the interface of tradition with modernity – and the attempts of the Emberá hosts to understand

and diplomatically answer those questions or meet the expectations inherent in them. I argue that the questions of the tourists, and the responses of the Emberá, can help us to explore the meeting ground of two interrelated processes: the development of indigenous cultural representation through tourism, and the growing Emberá awareness of the expectations of the outside world. The latter, the Emberá increasingly realize, have significantly changed, from stereotyping in the past, to idealized admiration in the present.

In all respects, the tourist expectations, as they are offered to the Emberá, are diverse and often contradictory. Some tourists take to the cultural distinctiveness of the Emberá and implicitly encourage a strong adherence to tradition at the exclusion of modernity, an attitude that reflects a nostalgia for the idealized 'vanishing savage' and lost worlds unaffected by (Western) civilizing processes (Clifford 1986; Rosaldo 1989; see also Conklin and Graham 1995; Gow 2007). Others are prepared to see the Emberá as inhabitants of the modern globalized world, people who maintain their identity, but share the benefits, predicaments and technologies of the modern era. Finally, a few non-indigenous Panamanian visitors are happy to realize that the Emberá share common tastes and experiences as citizens of the same nation, and are not so different to them after all. Contradictory expectations such as these encourage the Emberá to slightly underplay or accentuate their cultural difference in their attempts to guide their visitors to varied, well-known, or sometimes unexplored dimensions of their culture.

Overall, the engagement of the Emberá with tourism, and their attempts to understand and anticipate the tourist expectations, has inspired a process of self-reevaluation of Emberá culture, providing new opportunities for the Emberá to improvise and experiment with their cultural representation. In this process, the question of what is authentic has become a topic of concern among the residents of Parara Puru, and the tourist encounter an opportunity to rediscover, reflect upon and reconstitute their indigenous traditions (Abram, Waldren and Macleod 1997). As has been attested by an impressive number of anthropological contributions (see among many, Bruner 2005; Coleman and Crang 2002; Abram, Waldren and Macleod 1997; Selwyn 1996; Boissevain 1996), local conceptualizations of authenticity are undoubtedly shaped through the interaction of expectations in the tourist encounter. In fact, some indigenous communities manifest a remarkable adaptability in taking advantage of the desire of Western audiences to consume authentic 'native' culture. They often recombine and reinterpret old elements of their tradition, or introduce new elements, to produce innovative cultural adaptations or enhance their representation. This has evidently been the case with several Panamanian ethnic groups (cf. Pereiro Pérez 2010; Howe 2009; Velásquez Runk 2009; Guerrón-Montero 2006a, 2006b; Young and Bort 1999; Tice 1995; Taussig 1993; Swain 1989; Salvador 1976).

The following sections focus on the interaction of expectations in the tourist encounter as this takes place in Parara Puru.<sup>1</sup> First I describe how the inhabitants

of the community became involved with tourism and how they put into use their culturally embodied knowledge to create an ideal setting for fulfilling tourist expectations. Then I examine how the Emberá in Parara Puru are curious to learn more about their guests and how they obtain an understanding of their guests' expectations through the exploratory questions asked by the tourists. I pay special attention to some questions that reflect ambivalence in the resulting expectations – such as questions about the local code of dress or the use of computers – and add an additional level of complexity to contradictions already experienced by the Emberá, independently of tourism (e.g., indigeneity vs. modernity). Finally, I focus on the cultural improvisation encouraged by the growing awareness of the tourist expectations, and resulting cultural adaptations that involve experimentation or spontaneous deviation from established form. As we shall see in the ethnography that follows, the negotiation of expectations during the tourism exchange in Parara Puru is a dynamic and creative process that has inspired creative adaptations to diverse and contradictory tourist expectations.

### **An Ideal Setting to Fulfil Tourist Expectations**

Surrounded by dense rainforest, and approachable only by canoe, Parara Puru looks at first sight like an isolated community forgotten by time and untouched by modernity. From the point of view of the Western visitor the community emerges out of the lavish vegetation of the Chagres National Park as a small island of inhabited space within an ocean of green. This inhabited space, however, gives the impression of having emerged 'naturally' out of the forest. The wooden, thatched roofed houses blend with the overwhelming naturalness of the surrounding environment, and the bird songs mix with the sound of cumbia-Emberá music, performed by the local inhabitants to welcome incoming groups of visitors. In tune with the music, the relaxed but joyful disposition of the residents of Parara Puru – who walk slowly to meet the tourists, dressed in traditional attire – resonates with Rousseau-ian representations of a seemingly true and authentic life away from the tribulations of Western civilization.

The notion of authenticity in Western imagination has been associated, under the formative influence of Rousseau, with expectations of sincerity, primordial integrity, paradisiacal innocence and purity (Bendix 1997; Lindholm 2008). 'Simple' or 'native' cultures – such as the indigenous peoples of the contemporary world – have been and are still perceived as sharing those qualities in plenty. The rise of popular ecology in the latter part of the twentieth century increased the appeal of the earlier Rousseau-ian vision, idealizing indigenous communities as being closer to nature or encapsulating the primordial essence of ecological wisdom (Morris 1981; Ellen 1986; Conklin and Graham 1995; Milton 1996: 109–14; West and Carrier 2004). In Western discourse, romanticized images of life in the tropics often combine with the critique of modernity, the message of

environmentalists, and old colonial narratives of voyages of discovery. An idealized perception of tropical Panama in particular, as Frenkel (1996) explains, has developed since the late nineteenth century, fuelling North American imagination with Edenic images of the Panamanian rainforest.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing elements from idyllic representations of life in the tropics, or from the environment-friendly depictions of indigenous communities in popular ecology, the tourist agencies that organize day-excursions to the Emberá communities in Chagres advertise the beauty of the local environment along with the excitement of meeting one of Panama's indigenous 'tribes'. In tourism advertisements, the Emberá are represented as people with knowledge of the rainforest, who live – and have always lived – in harmony with it. And indeed, the Emberá are people who possess a great deal of knowledge about the rainforest, the result of a long history of living in ecosystems similar to that of Chagres National Park. Although their cultural adaptations, like those of all human groups, involve a certain degree of control over the natural environment, their lifestyle and material culture easily fits within the conceptual framework of the tourists' expectations. Independently of their engagement with tourism, the Emberá in Chagres are, undeniably, dwellers of the rainforest, and in this respect, are sincere when they present themselves to the tourists in those terms.

The inhabitants of Parara Puru do not have to go out of their way to present the tourists with an experience of an indigenous culture in the rainforest. Their village is a real inhabited indigenous community, the home of approximately twenty Emberá families. The houses – all built on stilts, according to Emberá custom – and the surrounding environment bear the mark of continuous habitation, as new structures and pathways emerge organically to meet the requirements of the local inhabitants. Old dwellings are continuously repaired or replaced by new ones, while electric appliances are gradually incorporated into the community's family houses alongside the more traditional fire hearths. In the spaces around their houses, the residents of the community have planted trees and flowers with recognizable cultural significance or use, which mark the domestication – the Emberization – of the local environment (cf. Herlihy 1986; Kane 2004).

Parara Puru is a new Emberá community, but all Emberá communities are relatively new. Until forty or fifty years ago the Emberá favoured a dispersed pattern of settlement, according to which clusters of Emberá families, often related by kinship, built their houses alongside the rivers that served, and are still used, as communication arteries through the rainforest. To search for better opportunities, and avoid external threats or internal quarrels, the Emberá often disassembled the wooden components of their houses to rebuild them in new and more favourable locations. Following this general strategy of dispersion and migration (Williams 2005), the Emberá expanded from the region of Choco in Lowland Colombia to the province of Darien in Eastern Panama where they established a strong presence alongside other groups such as the Kuna and the

Afrodarienitas (see Kane 2004). In the last sixty years, a smaller number of Emberá families migrated further westward into the areas surrounding the river Bayano and – closer to the Canal – the river Chagres.

In Chagres, the Emberá originally followed their traditional preference for dispersed settlement. The foundation of spatially concentrated communities was part of a much wider process which began in Darien in the 1950s and was encouraged by the government in the 1970s and 1980s (see Kane 2004; Herlihy 1986, 2003; Velásquez Runk 2009). Most of the new concentrated communities were formed around newly built primary schools that the government established in the newly founded communities. In Chagres, the Emberá took under consideration the idea of setting up concentrated communities after the establishment of a National Park in 1985. The regulations of the Chagres Park prohibited hunting and systematic cultivation, but the proximity of Chagres to the Canal and Panama City made possible the growth of tourism activities. Panamanian NGOs, supported by the Ministry of Tourism, assisted the Emberá with developing the necessary infrastructure to receive tourists, while a number of tourist agencies, also based in the City, undertook the task of advertising and organizing day trips to the Emberá communities in Chagres.

The success of the tourism-experiment was immediate and profitable to both the Emberá and the tourist agents. Parara Puru, one of the three Emberá communities built on the banks of the river Chagres, was founded nine years ago by an initial core-group of Emberá who were born in the vicinity and wanted to work full-time in tourism. They established a small but vibrant and economically successful community, which, despite its orientation towards tourism, should not be viewed as a tourist enclave: the community's spaces and their aesthetics are not completely 'regulated, commodified and privatised' (Edensor 1998: 47); there is an absence of high-end tourist facilities, while the majority of houses within the community are the permanent residences of the local families and subject to unregulated readjustments. The focal points of the tourism activity are two large communal houses, where the greater part of the cultural presentations take place, although the tourists are free to walk around the community but without entering individual family homes. Tourist groups range from as large as ninety to a hundred visitors, to as small as two or three independent travellers.

The great majority of tourists that visit Parara Puru come from inclusive resorts or cruise-ships passing through the Canal area. They reach Chagres by bus, and are accompanied by guides who gently supervise them for the duration of the trip. In Lake Alajuela, which is fed by the river Chagres, they board motorized canoes navigated by Emberá men in traditional attire. This is their first glimpse of the Emberá. Before entering the community, the canoe navigators take those groups that have more time at their disposal to the nearby waterfalls where some tourists have an opportunity to swim and walk in the rainforest. After this sensually overwhelming experience, the tourists reach Parara Puru, and are welcomed by its inhabitants at the disembarkation point. Following a small break to take

photographs – the Emberá of Parara Puru do not shy away from the camera – the tourists are accompanied to communal houses where they admire or buy Emberá artefacts (at a good price, in comparison to the markets in the City) and are offered a meal of fish and fried plantains served inside a folded palm leaf.

The standard presentation to tourists in Parara Puru also includes a speech by one of the leaders of the community that provides basic information about the community, the traditional methods of constructing artefacts, and the amount of labour invested in this process. This is followed by a music and dance performance, the most visually compelling part of the cultural presentation. First the women of Parara Puru dance a couple of traditional animal-dances – imitating the movements of different natural species each time – and then, men and women form pairs and dance cumbia-Emberá and rumba-Emberá,<sup>3</sup> inviting the tourists to join in the dance. The dance performance culminates in a spontaneous ‘party’, as tourist adults and children from diverse cultural backgrounds are united for a short time by the cheerful sound of rumba-Emberá.

Before the beginning of the dance, the tourists have the opportunity to ask the Emberá questions which the guides translate. Through those questions the Emberá gradually accumulate knowledge about the expectations of their audience. As I will describe in the following sections, the residents of Parara Puru are still learning how to decode and accommodate the complexity of those expectations. This process of decoding is for most of them a long-term undertaking. In the short term, however, and during the duration of the tourists’ visit, they remain prepared to answer questions or provide assistance. Some tourists, for example, might request a guided walk around the community, or in the forest, or ask for some informal instruction in Emberá indigenous knowledge. The Emberá of Parara Puru will fulfil most requests of that type, and remain attentive to the tourists’ needs until they see them off at the embarkation point in the early afternoon. Most tourists depart from Parara Puru worn out from the tropical heat, but exhilarated from the experience.

### **Investigating Each Other’s Expectations**

The inhabitants of Parara Puru became involved with the tourism economy approximately twelve years ago, in the period immediately preceding the foundation of their community in its current composition and location. Although they are comparatively new to tourism, they have already accumulated considerable experience, and appear to control the tourism encounter with confidence. The interaction with new groups of tourists, however, remains an open-ended process and often involves small, unexpected challenges. There are always new questions the tourists ask in a sincere desire to learn about the Emberá, or sometimes in a deliberate attempt to uncover alleged inauthentic dimensions of their indigenous life. In this

section I will give attention to some of these questions in an attempt to highlight an important stage in the negotiation of expectations during the tourist encounter.

First, I should clarify that the Emberá in Parara Puru, like in most other Emberá communities, do not speak languages other than Spanish and Emberá. Their communication with the overwhelming majority of tourists who do not speak Spanish is made easier by the involvement of the tourist guides, who are employees of the agencies that bring the tourists to Chagres. The guides try to facilitate, when possible, the interaction between the Emberá and their guests, and translate into the tourists' language (English, French and, more rarely, Italian) the speeches delivered by one of the leaders of the community. 'The speech' (referred to by the Emberá as *explicación* or simply *charla*) is a standard part of the cultural package offered to the tourists: it is delivered in Spanish, includes an explanation of the various methods of Emberá artefact manufacture, and a short presentation on the history of the community. It is always followed by a question-and-answer session, during which members of the audience ask the Emberá speaker for further clarifications with the interpretative help of their tourist guides who often add – during translation – descriptive information or short comments that reveal their opinions.

I should stress at this point that although the visiting tourists readily assume the role of the audience, observing for the most part their hosts, the Emberá of Parara Puru have similar opportunities to observe their guests too. Through daily interaction, the Emberá recognize the ethnic categories of tourists that visit their community and some of their respective characteristics. Tourists from different nationalities behave differently, my respondents explain. Some, for example the North Americans, are likely to buy many artefacts; others, such as the French, fewer; and some, the Germans are a case in point, purchase almost none. German tourists, I was told (and this was verified by my own observations) enjoy walking in the back regions of the community, sometimes with their guides, but very often unsupervised – and have a tendency to break away from their group or 'get lost'! The Italian men, a couple of teenage Emberá girls explained, enjoy posing for photos with Emberá women, even though the women themselves sometimes find this attention uncomfortable.

The comments made by the Emberá about different ethnic groups of tourists represent a significant break away from the old Emberá practice of avoiding contact with the outside world, a strategy that protected the integrity of the Emberá culture but resulted in limited knowledge of the wider world. The introduction of tourism has facilitated the growth of a global awareness among the Emberá (Theodossopoulos 2010), and has instigated a curiosity about the ethnic background of the tourists and their respective countries. Very often, while waiting for the arrival of particular tourist groups, or sometimes just after their departure, young and old Emberá men and women would approach me with questions about countries such as England, France or Italy (from which they receive regular visitors). They are often interested in general information, such as demography,

climate and language, or ask, in some cases, more particular questions, such as whether there are any indigenous people like themselves in those countries.

Tourists from Latin American countries can interact directly with the Emberá in Spanish, and ask questions, not only of the leaders who are delivering the speech, but also of any other member of the community. Some residents of Parara Puru, mostly men, but also a few women, are very comfortable with this type of interaction, while others are slightly, but always politely, reserved. Non-indigenous Panamanian visitors represent a small but significant category of Spanish-speaking tourists to whom the Emberá devote special care and attention. Most Emberá have been subjected to systematic stereotyping in the past due to their non-mainstream – and seen as ‘not-fully-modernized’ – identity. It is not surprising, then, that they are now very happy to receive some positive attention and recognition by their fellow-nationals who have started visiting the community as tourists. Apart from individual families of Panamanian tourists, Parara Puru regularly receives visits from Panamanian higher education institutions, which attempt to cultivate among their students a positive attitude towards the indigenous cultures of ‘their’ country.

The residents of Parara Puru take all questions seriously and attempt to give the best answer possible, no matter the nationality or size of the visiting group. The leaders of the community who deliver ‘the speech’ receive most of the questions, and are able to answer competently and diplomatically due to their skills they have developed from daily practice. Some questions asked by the tourists come from a curiosity to learn about particular dimensions of Emberá culture, while some others reflect an implicit desire to question the authenticity of Parara Puru as a truly indigenous community. The result of this type of question-and-answer interaction is a two-way negotiation of expectations that provides both parties – the tourists and the Emberá – with new information about each other’s perspectives. In the following sections I will offer some detailed examples.

### **Tourist Questions and Expectations**

It took me some time during my fieldwork to realize that the apparently simple questions the tourists ask – questions that some of my Emberá respondents and I treated as way too obvious – reflected complex tourist experiences and subjectivities. A good example is a question I have heard many times in different periods of my fieldwork: many tourists ask, in a short and straightforward manner, if the Emberá do, in real life, live in Parara Puru. The same question is sometimes phrased in a rather clumsy manner, such as ‘do you live here in the forest all the time?’ From the point of view of the Emberá, Parara Puru is, without any doubt, not part of the forest (which surrounds the community) but a very much inhabited, domesticated space. After the tourists’ departure, some of my



respondents have commented with apprehension on the possibility that some tourists have failed to realize that they in fact 'live here' (that is, in the community) and 'not in the forest'. In the presence of the tourist audience, however, they politely reply, that 'yes', indeed, they live here all the time, that is, 'in the *community* of Parara Puru'.

Behind this straightforward question, however, there often lies a more complicated tourist experience. Some well-travelled tourists have attended cultural presentations by other ethnic groups that take place in locations outside the indigenous community, such as sites of historic significance (see Bunten, this volume) or settings especially prepared for tourist performances. The well-travelled tourists are often aware that indigenous performers can travel to designated locations, often dressed in traditional costume, for the sole purpose of the tourism exchange (see Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2004). This comparative dimension in the critical thinking of some tourists is less obvious, but can become apparent during subsequent conversations with the tourists themselves. In many cases, the tourists' view represents a more widespread wariness towards the commoditized nature of pre-arranged cultural presentations.

This wariness is sometimes directly expressed with questions focusing on the Emberá attire. 'Do you wear these clothes all day?' or 'Are you dressed like this every day?' the tourists often ask. Some tourist guides welcome this type of probing question and, before translating into Spanish, they make small remarks like 'I am interested to know the answer to this question as well', or 'let us see how he [the Emberá leader] will answer this question'. On these occasions, the guides find an opportunity to implicitly stress their modern subjectivity – perceived as parallel to that of their clients – by underlining their ability to challenge the full extent of the Emberá adherence to tradition. The implication here is that the Emberá are not expected to maintain daily their traditional code of dressing in the modern world, according to which the upper part of the body is mostly uncovered, decorated only by body painting, necklaces and bracelets.

The Emberá leaders who deliver 'the speech' answer questions of this type with diplomatic honesty: they explain that the government does not allow them to venture outside of their communities in traditional attire. Non-indigenous Panamanians, they add, are also obliged (by law) to wear at least a T-shirt when they appear in public. They also explain that when the tourists depart, the inhabitants of the community take off their necklaces and bracelets to carry out their daily chores in a more comfortable manner. The women, some Emberá further clarify, wear their traditional skirts (*parumas*) all day, and often outside of the community. All these statements are true: as a matter of principle, the Emberá of Parara Puru rarely lie to enhance their self-representation. Yet, they will diplomatically avoid emphasizing the fact that men, women and children do wear T-shirts both within and outside the community, while men also wear shorts.

As I will further explain in the following section, the issue of 'what clothes the Emberá should wear' is a serious topic for debate even within the Emberá

community. The questions of the tourists, however, reflect their perception of the Emberá as inhabiting an ambiguous position at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. There are additional types of questions the tourists ask that indirectly address this ambiguous position, such as for example questions about health and education. Most tourists are fascinated to hear about Emberá shamans (*Jaibanas*), their knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants and, more importantly, the degree to which contemporary Emberá rely on their care and advice. With respect to the last issue, they ask relevant questions and receive honest and direct answers. Some Emberá, the tourists are told, still rely on traditional medicine – sometimes, but not at all times; and yet, to solve more serious medical problems, they take conventional medicines and, if this is absolutely necessary, visit a medical centre or a hospital outside the community.

Questions about the education of the Emberá, as these are articulated by visiting tourists, often conceal the inadvertent recommendation that Emberá children living in the rainforest should not be deprived of educational opportunities. In this respect, and as I will further underline in the following section, the tourists' admiration of premodern cultural lifestyles gives way in the face of their modern values about education. The Emberá of Parara Puru share very similar pro-educational values, and answer these types of question without any ambivalence or hesitation, proudly stating that they have a primary school in the community and that they cherish the education of their children. An issue that is not always made directly obvious to the tourists, but that concerns the Emberá, is that the children of the latter receive education only in Spanish, as very few teachers are qualified to teach the Emberá language and there are currently only a few appropriate textbooks that teach Emberá.<sup>4</sup>

Other types of exploratory questions asked by the tourists in Parara Puru are, for the most part, less controversial, reflecting the traveller's ethnographic curiosity. For example, tourists frequently ask: 'Are you monogamous?' (Usual reply: 'yes'); 'Where do you find partners to marry?' (Usual reply: 'in neighbouring Emberá communities, or in Darien, where many Emberá live'); 'At what age do young people marry?' (Usual reply: 'girls at 16, boys a bit older, unless they want to continue their education'); 'How do young people have fun?' (Usual reply: sometimes in social gatherings in neighbouring Emberá and non-Emberá communities, sometimes locally). When some of the same questions are asked by non-indigenous Panamanians, such as Panamanian students on an educational trip, the Emberá of Parara Puru might provide additional details to their answers, making more apparent to their interlocutors that they too live in the same nation and are not too different from them after all. For example, it is more openly admitted in these cases that many residents of Parara Puru go for entertainment to neighbouring non-Emberá communities, that apart from their own Emberá music they like to listen and dance to popular Panamanian musical genres (such as *tipico*); and that when they go to the hospital they have to show, like all Panamanian citizens, their national identity card.

## Indigeneity with or without Modernity

As we have already seen, several of the questions that the tourists ask in Parara Puru indicate the ambivalence in the minds of the tourists about the position of the Emberá in the intersection of tradition and modernity. This ambivalence is noticeable in the negotiation of the expectations during the tourism encounter, and becomes more apparent in discussions about certain topics such as the issue of the Emberá traditional attire, and the possibility of introducing computers to the community. Both topics concern the Emberá independently of their interaction with tourists; but the tourists' expectations, as these are gradually communicated during the tourism exchange, add an extra level of complexity to such local concerns.

The issue of the Emberá attire – or, the issue of clothes or clothing (*vestidos*) – represents a broader topic of debate in the Emberá world. There are many Emberá women who feel uncomfortable with the old tradition of having their upper body exposed, covered solely by necklaces and body paint. This is, to a great extent, a response to accusations by non-Emberá Panamanians who associate the lack of clothes with inferior morals or values. Many Emberá women in comparatively inaccessible communities in Darien systematically cover their upper bodies with bras, T-shirts, or both, while they still prefer to cover their lower body with the traditional Emberá skirts (*parumas*). In Parara Puru however, where Emberá tradition is presented to groups of outsiders and is more confidently and systematically celebrated, most Emberá women still feel comparatively comfortable with the traditional Emberá attire.

However, a positive evaluation for the traditional Emberá code of dress is not only found in those communities that have developed tourism. Even in inaccessible Emberá communities, which do not receive tourists, there are some men and women who feel comfortable with fewer clothes and are not embarrassed by the topless-ness of the traditional attire. On the whole, the ambivalence of the Emberá about the question of the Emberá code of dress cuts across the tourism or lack-of-tourism divide, while supporters of all possible positions can be found among young and old. The introduction of tourism has added further complexity to the issue that often results in a three-way contradiction: (a) the social expectation to follow the values of the Panamanian nation and modernity, which clashes not only with (b) traditional practices, but also with (c) the expectation of the tourist audience that the Emberá should hold fast to traditional practices such as their code of dress.

This triple contradiction becomes more evident as the Emberá who engage with tourism gradually become, first, more confident about the value of their traditional practices, which are admired by Western visitors and, second, aware that the latter are pleased to see them in traditional attire, and expect from them adherence to this code of dress more generally, and not only in the context of cultural presentations. A Western preference for the traditional-*cum*-exotic code

of dress informs similar dilemmas and contradictions faced by other indigenous groups in Latin America (see Conklin 1997; Gow 2007; Ewart 2007; Santos-Granero 2009). Among the tourists in particular, it is easy to distinguish those who pass judgement on the Emberá based on their suspicion that they dress inauthentically (appearing in traditional dress only for the duration of the cultural presentations), and those who are willing to accept the Emberá as people who can wear modern clothes without compromising their indigenous identity.

On one particular occasion, for example, a small group of Japanese visitors were thrilled to discover a 'made in Japan' label on the bottom edge of a *paruma* skirt. After hearing the explanatory comments made by their guide, they realized that, nowadays, this representatively Emberá type of clothing is manufactured in Asia specifically for the Emberá and according to Emberá specifications.<sup>5</sup> The Japanese tourists were even more thrilled to realise that despite its international record of manufacture, a *paruma* is quintessentially an Emberá garment worn by Emberá women within and outside their communities with the implicit intention of underlining their ethnic origin. The Japanese tourists' ability to accept the Emberá as inhabitants of a globalized world, without challenging their indigeneity, is representative of a significant number of tourists. Others maintain less flexible expectations and, like the examples I offered in the previous section, they question the degree to which the Emberá wear traditional clothes in their daily lives.

Similar contradictions emerge with respect to the introduction of computers in the Emberá community. When considering the use of computers, as with education more generally, several tourists are ready to depart from their exoticized expectation of indigenous people living without modern technology, in harmony with nature. More specifically, the image of young children learning how to use computers is associated with the ideal of education for all which appeals to most Western tourists. The idea of adult indigenous people using computers, however, represents an anomaly for some visitors to Parara Puru, who see the inhabited spaces of the community and its thatched-roof dwellings as an extension of the forest. The tourists would have been surprised to know that several inhabitants of Parara Puru are interested in computers and some are learning how to use them.

In 2008 I met a Peace Corps volunteer, Deborah Rockoff, who devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to teaching children and adults in Parara Puru basic computer skills. She used her own laptop for this purpose, while investigating the possibility of acquiring additional computers for the community's school and the community's main office. Some of the adult members of the community had already benefited from her help, learning how to keep the community's accounts in Microsoft Excel. The Emberá who participated in this experiment were enthusiastic and asked me additional questions about the Internet and the possibility of advertising the community through the Internet. They remained, however, somehow unsure about the impact that computer use might have on the profile of the community with respect to their perceived 'authenticity'. Their initial hesitation about what the tourists' opinion might be,

allowed me to appreciate the degree to which a certain type of tourist expectation – namely the desire to meet an authentic indigenous community disconnected from the rest of the world – has already added a complex turn to the emerging strategies of Emberá cultural representation. In the section that follows, I will describe how problems of this type are often solved with improvisation and spontaneity, as the community of Parara Puru adapts to the challenges posed by the tourism economy.

### **Anticipation and Improvisation as a Response to Tourist Expectations**

In a short period of approximately twelve years, the residents of Parara Puru have entered the economy of tourism dynamically. At first they learned how to carry out successful cultural performances. Then, through frequent practice, they started accumulating additional experience, gaining knowledge as to how to guide their guests, and inviting them to see the world from their point of view. They are now gradually moving away from the initial stage of hesitant experimentation with presenting facets of an Amerindian culture to an audience of Western tourists, and are slowly entering a more confident second stage of articulating the characteristics of their own cultural tradition to the non-Emberá world. This process of transformation does not merely enhance the representation of the Emberá culture, but also encourages and facilitates its enrichment with new cultural elements.

As my respondents in Parara Puru explained to me, tourism has provided them with an opportunity to spend more time practising their culture. They now devote more time to manufacturing Emberá artefacts, in much greater numbers, and in a greater variety of motifs and variations. They dance their traditional dances daily (as opposed to only on special occasions), and have more opportunities to perfect their talent as dancers or musicians in a much wider repertoire of dance and musical theme variations. They have also become skilled at better articulating the particularities of their culture, such as describing or explaining artefacts, buildings, elements of the physical and man-made environment, techniques of manufacture, cultural traditions and performances. Through practice and improvisation they contribute new elements to the wealth of their culture, opening new possibilities for being Emberá in the contemporary world.

To a significant extent this phase of cultural creativity is stimulated by the negotiation of expectations in the interaction with tourists. Day after day, the Emberá of Parara Puru learn how to anticipate some of the most usual questions the tourists ask, and improve their skill in giving precise, and when necessary, diplomatic answers. Foreign tourists and Panamanian non-indigenous visitors have slightly different expectations, and are likely to admire or criticize different aspects of the indigenous life. The Emberá hosts pay very careful attention to

these subtle differentiations in the respective expectations of their guests, and adapt their narratives accordingly, stressing slightly different dimensions of their daily lives. For example, they might, to some small extent, underplay their differences with their Panamanian visitors in an attempt to demonstrate that they too are citizens of the same modern nation, or they might accentuate their cultural distinctiveness in front of North American audiences.

At the same time, however, they become aware that the expectations of the non-Emberá world are diverse and complex, and that this complexity can open up a whole new range of possibilities for the representation of the Emberá culture. For example, it is already apparent to most Emberá in Parara Puru that while, until twenty years ago, the non-indigenous Panamanian majority maintained a stereotyping attitude towards the Emberá indigenous identity, the tourists from the nations of the economically developed world appreciate – and some even approach with awe and admiration – the Emberá indigenous traditions. In a similar manner, an increasing number of the Panamanian middle class are interested in learning more about Emberá culture, and willing to abandon or partly reconsider their previous negative stereotypes.

In Parara Puru, the emerging awareness of these changing expectations has inspired a renewed interest in the issue of the authenticity of indigenous culture. This often takes the form of collective introspection, a concern with the history of the Emberá tradition and the ‘truthfulness’ of its representation. Now that a wider non-Emberá audience is increasingly paying attention to the Emberá, the Emberá feel a growing responsibility to pay more attention to the details of their own culture. They desire to become more informed and more articulate guides of the Emberá world, able to describe a wider variety of cultural particularities that might interest a larger variety of tourists, including those who are more knowledgeable and inquisitive.

During six sequential periods of fieldwork in Parara Puru – in 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 – I had the opportunity to observe these nuanced changes in perspective. Year after year, new individuals – men and women – step forward and take a progressively more active role in guiding the visitors, narrating the history of the community, or explaining the making of artefacts, the particulars of the dress code, and specific details of the Emberá way of life. With the increase in the number of voices that contribute to the guiding of the visitors, the narrative about Emberá culture becomes enriched with new details and new perspectives. Each individual, old or young, male or female, introduces life experiences that reflect slightly different skills, and slightly different subjectivities. In this respect, the project of educating the tourists into the basics of Emberá culture gradually accommodates a number of parallel journeys of exploration into the deeper aspects Emberá culture undertaken by the Emberá themselves.

Nevertheless, the collective pool of knowledge about Emberá culture in Parara Puru is not sufficient to answer all potential questions the tourists might ask. For this reason, the majority of the inhabitants of the community, like amateur

anthropologists, have their ears open for additional pieces of information that could be gathered during conversations with Emberá from other communities. In this respect, knowledge about cultural issues can make a difference in negotiating tourist expectations (see also, Tucker, Bunten, in this volume). In Parara Puru new information about the cultural particularities of Emberá life is shared throughout the community at speed, between family members, and from one family to another, especially when the new information in question can add a new element to the daily presentations for the tourists. On one occasion, for example, I was fortunate to observe a small change in the daily dance presentations that occurred within less than a week! Rumba-Emberá had typically been danced until then in pairs, with the dancers positioned side-by-side, moving in a circular procession, in a manner choreographically similar to cumbia-Emberá.<sup>6</sup> Then one day in April 2008, the inhabitants of Parara Puru started dancing the rumba-Emberá in a face-to-face position, again in a circular pattern, but in a freestyle manner, not in procession as before.

The change described above was evidently small and involved the choreographic arrangement of the bodies of the dancing couples, while the music of the dance remained the same. However, since I was concerned at the time of fieldwork with the details of the Emberá dance tradition, I was immediately struck by the changes. I started asking my respondents in the community and I was given, in most cases, more or less the same answer: 'This is the correct way to dance rumba-Emberá'. Considering the small size of the community, it was easy to identify the individuals who had introduced this small change in the style of the dance and their rationale for implementing it. In the Chagres area, the numbers of the Emberá are small, and their experience with dancing rumba-Emberá before the introduction of tourism was limited. But it became apparent during my fieldwork that this free-style arrangement of the dancing couples was closer to the way the Emberá dance rumba in Darien, where Emberá dancing has been more established. Very conveniently, the new style of dancing was also easier for the tourists to follow and has facilitated tourist participation.

More importantly, while older dance patterns become features of everyday dance practice, new dance moves are introduced through rehearsal and improvisation, and the Emberá dance tradition, which was declining until the introduction of tourism, is undergoing a revitalization. This is apparent also in the Emberá animal-dances, the other major type of Emberá dancing, which encourages improvisation as part of imitating the movement and attributes of native animal species. The introduction of tourism has motivated the residents of Parara Puru to dance a much greater number of animal dances than ever before, and introduce a wide variety of new dance moves and choreographed patterns into their existing repertoire. The degree of improvisation has been accelerated by tourism, inspiring the Emberá to realize new avenues of artistic expression.

Similar examples of improvisation and experimentation that result in new patterns and designs can be found in the context of the Emberá art of basket and

mask construction. The wider Emberá society in Panama – not merely the communities that entertain tourists – are involved in the production of cultural artefacts that eventually find their way into the tourist market (Velásquez Runk 2001). With the increase in material culture production, new designs emerge out of older patterns, while new colours are introduced using old and well-established dyeing techniques (cf. Callaghan 2002). As the art of Emberá basketry continues to evolve, new natural dyeing mediums are introduced to produce more colours and accommodate a greater variety of designs.<sup>7</sup> My respondents in Parara Puru welcome this creative freedom and the new possibilities that it encourages, and state that they prefer work invested in constructing cultural artefacts to labouring for cultivation-related undertakings.

As we have already seen, the desire to anticipate the expectations of tourists has inspired creativity and cultural improvisation among the Emberá who are involved with tourism. In the context of work invested in cultural performances for tourists, the established authenticity of older practices merges with the spontaneous discovery of new motifs. The reorganization of new and old elements emerges organically in daily life as the Emberá adapt to new circumstances, but does not contradict older practices – that is, what the Emberá themselves see as ‘Emberá traditions’. The latter remain, as I have argued elsewhere, true to the spirit of Emberá social organization and process (Theodossopoulos 2010). In this respect, however stereotypical or unrepresentative the expectations of some tourists might be, they have stimulated, to a smaller or larger extent, the production of creative solutions to a new set of challenges.

## **Conclusion**

While at the beginning of their engagement with tourism the residents of Parara Puru simply relied on their readily available knowledge about their culture (that is, what most Emberá more or less know), in a relatively short period of time, and through frequent practice in working with tourists, they started refining their skills at presenting Emberá culture. During their first steps as entertainers of tourists they attempted to provide their guests with an indigenous experience, a spectacle (see Urry 1990). With the passage of time, however, the Emberá of Parara Puru identified some dimensions of their culture that the tourists were likely to appreciate more, collected additional information about these cultural dimensions, and improved their skill in practising them. Having learnt how to anticipate some of the tourists’ expectations, and equipped with this knowledge, they started guiding the tourists into and around their culture, instead of merely participating in a spectacle. As with other Amerindian ethnic groups, they now exercise a certain degree of control over their self-presentation (cf. Bunten 2008: 392; this volume).



Presently, the Emberá who live in communities that regularly receive tourists spend more time than ever before discussing, being concerned with, and practising the performative and artistic aspects of their culture. Month after month, year after year, they become more experienced as artists, dancers, storytellers and guides to the Emberá tradition. Through daily practice, they share more opportunities to spontaneously improvise, introduce new patterns or designs to established motifs, incorporate new materials into traditional techniques, and include additional information into customary sets of knowledge and narratives. Small fragments of partly forgotten information about Emberá history and tradition are collected and integrated into new narratives, or used to authenticate contemporary practices. However, new adaptations and improvisations taking place in Parara Puru are not challenging the conventions of Emberá culture, but they evolve 'from within the local cultural matrix' (Bruner 2005: 5). As such cultural improvisation is 'intrinsic to the very processes of social and cultural life' (Ingold and Hallam 2007: 19).

So, the Emberá improvise and experiment as they try to meet the expectations of their visitors. In this process, they feel committed to respecting 'the ways of their parents and grandfathers' through a conscious attempt to reproduce dances, artefacts, and body decoration in accordance with established cultural patterns. Yet, through the spontaneous combination of new forms with old structures – which inevitably occur in everyday practice – they restructure their cultural representations. This 'restructuring' often involves, as Stewart has suggested in his discussion of creolization and mixture, 'an internal reorganization of elements' (2007: 18). This is why I argue that a more systematic appreciation of the internal reorganization of cultural expressions can help us circumvent the obstacles of the binary distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, an opposition that implies a static and limiting understanding of culture as a fixed and self-contained entity. In everyday life there is no single genuine Emberá culture; culture, as Bruner (1993, 1994, 2005) argues, always evolves and adapts to new challenges, just one of which is indigenous tourism.

But while the dialogue with the tourists' expectations is inspiring creativity, it also brings to the surface a few contradictions inherent in the tourists' imagination of contemporary indigenous people. The tourist expectations oscillate between a yearning to preserve an uncontaminated version of indigeneity – an expectation of unshakeable cultural integrity and purity (Ramos 1998: 70) based on 'an ontological and essentialist vision of exotic cultures' Salazar (2010: xviii) – and an implicit desire to introduce Western civilizational benefits into the indigenous experience, such as education in schools or medical care in hospitals. These contradictory expectations match comparable tensions experienced by the Emberá in the non-tourism-related dimensions of their lives – such as the commitment to hold fast to a distinctive indigenous tradition and the responsibility of participating in the life of a modern nation. In this respect, the efforts of the Emberá to understand and anticipate the expectations of tourists

closely relate to, and often complicate, similar concerns they tackle – independently of tourism – as citizens of their nation and inhabitants of a changing world.

At the same time, however, the expectations of the world towards the Emberá are also changing. The residents of Parara Puru are able to detect these changes through their negotiation of tourist expectations in the tourism encounter. Up until twenty years ago, the Emberá were discriminated against by their nation's non-indigenous majority on the grounds of their cultural distinctiveness (which was stereotyped as primitiveness). Now, foreigners from the most powerful and prosperous nations of the world approach Panama's indigenous communities with respect and care. Even Panamanian visitors are willing to appreciate Emberá culture in positive terms, adopting their government's official perception of cultural diversity as an asset to the nation (more generally) or the development of tourism (more particularly) (cf. Guerrón-Montero 2006a; Pereiro Pérez 2010). In this regard, the Emberá have come a long way from their old strategy of avoiding contact with the outside world to their current accelerated contact with the global community, which has resulted in increased recognition and respect from outsiders.

The Emberá residents of Parara Puru are continually polishing their skill in deciphering and anticipating contradictory tourist expectations. The tourists undeniably add an additional level of ambiguity to the hazy interface of tradition with modernity. My Emberá respondents, however, are keen to face and resolve the problems arising from this ambiguity and, without any doubt, they declare their desire to take advantage of the tourist economy. They now wish to reach out to the world and enhance the representation and visibility of their culture (Theodossopoulos 2009; Strathern and Stewart 2009), to derive some benefit from the globalizing economy (Loker 1999), and to renegotiate – as other Panamanian ethnic groups have done (cf. Howe 1998, 2009; Guerrón-Montero 2006a, 2006b; Tice 1995; Young and Bort 1999) – their relationship with the wider national and international community. In Parara Puru, the tourists' expectations, despite their contradictory nature, have simultaneously inspired both cultural improvisation and the revitalization of older indigenous practices, encouraging the Emberá to adapt – as they have done in the past (cf. Kane 2004; Williams 2005) – to new challenges and opportunities. The dialogue with the international community, as this is realized through the negotiation of expectations in the tourist encounter, has facilitated this process, repeatedly reminding the Emberá that the outside world is curious about their unique culture.

## Notes

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1. Where I undertook anthropological fieldwork in August and September 2005, February, March and April 2007, March and April 2008, July and August 2009, February, March, April and May 2010 and January, February, March and April 2011. The first draft of this chapter was written in 2009, but during revision benefited from later fieldwork.
2. An idealized image that coexisted in an ambivalent relationship with contrasting perceptions of physical danger and moral degradation lurking in the tropical jungle (Frenkel 1996).
3. For a detailed description of these dances, and their importance for Emberá cultural representation, see Theodossopoulos n.d.
4. The Panamanian Ministry of Education has recently produced a couple of textbooks of the Emberá language for primary education, a project that is (at the time of writing) at an experimental stage.
5. The textiles used for the Emberá *parumas* are different from those used by Kuna women for their traditional costumes, although both are often – and especially nowadays – manufactured in Asia. The origin of both the Kuna and Emberá traditional women's outfit 'cannot be credited to any single outside source'; both contain 'elements that can be traced back several hundred years, and others that have developed as the result of contact' and as adaptations to the arrivals of new materials (Salvador 1976: 169).
6. For a detailed description of rumba- and cumbia-Emberá, and the significance of improvisation in Emberá dancing, see Theodossopoulos n.d.
7. For comparative examples of indigenous arts, new designs and older patterns, see Graburn 1976, Smith 1989; and among the Kuna (the neighbours of the Emberá) see Tice 1995, Salvador 1976.

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