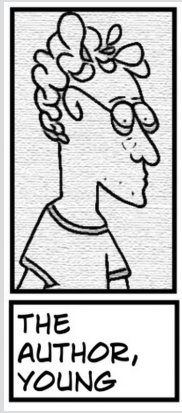
Preface

I should start by making myself more visible to the reader; I see this as a responsibility and duty, more so in the preface of a monograph that is deeply concerned with the style of ethnographic exposition. My journey through the world of Emberá clothes has been haunted by the spectres of nostalgia and exoticisation, and in particular the persistent tension brought about by the recognition of my limitations as an analyst and the liberating analytic possibilities engendered by this very recognition. My internal struggle to balance my idealisation and deconstruction has produced in its wake creative disagreement. On the one hand I battle with my proclivity to idealise, over-interpret and identify with indigenous tradition while overlooking non-indigenous influences. On the other hand I take great effort to identify the nostalgic, exoticising inclinations of the anthropological endeavour. Importantly, I approach such liabilities without guilt, treating them instead as opportunities for the production of knowledge, committed to my argument that through reflexive treatment, ethnographic nostalgia can lead to thicker anthropological analysis.

In the box below you see the caricatures of my two authorial voices, presented to capture idealisation and deconstruction. Such caricatures are comfortably situated in the artificial environment of exoticisation; with their comic simplicity, they embrace the very source of embarrassment. Used here, they point sharply to the contradictions that engender the futile and essentialist search for a singular authenticity in social life, the illusion of singular narrative. My self-caricaturing here attempts to defy singularity:

Box 1



There is one particular niggling voice in my mind that I have never managed to dismiss, that of myself as a young ethnographer. His contagious enthusiasm for fieldwork comes partly from the training he received in the United Kingdom. He believes that recording the details of local social life is an end goal in itself, and that ethnography is more important than theory. Yet, despite his firm belief in the empirical project of anthropology, he is not a positivist, but is fully dedicated to the study of the particular. Ethnographic detail is magical and beautiful, he advocates.

My younger anthropological Self is a champion of ethnographic nostalgia. He is fascinated by indigenous-*cum*-traditional structure and form, which he encounters both in anthropological literature and in everyday life. And he searches for the past in the present – a past formed by a previous ethnological record. This is why he spends significant time collecting other ethnographic accounts, published and unpublished, about the people he studies.

He values the systematic comparison of the ethnographic past with the present, and calls this endeavour 'scholarly work'. He dismays when he realises that his scholarly work is considered by many boring, or outdated. Hence, he persists in writing for a small readership of specialists.

The other voice that prevails in my mind challenges, like a sophist, everything that my younger Self has accomplished. This is an identity I acquired after reading widely, teaching and embracing more than one type of anthropology. This part of me appreciates ethnography in depth, but does not believe that the anthropological project is ethnographic. Aware that non-specialists are bored with ethnographic details, he experiments with new mediums of representation. Anthropology should address broader and more timely questions, he advocates.

This older anthropological Self of mine attempts to problematise ethnographic nostalgia. He is likely to acknowledge that indigeneity is not confined to pre-modern structure and form, and that indigenous people embrace modernity. He does not see the technologies of globalisation as corruptive or alienating, and he hastily embraces change. Rather than dismissing the exotic form, he attempts to learn from the process of exoticisation.

He approaches his own writing and scholarly comparisons with a critical spirit, aware that what he finds fascinating may only concern a privileged readership of specialists. Hence, he keeps on reminding himself that anthropology should be communicable to the wider public.

The struggle between those two ideal-*cum*-stereotypical anthropological types has shaped the presentation of this book. Although my older authorial Self has obviously the upper hand in managing the plot, my younger Self has negotiated some concessions in relation to content. A concern with close ethnographic comparison and corroboration – however wearisome some readers may find it – is still evident in the main body of the book, confined to particular chapters or text boxes. Such detail is valuable to area and subject specialists, making its contribution to a slowly expanding ethnographic literature about the Emberá. Yet, by becoming part of this literature – a standard of academic authenticity of a sort – the book signals its complicity with the production of ethnographic nostalgia.[1]

Ethnographic nostalgia, I argue, is at play in the way that previous ethnographic writings – in this case, about the Emberá – structure, perhaps even preempt, the ethnographer's comprehension of the ethnographic reality in the present. However irredeemable, ethnographic nostalgia has played a crucial role in the furthering of academic knowledge. It has motivated a persistent scholarly endeavour that attempts to compare the ethnographic past with the present, often in an effort to grasp the secrets of social change. Everything, including our knowledge about society, is subject to change. Our struggle to depart from the knowledge we have acquired – often with some nostalgic reluctance – engenders the discovery of what is new. It is in this sense that the tension between these two positions, empiricist and deconstructive, shapes the form of this book.

I started my fieldwork in the rainforest of Chagres as an established academic, renowned for my research on the anthropology of Europe. I thus carried with me the lessons acquired in my previous research and training, including a sceptical inclination towards the exaggeration of difference. But coming to a new field, I felt also the desire of my younger anthropological Self to 'rediscover' the Emberá in a manner that bore resemblance to previous ethnographic accounts. In other words, this part of me hoped to see the Emberá as they had been recorded before, as if they had emerged from the pages of a book. Admittedly, such exoticising and nostalgic predilections were accentuated by the particular ethnographic setting. In Chagres, where I conducted my fieldwork, the Emberá put on traditional attire to entertain foreign tourists. Their daily dress codes shift during the day and include modern, indigenous and indigenous-*and*-modern clothes. These varied – formal, informal and spontaneous – dress combinations encouraged me to compare the Emberá of Chagres with the ethnographic accounts of previous eras: the Emberá conceived as people outside modernity (Nordenskiold 1928; Torres de Araúz 1966; Reverte Coma 2002), and the Emberá as a rapidly modernising people (Kane 1994; Herlihy 1986).

I traced these two separate ethnographic views of the Emberá in the everyday reality of my fieldwork at Chagres. And as I found elements of both in the present, I gradually acquired the nostalgic impression that reality was in part constructed through the ethnographies I had read. As if images from different eras – the 1920s, 1960s, 1980s – were superimposed on each other, generating a contradictory complexity and a number of 'authentic discontinuities', an expression I borrow from

Kane (1994) to address the rifts between an idealising past and a modernising encroaching present, where the past persists and re-emerges in the present.

The illustrations that support this book attempt to capture this sense of simultaneity. By filtering (digitally) and altering (by hand) my photographic record, I have produced a series of black-and-white sketches. They make visible precisely the nostalgic sensation I had during fieldwork, the feeling that the present comes to light filtered through the pages of an older book. And by presenting my visual aids as artistic reconstructions of my ethnographic nostalgia – as incomplete, open-ended depictions (Taussig 2011; Ingold 2012), not absolute records of a singular authenticity – I expose the subjectivity of my account and its proclivity to fuel – by freezing ethnographic time (see Fabian 1983) – the ethnographic nostalgia of the future.

As I mentioned above, I have approached the parallel, coexisting and complicating authenticities I experienced in the field through the lens of my previous training, writing and career. This partly involved introducing analytical tools that are not rooted in the anthropology of Latin America, resulting in some cross-fertilisation across otherwise discrete fields. An example of this is *disemia*, a concept that I borrow from Herzfeld (2005) to address the ambivalence between official self-representation and informal self-recognition. The originality of Herzfeld's conception allows to us appreciate how ambivalence – and the tensions it propagates – does not necessarily generate an unresolvable split in the identities of local actors. My adaption of *disemia* to analyse indigenous representation attempts to illustrate the simultaneity of modernity and indigeneity in everyday narratives and experiences. *Indigenous disemia* captures the ambivalence between a formal view of modernity and indigeneity, and a fluid, subversive experience of being simultaneously modern-*and*-indigenous. Some of the dress codes of the Emberá in Chagres, despite clothes-shifts and contradictions, are simultaneously indigenous-*and*-modern.

In being simultaneously indigenous-*and*-modern, the shifting dress codes of the Emberá in Chagres – the westernmost edge of the Emberá distribution in Panama – offered me an opportunity to think anthropologically about modernity and indigeneity; not as two forces in opposition, but as two sides of the same coin. Chagres, as a location for my fieldwork, encouraged me to think in broader terms, not merely about the representational awareness of the Emberá, but also about authenticity as representativeness. It is precisely because Parara Puru, my field site, is located so close to the Panama Canal and Panama City that it has attracted accusations of inauthenticity, as if the community is, somehow, less Emberá than other Emberá communities:[2] a community only an hour and half away from Panama City, yet approachable only by dugout canoe; a community in the rainforest, so far away but so close to the crossroads of international capitalism and commerce. Contradictions of this type stimulate the allure of the exotic, but also its very denial: the Emberá in Parara Puru do not live in a museum, but in a politically organised community, as so many other Emberá in Eastern Panama.

I could have written many different accounts of the Emberá in Parara Puru. The one I present in this book intentionally adopts more than one style of ethnographic description. Taken alongside the visual aids that support this book, these styles represent different elements of analysis, different degrees of tinkering with the ethnographic moment. They are incomplete depictions of a reality that is so complex that it defies comprehensive explanation. However, by putting these different styles of writing side by side I attempt to shed light on more than one – incomplete – aspect of the same theme. Indeed, at times I deliberately refer to the same story, but narrated from a different point of view. For example, early in the book (Chapter 2) I provide a 'static' description of the traditional Emberá attire, which represents a prescribed authenticity denied by all other chapters in the book. And I have chosen to present a linear story of the Emberá clothes (Chapter 3), drawing attention to processes and inter-connections in time and space, which is further complicated by the bottom-up ethnographic style adopted in the second half of the book. Similarly, the historical ethnography in Chapter 4, where I examine the exoticising narratives of two Western explorers, is complemented by a more synchronic analysis – the voices of here and now – in the chapters that follow.

I would have liked to write many different accounts about the Emberá in Chagres. Not only are there different styles of ethnographic presentation, but also countless aspects of the life of the Emberá that I do not tackle in this book, although I hope to in the future. Many colleagues who are Amazonian specialists will be disappointed to find only a small amount of information about kinship, ontology and symbolism, themes that remain fertile grounds for investigation in the Emberá world. Similarly, many colleagues who write about Panama might expect a comprehensive ethnography about the Emberá of Chagres, with more emphasis on the economy of tourism and the representational peculiarities that make this ethnographic context so distinctive.[3] And there are also several themes I examine in the book that invite further exploration. For example, the topics of Emberá body painting in particular, and the distinctive fashion of the Emberá-Wounaan *paruma*-skirts deserve monograph-length analysis in their own right.

As for the account I provide in this book, I want to issue a disclaimer. My ethnographic experience addresses the Emberá of Panama, and in particular those of Chagres. My generalising statements with respect to certain sartorial aspects of the Emberá culture often extend beyond Chagres, to address the Emberá of Eastern Panama – that is, the Emberá living on the lands east of the Canal and up to the Colombian border. My generalisations are corroborated by close comparison with previous ethnographic work,[4] my extensive travel, but also the comparative reflections of my Emberá interlocutors at Chagres, who are intimately interconnected with wider Emberá society. Nevertheless, and in most respects, my partial and incomplete references to the Emberá as a generic ethnic category closely reflects a Chagres perspective, and does not, by any means, aspire to represent the Emberá in Colombia.[5]

In all these respects my account remains incomplete. But this is a creative sort of incompleteness that invites future investigation, and makes visible the complex and partial nature of ethnographic engagement. In my own journey with the

Emberá, I have used ethnographic nostalgia as an analytical device to discover and disseminate knowledge, a way of navigating the countless errors and misperceptions that emerged from my ethnographic experience. I continue to learn from these errors, and I continue to feel nostalgic sentiments about my time with the Emberá at Chagres. In fact, every sentence I write, every attempt I make to organise my description of the Emberá, generates the possibility for further nostalgia; and alongside this, further opportunities to learn from it, as much about myself as an ethnographer as the Emberá.

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I would like to end the preface by acknowledging the numerous people who have provided me with help throughout the ten-year cycle that has informed the production of this monograph. First and foremost my gratitude goes to the residents of Parara Puru at river Chagres, to whom I dedicate the book. I visited the community after completing a first manuscript draft in January 2015, and I am now worried that I will not be able to return to the community every year, as I did between 2007 and 2012. Among my many friends in Parara, special thanks go to Claudio Chami and Ubertina Cabrera, Antonito Sarco, Anel Sarco, Francisco Chami and Escolatica Flaco, Alberto Tocamo, Gorge Martinez and Crecencia Caisamo, Brenio Dogirama and, finally, Claudio Junior Chami. I refer to them in my text with their first name in appreciation of their views, but the overall responsibility of my analysis, and any potential mistakes, are all mine to bear. Among my friends in Panama City I would like to thank George, Lambros, Mary and Sofia Efthimiopulos, Danae Brugiati and Nicasio de León; their consistent support for my research – material, psychological and academic – has been invaluable over the years. Keith Alpaugh, Kim Rowell, Lisa Carter, Mark Horton, Carlos Fitzgerald and Claudio Junior Chami travelled with me to Darién, while Tomás Mendizábal accompanied me in the exploration of Venta de Chagres; I am grateful for their companionship and friendship. I would also like to thank Jim Howe for sharing with me visual material from the Marsh expedition, and Cay Tsilimigra for translating for me Nordenskiold's (1928) book from Swedish to Greek. And closer to home, I would like to thank Tasia Kolokotsa for drawing four sketches especially for this book, Melissa Benson for proofreading the first draft and, finally, Michaela Benson, my wife, for her support and advice over the years – she has borne my long periods of absence in the field without complaint. I should also acknowledge the support of the ESRC (research grant RES-000-22-3733) upon which the lengthier part of this research was based. The British Academy (small grants SG-49635 and SG-54214), the University of Bristol and the University of Kent provided me with small research funds, which allowed me to travel to Chagres on an annual basis. Finally, I should express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers who read the manuscript of this book, and my colleagues at the University of Kent who read some of its chapters: their suggestions and inspiration has been invaluable.

Notes

1 To avoid misunderstanding, I use 'complicity' here in its less known meaning, to denote complexity and involvement (Marcus 1998: 107).
2 For the authenticity traps associated with the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity, see Theodossopoulos 2013a.
3 In previous and forthcoming work I focus extensively on indigenous tourism and challenges introduced by tourism at Chagres (see Theodossopoulos 2007, 2010a, 2011, 2013c, 2014). But this body of work is by no means comprehensive, and relies only on a small fraction of the data I have collected on Emberá tourism.
4 Apart from ethnographic work about the Emberá written in English, I have paid special attention to refer closely to the ethnographic literature written in Spanish, especially that of Reina Torres de Araúz (1966) and Reverte Coma (2002), but also that of some of the former's students. I have searched meticulously for unpublished BA and MA dissertations in the library of the University of Panama, and some of this work – which largely descriptive – has informed directly or indirectly my text or my fieldwork. I have also shared some of this descriptive information with my interlocutors at Parara Puru. In most cases where I refer to this Spanish literature on the Emberá of Panama I have tried to focus on its descriptive strengths, usually to corroborate comparisons, instead of dwelling on or criticising its theoretical weakness.
5 I do aspire in the future to extend my close ethnographic comparisons of the literature on the Emberá of Panama to include more systematic reference to the literature on the Emberá in Colombia. This task will undoubtedly involve another long-term cycle of dedicated work, and, ideally, travelling to parts of Colombia that are, at the moment, not fully secure.