

The Status of the Economy and Culture of Piriatí Emberá:
Processes of Social and Environmental Change
in Alto Bayano, Panamá

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Introduction:

In the late 1960s, the Panamanian government and the rest of the world were focusing their attention on a seemingly quiet and undeveloped area of Eastern Panamá: Alto Bayano. Several development projects of interest were in the works. Panamá as a nation was interested in the Bayano River, the largest river in the area. The proposed hydroelectric project would eventually provide 30% of the electricity used to power Panamá City (Berger-Delca, 1999). The international community was interested in the area because it was part of the last stretch of Latin America, between Panamá province and the foothills of the Colombian Andes, through which the Panamerican highway had not yet penetrated. The goal of connecting the continents by road remains foiled to this day; developments of the Colombian civil war made development of a highway through the jungle an impossible and undesirable undertaking. However, progress was made through the Alto Bayano region, and the highway now extends beyond the area, well into the Darién Province.

Meanwhile, as the national and international governments were designing their future, four principal population groups were not so quietly living in and around the sites of the proposed development projects. The Kuna were the oldest population in the area, having lived in Panamá province since before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the early 1500s. Later came the Afrocolonos, descendents of escaped slaves brought to the new world by the same Spaniards. More recently, two new groups entered the cultural mix. Beginning in the 1940s and 50s, small numbers of Emberá Indians began to spill across the border from Darién Province and to settle in the river valleys of several tributaries to the Bayano River. Also around that time, a large

migration of Latino colonists from western regions of Panamá was beginning to flood the area. They came in search of new land for cattle ranching, since the lands of Azuero Peninsula they left behind had already been completely deforested and turned into pasturelands. They continued their aggressive pattern of land use in the Bayano area, starting in the area around the mouth of the Majé River, and working their way westward.

Along with this growing migration of Latinos into the area and the execution of the two development projects in the mid-1970s came new pressures on the people of the region and the environment on which they depended. The highway facilitated contact between Alto Bayano and the modern world for the first time, and the hydroelectric dam flooded 377,170 hectares of territory (Berger-Delca, 1998), changes the character of the landscape and life within the region irrevocably. It is the effects of these changes, and the resultant processes of cultural, economic and political transformation that ensued, that make up the topic of this study. A community of Emberá Indians, called Piriati, was chosen as the site for three weeks of field research that was conducted during the month of May, 2002. Along with the enjoyable process of getting to know the people and their situation through conversation and accompanying them through their daily lives, a General Questionnaire and an Opinion Survey were conducted in an effort to gather statistical information about the economic practices and opinions of the people.

Research Site:

Piriati is a small community of Emberá Indians next to the Panamerican highway in the eastern region of Panamá Province. Piriati is located within 5,280

hectares of Collective Territory¹, a land concession that was granted to the Emberá people in exchange for their lands that were flooded by the creation of the Bayano dam in 1976. The territory runs from the highway to the shores of Lake Bayano. The Emberá are surrounded on all sides by other ethnic groups. Across the lake and to the east and west is located the Kuna Comarca of Madungandi, which totals an area of 180,000 hectares (Berger-Delca, 1998). To the south are many Latino colonists and their cattle. Today, the area for which the colonists deforested the landscape almost completely, leaving behind pasturelands. Because the activities of the colonists are relatively uncontrolled by the government, the extent of this alteration of the landscape is not completely documented. The 1980s was the heaviest period of timber extraction in the area. Currently only 20% of the total timber from the area east of Panamá City comes from the Province of Panamá; 80% now comes from Darién (Berger-Delca, 1998), a statistic that demonstrates the small quantity of virgin forest left in the Alto Bayano region.

The national census from the year 2000 reported the population as 374 individuals. The demographics of the community are in a state of flux. In the past ten years the population has risen by 72%. This is in part due to the rise in the overall population of Emberá living in Panamá in general. In 1960 there were a total of 5,224 Choco in Panamá (Araúz, 1967). According to the 2000 census, there were 22,485 Emberá and 6,882 Wounaan in the country, for a total of almost 30,000 descendants of the Colombian Choco. Another more recent cause of Piriati's population growth is the westward migration increasing violence in the Darién Province, near the Columbian border, which has compelled many individuals to move westward toward central Panamá.

¹ Collective Territory: Any lands outside a tribe's established Comarca that are also conceded to indigenous group by the government.

The community design of Piriati strays from traditional patterns in several ways. The first distinction is the concentrated living pattern of the community. Traditionally, Emberá have lived in isolated family groupings, lacking any official political organization at a level greater than the head of the household (Araúz, 1967). The vast majority of the homes are located within several 100 meters of the single road that enters the community from the highway. The government specified this concentrated living pattern as a criterion for the concession of the land to the original 34 families that relocated to the area, in order to facilitate organization of schooling and other public services (Wali, 1989). Families came from different areas, primarily Majecito, Río Diablo and Río Diablito. The sudden requirement to live in close proximity to people of other family groups is a source of conflict and tension, and creation of an effective shared management of the community has proven to be difficult.

Second, the Emberá are not accustomed to living within borders. They are truly a mobile people, as evidenced by their gradual migration along river valleys, from Colombia, through Darien province, and most recently, arriving in the Bayano region in the 1940s and 50s. They have always made their homes near the banks of rivers, making use of the fertile alluvial soils which best produced their traditional crops (Roundtable, 1978), of which platano was ~~a the most~~ historically the most important staple. The effect on the economy of their forced relocation is thus an important question, for it has led to the reorganization of land use patterns. Now that boundaries have been drawn, the Emberá are prevented from looking for better land if their soil is not sufficient; they are stuck with what they have. Therefore, as the land has deteriorated, many people have been forced to change cultivation patterns or dedicate themselves to other economic activities.

The relocation and changes in economy have also provoked significant changes in the Emberá culture among the people of Piriati. Traditions such as the style of dress and speaking the Emberá language are growing less common, especially among the younger generations. The traditional Emberá dwellings, built on pillars with a conical roof made of palm leaves (Araúz, 1967), are now being replaced by structures built from processed timber. Such changes are due to the exposure to and increasing integration with Latino society and economic structure. Changing educational opportunities, access to media and popular culture, television, telephone, and the ever-improving transportation system facilitate this interaction with the outside world. The stretch of the Panamerican highway that runs between Panamá City and the Alto Bayano region was being paved at the time of this investigation, further connecting Piriati to the developed regions of the country. It was to assess the current status of the economy and culture amidst these processes of change that I went to Piriati for three weeks. Specific emphasis was placed on gathering information about changes in the economy, changes in cultural patterns, and effects of environmental changes on the aforementioned processes.

Results and Analysis:

The results and analysis of this investigation will be split up into 3 sections. First, data about the economic activity of the people will be presented, followed by information collected about Emberá culture, and concluded by visions for the future and the current political situation. Information is drawn from the General Questionnaire and the Opinion Survey, as well as personal observations and conversations, leading to a combination of hard data and opinions of the people. In the Questionnaire, 21 households were surveyed. A household is defined as one building, within which lives a primary parental pair, along with any number of single children, married children and

grand-children of the original couple that sleep in the same residence. The Opinion Survey includes information from a total of 47 people, 36 of which were either the father or mother of a household that also participated in the Questionnaire.

Economy:

The first focus of the investigation was the assessing the current distribution of the economic activity. The Questionnaire included questions about primary livelihoods of the mother and father in the household, along with information about any extra work done by the parents to gain supplementary income for the family. Sources of employment in the Alto Bayano region as a whole are agriculture, cattle ranching and timber extraction. All of these industries exist to varying degrees in Piriati, with the addition of the production of traditional arts and crafts. Both men and women are engaged in agriculture and artesanias, while only men are involved in cattle ranching and logging. The following table describes the economic activity of the fathers of the 21 households that participated in the Questionnaire. It presents both their primary source of income and other industries in which farmers are involved on the side.

TABLE 1: Occupations of Heads of Households (21 fathers surveyed)

Primary Male Occupation		Farmers – Supplementary Work	
Agriculture	20	Artesania	1
Artesania	1	Cattle Ranching	12
Total	21	Timber Extraction	13

*Note: Data regarding female occupations was better presented within the text rather than in table format.

The majority of the families in Piriati earn their primary living from agriculture. This is in keeping with the traditional Emberá economy of subsistence agriculture, but today crops are not only grown for household consumption, but also to earn monetary revenue. Also straying from their traditional patterns is the trend toward working in

other industries on the side, in addition to agriculture; almost every man in Piriati is engaged in one or more economic activities alongside agriculture in order to bolster his annual revenue. Two-thirds of the men surveyed work on the side in the cattle industry as hired hands or own cattle themselves, and two-thirds buy trees from the Kuna or are contracted to help process the timber.

Another important element of the economy in Piriati is that of the women's contribution to the functioning of the household and subsistence activities. To this day there exists the stereotype among Latinos ^{that} Emberá women do all the work (Wali, 1989). This may be due to the fact that women traditionally side by side with their husbands in the fields, in addition to raising animals, performing daily household chores, and crafting needed items such as clothing and functional baskets. Today, women continue to do all of these things, although they now purchase many items that they previously made by hand. At different points in their lives, their most important work is taking care of the children, and throughout their lives they are homemakers. All of them are skilled at making food, washing dishes, washing clothes, crafting and any number of daily chores. The women of Piriati have been slower than their partners to move away from traditional subsistence practices to engage more directly in the cash economy. Recently, however, women have also begun activities that bring in extra revenue. Principal among these is the weaving of decorative baskets and the making of beaded necklaces, called Chakiras, to sell to tourists. The women of Piriati have only been producing this sort of artesanía for the past three years, and due to lack of steady tourism in the area, the industry currently lacks a significant market. Out of the 21 families that participated in the Questionnaire, more than 50% were actively engaged in weaving and other crafts.

The heavy involvement of Piriati's men and women in cash producing industries has significantly increased in recent decades. Before the mid 1970s, when the Panamerican highway was constructed, and the relocation and consolidation of dispersed populations to roadside communities such as Piriati and Ipeti, the people were relatively isolated from the economic and social structures on a national level. They did participate in the national economy, but only through the sale of extra agricultural products. In the 1960s, when Reina de Torres conducted an ethnography of the Choco of Darien and Eastern Panama, the people had developed a significant market for plantains on a large scale, and bananas, avocado and rice in smaller quantities (Araúz, 1967). Many of the older members of the community who had experienced the lifestyle of Majecito before relocation spoke of the great distances required to bring products to market, and the amount of time it took to arrive in Panamá City and return again. The advent of the highway brought great luxury and ease to the economic activities that had previously required such effects. When asked what was different about the life in Piriati and that of Majecito, the most common response was that, before the relocation, they lived "far". According to almost everyone interviewed, life is better, or at least easier, living close to the highway.

The ease of the life in Piriati, as well as the need to engage in cash producing activities, are two results of the ever increasing dependency on the modern economic and social systems. Today, many items must be purchased that were previously hand made or not commonly used. A 60 year-old woman in the village, with the help of her daughter acting as translator from Emberá to Spanish, related a list of these items:

Table 2: Changes in the Source of Various Household Items

Currently Purchased Item:	Item Previously Used/Previous source:
<i>Soap for washing clothes</i>	<i>Soap was purchased</i>

<i>Soap for bathing</i>	<i>Soap was purchased</i>
<i>Cooking oil (bottled vegetable oil)</i>	<i>Oil extracted from Coroso and Trupa seeds</i>
<i>Salt</i>	<i>Salt was purchased</i>
<i>Processed Sugar</i>	<i>Sugar cane</i>
<i>Kerosene</i>	<i>A burnable oil was extracted from a tree</i>
<i>Coffee</i>	<i>Hot drinks were made from toasted corn and from lemon grass</i>
<i>Bleach</i>	<i>Not used</i>
<i>Toothpaste/toothbrush</i>	<i>Not used until circa 1940</i>
<i>School supplies (notebooks, uniform, etc.)</i>	<i>Not used until school started circa 1970</i>
<i>Rice*</i>	<i>Previously cultivated it themselves</i>
<i>Corn*</i>	<i>Previously cultivated it themselves</i>
<i>Plates and utensils</i>	<i>A variety of shapes of tatumá fruit² as well as cooking pots and containers made from a mixture of mud and sand</i>

* Note: The woman included rice and corn on this list only because the past year's harvest had not been successful, and this year they must buy both.

The woman also related a list of items that are not purchased. These include: yucca, cilantro, plantain, banana, beans, yampi, and oteo. These changes in the source of various items are a natural process of making use of what the people have available to them. However, the increased need for cash to purchase these items pushes the Emberá family further away from the subsistence economy.

Changes in pressures on the land have also led to significant changes in economic patterns. Three principal environmental factors contribute to the changes. The most important factor, as signified by the frequency of comments by the individuals interviewed, was the increased difficulties in production of traditional crops. This declining productivity is one reason why they have been forced to look to other industries to supplement their incomes. The Emberá who moved from Majecito to Piriati actually saw an improvement in their access to land after relocation, since in Majecito they had felt strong pressure from other ethnic groups on all sides (Wali, 1989). However, after relocation, "the majority of Piriati residents emphasized planting

² A tatumá is a fruit with an extremely hard outer shell. In the area of Alto Bayano there are many varieties of countless shapes and sizes, perfect for a variety of kitchen uses.

corn and rice as opposed to plantains. This was because while the land was flat, it was not river-bed land where plantains seem to do best” (Wali, 1989, pg. 94). Many farmers told me that in Piriati, plantain trees do not last for more than one to two years, whereas in previous locations, one plantain tree could continue to produce for up to 10 years. A resounding majority of those interviewed stated that the land had better in Majecito, although even land around Majecito could not compare to the quality of the land left behind in Darien.

Variability of weather patterns in recent years is also a major complaint of farmers. The beginning of the rainy season usually comes in the end of April or early May. In 2002, the rains did not come until May 17th, almost a month behind schedule. This caused great problems for the people because the planting season for corn was already over. Many people also lost their rice crops the same year, because they planted after what appeared to be the start of the rains in mid-April, but the long dry period that followed completely obliterated their investment.

Deforestation is the third environmental factor quoted as important in its effects on the economy. Some individuals blame the recent droughts on the extreme deforestation of the region. This Latinos’ extensive clearing of the landscape has undoubtedly had an impact on the ecological balance of the region. In their Roundtable to discuss the early effects of the inundation of Lake Bayano, members of the Institute of Hydraulic Resources and Electrification spoke of the colonists’ “artificial modification of the natural environment, whose result is none other than the creation of specific microclimates” (1978). It is difficult to measure a direct cause and effect relationship between deforestation and changes in local climate. However, whether or not there is a direct relationship between the loss of the forest and tardiness of the rain, the deforestation has had some direct impacts, such as near-elimination of subsistence

hunting due to increased distance of the population from the virgin forest. This change forced the people to look for meat from the outside markets. Fortunately, there are still abundant fish in the river and the lake, providing people with protein in their diets. It is interesting to note that, despite acknowledging the difficulties created by the loss of subsistence hunting and the poor quality of the soil, almost everyone who remembered the early years in Majecito continued to assert the opinion that life was easier in Piriati than it had been previously.

Along with environmental factors, government imposed limitations in land use and other pressures from the outside have made agriculture more difficult and diminished its practicality as a primary occupation. When interviewees were asked about the most important problems of the community, the three most frequent responses were 1) the lack of official recognition of ownership of the collective territory in the form of demarcation and titulation, 2) the unchecked invasion of Latino colonists into the collective territory of the Emberá, and 3) the government's apparent lack of interest in correcting both of the previous two issues. Alaka Wali suggests that lack of official ownership of the land dissuades individuals from placing a great investment in agriculture, and creates incentives for them to engage in economic activities such as logging and cattle grazing that result in immediate cash flow and do not require long term possession of the land in question. (1989).

In addition to concerns about status of the land and claim to it, social influences are important in the changing of economic practices. The Emberá, as opposed to their Kuna neighbors, are relatively open to interaction with outsiders, and to adopting new social and economic patterns. For example, Kuna communities have internal laws that prohibit individual members from engaging in cattle ranching, due to the belief that it is hard on the environment and their effort to closely monitor processes of social and

economic change. Emberá social structure, on the other hand, is much less rigid, and individuals greater freedom to choose their own path. This is therefore evidenced in the increasing participation of Emberá men in industries previously viewed as Colonist activities.

In Piriati, the influence of the cattle industry is stronger than other Emberá communities. According the 1990 census, there were 3 explotaciones^{and} 14 heads of cattle in Piriati, while none were reported in Ipeti Emberá, a community 15 kilometers down the road. There were cattle in Majé, a community on the southern shore of Lake Bayano (Berger-Delca, 1998). Although it is more isolated from societal influences since boat transportation is required to reach the area, several Latinos have married into the community, which could explain the trend.

Watching the activity of the women during my stay in Piriati, I witnessed an economic practice that appeared to me to be influenced by Emberá societal structure, but motivated by their integration with the modern economic system. All the women of the extended family with which I lived gathered together once every two weeks for a full day, to make bollos, a traditional food made primarily from rice or plantains. In the morning some of them would go together to the forest to collect palm leaves with which to wrap the bollos while the rest of the women worked to sift the rice or peel the plantains, afterward beginning the process of grinding it into a paste. Finally, in the afternoon, they worked together to fill the leaves with paste and boil the finished product in a large cauldron. In the evening they would sell the bollos to community members. All of the revenue of this joint effort went into buying fuel for the generator that provides light to the community during the hours between dusk and 10:00 pm.

This example highlights several interesting elements of the economy: one is the community's subsequent involvement in subsistence and cash economies. The common

use of money is not something to be saved or invested, but a useful way to trade for goods as the daily need arises. The idea of saving money and collecting large quantities of material items continue to be foreign concepts to many people in Piriati, although much of this could be due to lack of sufficient capital or access to financial institutions to begin investments. However, when comparing the culture of poor Latino culture with the Emberá, the difference in goals and economic strategies is evident. The Latinos believe that the Emberá are lazy, and do not do enough to use the land and resources they possess (Wali, 1989). This difference in cultural backgrounds is strikingly apparent in the different land use patterns of the two groups. While the colonists completely deforest every inch of land that they find, the Emberá continue to maintain some forests. I asked two men for exact numbers of hectares of their parcels of land that they had dedicated to various land uses. One man, with a total of approximately 60 hectares, had currently 6 hectares of virgin forests, 5 hectares cleared and planted, and 50 hectares of secondary forest, 9 of which were planted with ñame³. The other man, of a total of approximately 60 hectares, had 3 hectares of virgin forest remaining, 30 of secondary forest, and 30 hectares planted with corn, rice, yucca and plantain. Thus, the cultivation style of in Piriati allows for significant secondary forest cover, and scattered areas of primary forest.

As we have already seen, this pattern is slowly changing as Latino ideals become fixed in the minds of individual Emberá. I met one man who had lived a portion of his life in the city, and shared the belief of colonists that the problem of the Emberá was their lack of work ethic. He had come to the community years after the land had been parcelled out, and he said to me, “If I had as much land as any of those guys. I would be a rich man right now” (EMI.D2). A very similar phrase is heard

³ Cultivation of ñame requires the removal of the largest trees in the forest, but the maintenance of smaller trees, around which the vine of the ñame grows upward. Thus, the cultivation of ñame takes

throughout the streets of Cañita, Tortí, or any other colonist community, where the common opinion is that the Emberá have too much land, especially if they refuse to put it to “good” use, i.e. cattle ranching.

There have been many changes in the economic system since the relocation to Piriati, but there remain elements of the Emberá economy that are slow to change. This has to do with underlying cultural elements that serve to value and guard certain traditions and social patterns, and allow others to dissipate into the larger culture.

Cultural Changes:

A second focus of the Opinion Survey was the importance of the Emberá culture in the eyes of the people of Piriati, as well as their views of the processes of change currently taking place. Through analysis of the way in which the people view their own culture, we can learn a great deal about their economy and relationship to the land. The following presents the elements of Emberá culture that were most frequently cited as important by individuals interviewed. Responses were organized into generations based on the following age categories: Older = greater than 35 (remembers something of life before relocation). Middle = 25 to 35, and anyone over 20 who was married. Young = 0 to 20, and anyone between 20 and 25 who is not married.

Table 3: Important Elements of the Emberá Culture, According to Age Groups (total of 47 individuals: 29 older, 8 middle and 10 young)

Older Generation (29)		Middle Generation (8)		Young Generation (10)	
Dialect	11	Dialect	2	Dialect	3
Style of Dress	7	Style of Dress	1	Style of Dress	3
Artesania	3	Artesania	1	Traditional Dance	1
Traditional Dance	3	Other Traditions	4	Other Traditions	6
Other Traditions	4				

place in a secondary forest.

When asked what was most important about the Emberá culture, by far the most common response from members of all three generations was: the dialect and the traditional style of dress.

The biggest cultural problem, which was referenced by individuals of all age categories, including youths, was that the young people are letting go of the traditions, with greatest emphasis once again placed on the importance of language and style of dress. The most common explanation for this pattern, also spanning the three categories, was modern education. Piriati has its own primary school, with 7 grades (kindergarden through sixth). According to the head teacher, interest among the students in continuing on to secondary school is increasing. In 2001, 14 out of 16 graduates from sixth grade went on to First Cycle of secondary school (7th through 9th). However, few continued to Second Cycle (10th through 12th). Only one or two students from Piriati graduate from secondary school every year. However, there are currently between 10 and 14 older students in night school, working slowly toward their high school degrees while working in other jobs during the day.

It was apparent that school itself was not the problem in the eyes of the majority of the people; school is viewed as a positive opportunity. Rather, the fact that there were no qualified teachers available who spoke Emberá was the source of the problem. All of the professors were Latinos from the city, and therefore spoke only Spanish with the students. What is more, the type of knowledge gained in school is completely different than the education received by going out in the fields and to the river to observe the work of one's parents. This was not viewed as a negative change, but rather something inevitable and necessary. One woman of 40 years spoke of the difficulties experienced by her father's generation when the people were first relocated near the

highway, and came into contact with Latinos. A stereotype that still exists in the minds of many Latinos that interact with the Emberá is that they are easy to swindle, because in earlier years they didn't know how to count their change when purchasing merchandise. Therefore, the woman who told me this story is always extremely vigilant when dealing with Latino vendors, and emphatic about sending her children to school every day. A middle-aged man told me the story of his difficulties in achieving his education. The school didn't enter his community until he was already 11 years old. His father told him he was old enough to be working in the fields, but his desire to go to school convinced both his father and the teacher that he deserved a chance. He was 21 by the time he graduated from primary school. This man is now willing to make many sacrifices in order that his children can be educated. His second oldest daughter plans to enter University next year.

A second major cause of the "youth problem" was identified as their exposure to Latino culture. Several older people commented that kids leave Piriati and go to the City, and when they come back they have decided that they do not want to dress like the Emberá or talk like the Emberá. One young woman expressed her concern that Emberá values are being replaced by Latino moral codes. She pointed out that only in recent years has infidelity become more accepted within Piriati and other Emberá communities, a development for which she blames Latino influence. Some individuals worried about the apparent lack of interest on the part of young people in the management of the community, and in taking part in planning to improve the situation of the people. Members of all the age groups pointed to exposure to outside culture as the cause of drug problems and other destructive behaviors in which young men in particular are increasingly participating.

When asked if anyone was working to improve the situation, many responded that there was nothing they could do to change the natural course of events. Others felt the Caŕique⁴ should take a more forceful stand in confronting the obvious social problems. Several community leaders, including the Caŕique, spoke to me about their idea for new cultural legislation, similar in kind to that of the Kuna, which requires members of the community to continue participating in certain central traditions if they wish to remain living in the community. There are no real plans to implement such an idea; they are still in the phase of evaluation of the idea and study as to how it would be received. Many are concerned about the strong rebellion that would be incited among the young people.

The problem of lack of political unity is one element of the Emberá culture that places it at a disadvantage in controlling the direction in which the community is moving. Despite the conception that young people take less interest in governing the community, it is interesting to note that only members of the younger generations directly commented on the disorganization of the administration. This could be partially explained by the difference in education levels of the two age groups, and the resulting difference in their vocabulary, but it is an interesting statement of possible changes in the future. Although they did not describe the problem in such a precise way, many older people did express dissatisfaction with the political situation through complaining about the ineffectiveness of the current Caŕique. Several claimed that the Caŕique did nothing for the community, which is an exaggeration at best. Others complained that he should create more stringent requirements for the young people

⁴ The Cacique is the primary authority of the community. Along with a number of other community leaders, the Cacique works to improve the situation of the community and look out for the welfare of the people. According to Araúz, the post is a recent development. In 1967 she wrote, "The [Emberá] at present do not have their own political organization. In Darién, it is impossible to find chieftans or caciques, and the same is true for Colombia." The Bayano area is much less traditional than Darién and Colombia.

demanding that they speak Emberá and dress in traditional clothing. But an equal number praised him for his good work. Overall, it was apparent that most people were frustrated by the status of local politics in Piriati.

Despite their agreement on the problems with Piriati's politics, lack of unity is a more common theme throughout the community. Piriati is split into factions, largely divided down family lines. This problem dates back to the traditional Emberá political organization, which was basically structured around autonomous family units. The consolidation of many families into one community, as a government stipulation for entitlement to the collective territory, is the principal reason why the people of Piriati broke from their traditional way. A current debate that splits the community is the fight over the best way to title the land. Many want individual property titles, which would allow them to have complete control over the fate of their parcel of land. The others believe that collective territory should remain collective, because if the land is converted into titled property, there is nothing that would prevent colonists from buying up the area and ending up with legal right to be on the land. Currently they are encroaching onto collective territory anyway, but in theory, the is required to protect the borders, so maintaining that status leaves the people with a small amount of hope that they colonists will eventually be forced to leave them alone.

It is interesting to note that the most important elements of Emberá culture, as signified by the results of the Opinion Survey, only included references to physical and vocal expressions of identity; very little of the ideology of the Emberá was mentioned. Alaka Wali, in her 1989 work, discussed the concept of "ethnicity", or culture, as a combination of material and ideological elements:

If the material reality of ethnic differentiation is important, so too is the ideological component—the use of ethnicity as a political strategy—as people respond to conflict and domination . . . The Kuna and Emberá attempted to maintain rights to land by using their status as 'indigenous'

inhabitants. They revitalized certain cultural traits and publicly presented an ethnic discourse in order to persuade government officials of the legitimacy of their claim (1989, pg. 5).

One community leader expressed this concern to me, stating that in losing the culture the people lose force. His reasoning behind this was not necessarily one of unity among the people, but more that international donors look favorably upon a culture that maintains itself intact, rather than one that allows itself to change very easily. He referenced the success of the Kuna in maintaining their culture, and pointed to the benefits it has brought to them. For centuries the Kuna have been politically a very well organized people. The place of the Cultural Congress, the community meeting house, is similar to the place a church occupies in other societies (KNLD1). Their political process is a very well respected tradition. Perhaps the lack of political organization among the Emberá is due in part to the relatively weak conception of their personal ideology.

Ideological pressures are coming not only from outside forces, but also from within the community. For the past 10 to 15 years, missionary activity has been growing in Piriati. Currently there are three Evangelical Christian churches. Two are run by Emberá pastors, and the third is managed by North American and Colombian missionaries. This last church, of the New Tribes Mission, is working to transcribe the Emberá language, which until recently existed only orally. Their goal is to translate the Bible and other important Christian works into the language of the people.

The majority of the individuals interviewed claimed to be members of one of the churches. If they were not members, their statement of their lack of affiliation often sounded embarrassed. One man quickly followed his negative answer with a desire that hopefully soon he could become a member. One family, however, cited the church as a negative influence that was eating away at the integrity of Emberá culture.

Some churches are more didactic than others with regard to the need for the Emberá to change their cultural patterns. They say, for example, that women should not walk around without their shirts on, because it is not proper in the eyes of God. The New Tribes Church was less didactic than the others in this way. One missionary, who is in the process of transcribing Emberá legends in order to analyse their relationship to Christian traditions, spoke of the fact that God was not concerned about appearances, but rather the contents of an individual's heart and soul. This idea was repeated by several Emberá women, who chose to continue wearing the paruma, a traditional wrap around skirt, but also chose to associate themselves with the church.

Whether or not the missionaries will ultimately benefit the Emberá in terms of their cultural integrity, the willingness of the Emberá to accept a new religion is evidence in itself that their own ideology is weak. It is interesting to compare this case with that of the Kuna, who are currently experiencing similar pressures from missionary organizations, but are in the process of enacting a law that prevents more churches from entering communities without paying a tax.

Visions for the Future:

A third focus of the survey was to gain an understanding of the people's hopes and visions for the future. The Opinion Survey provided opportunity for people to respond to this question freely. In addition, the political actors working to shape Piriati's future and the future of the Emberá in general were investigated. I was interested to find out more about how effectively the people were taking charge of their situation politically, and their level of success in creating the future they want for themselves. Interviewees were asked what future they would like to see for Piriati, i.e. for the community, and for the culture of the younger generations.

With regard to the future of the community, one vision was shared by almost all respondents: They hoped for improvement of the road, which in its current form becomes close to impassable by vehicle immediately after the first rains. They looked toward the betterment of their homes. In the words of one young woman, “we’d like things to be just a little more elegant around here...” (EMYO6). Many comment on the need to improve the state of the primary school, which was falling down in places and lacked a cafeteria. Others mentioned the need for a Health Center that was actually stocked with medicine and had a more frequent staff. They also hoped to eventually receive 24-hour electricity, a particularly interesting request, considering their relocation to the area was due to the construction of a major hydroelectric project which produces 150 MW of energy (Berger-Delca, 1999), and brings energy to residents of Panamá City for prices as low as \$2 per month (EMOL3). Currently each household in Piriati pays \$6 per month in operating cost of the community generator, which provides approximately four hours of electricity each evening.

The question about the future of the younger generation, and Emberá society in general, solicited contradictory responses: many talked about the need to save the traditions, and many also talked about the need to move forward and modernise. While a large part of the difference between these responses could very well have been difference of opinion, five individuals combined these two apparently contradictory responses into a one response that made sense. They spoke of the great need for the young generation to be educated, to gain professional status and be able to come back and help Piriati move forward economically, but that they should do so while consciously maintaining their ties to the Emberá culture.

To modernise and maintain one’s traditions is a difficult task, and impossible to achieve entirely. By letting new ideas in, old ideas necessarily are lost. But many

people proposed solutions to problems that amplify the speed with which culture is lost. One woman spoke of the dire need for Piriati's very own secondary school. In order to attend Colegio (high school), children must currently go to either Torti or Cañita. Cañita is far enough away that families prefer to allow their children to stay outside during the week, and only return to Piriati during the two days of the weekend. Were Piriati to have its own Colegio, children would be able to receive the education that is so important, and be able to continue living in their homes, speaking Emberá with their families instead of Spanish in their school, and they would feel less pressure to adopt the styles that they see on the outside. A large percentage of those surveyed from the two younger generations spoke of their personal desire to continue with their education and become professional. People of all ages told me of their hope that those who do achieve this goal would eventually return to Piriati to give back to their community. There was also talk, among the community leaders, of instituting a cultural law that would require young people to participate more fully in the cultural traditions of the Emberá.

Views about the future of land use, and the proper way to confront problems related to the land, were not directly addressed by the questions about the future in the original survey. However, after observing the frequency with which land issues were cited as the most important problems facing the community, I became curious to hear whether the people were thinking about possible solutions to the problems. Current problems, as mentioned in the economy section, include the lack of official demarcation and titulation of land, a problem which has led to the unchecked invasion of Latino colonists into the area designated as collective territory. Also current is the problem of poor quality of the soil, at least in relation to the productivity of several staple crops of the Emberá, such as platanos. The most troubling new issue looming in the near future

is the lack of land available for the younger generations. One generation has already passed since the original families relocated to Piriati, and the original parcels of land have been divided between the children of those original families. Small pieces of land have also been taken up by individuals who have migrated to the area in recent years. Currently there is scarcely enough land for the father of the family to cultivate in a sustainable fashion, allowing for full rotation of his parcels, and for the soil to rest and revitalize.

The lack of official demarcation of Collective Territory is one that dates back to the time of relocation. According to Article 123 of Panama's National Constitution, "the State guarantees to the indigenous communities the reservation of the necessary territories and collective property of said communities for the achievement of their economic and social well-being" (Berger-Delca, 1998, Anexos 14-14). The indigenous people interpret the wording of this portion of the Constitution to mean that they should have official collective ownership of the property that was conceded to them by the government. However, the government has not yet agreed to this view. Alaka Wali summarizes several key obstacles that have stood in the way of Emberá achieving the official demarcation of their lands:

The Emberá encountered difficulties and delays in obtaining compliance [with the promise of demarcation]. They were hampered by the fact that they had no formal method for negotiating with the authorities. Another obstacle was the prejudicial attitude of beaurucrats and technical personnel who were working with the Emberá (1989).

Without official title to the lands, the Emberá have had a difficult time convincing Latino colonists that they are not legally allowed to move beyond the borders of Collective Territory. The government institution charged with preventing this invasion and monitoring the illegal use of natural resources is ANAM (National Environmental Authority). However, due to corruption and disorganization at higher levels of

government, even documented incidences of violation are often ignored, and the culprits and their cattle are free to continue living and working on land that should belong to the Emberá.

Rather than rely on ANAM to protect their lands, the Emberá understand that they must achieve official ownership of their land in order to gain political weight over the colonists. Despite their overall lack of political unity, the Emberá people as a whole, along with the closely related Wounaan tribe⁵, have submitted a proposal to the Office of Indigenous Politics within the Ministry of Government and Justice entitled Proposal for Collective Territories Law, Emberá and Wounaan. This controversial piece of legislation seeks to finally establish official demarcation of all Collective Territories that were left outside the limits of the two Emberá-Wounaan Comarcas in the Province of Darién. Many other groups of people living in the Bayano and Darién regions oppose the legislation, for it would in effect create dozens of tiny Comarcas scattered throughout the region, giving what many feel to be too much power to the Indians.

The indigenous people, on the other hand, feel that they would be receiving exactly what they deserve. Article 1 of the proposed law states that:

This law regulates the regimen of collective property of the lands traditionally occupied by the Emberá and Wounaan peoples, with the end of guaranteeing the respect of their cultural identity, the protection of their natural resources, and the development of their material, social and spiritual values (Borrador, 2001).

The protection of their culture, and security on the lands where their people have lived for many years does not seem to the indigenous people as too much to ask.

An integral component of the “Exposition of Motives” for why this law should be passed is an argument centered around the protection of natural resources. The

⁵ The Wounaan and the Emberá are both descendant tribes of the Choco of Colombia. They closely resemble each other in physical appearance, but their languages are mutually unintelligible.

importance of biodiversity in the Darién and Panamá Provinces, and the increasing environmental dilemmas faced by the region and the country as a whole are well described. It goes on to say that:

the Emberá and Wounaan indigenous people have occupied the eastern region of Panamá for many years. Like any other indigenous people in the Americas, they have maintained for centuries a tight relationship with the land and natural environment, as an integral part of their life, fundamental in their security, and an indispensable medium for their development” (Exp. Of Motives, 2002).

This proposal paints an ideal image of ecological harmony between indigenous people and the natural environment. Piriati, with its trends toward increased participation in industries such as cattle ranching and timber extraction that are not thought of as sustainable practices, does not fit this image entirely. This seemingly hypocritical description of the Emberá culture and conservation ethic serves as a good opportunity to restate the fact that Piriati is in many ways a non-traditional Emberá community. The Bayano region is the most exposed and connected to Latino culture of all areas inhabited by Emberá, and the state of the economy in a more isolated community in Darién may very well resemble more closely the ideal image of ecological sustainability.

Because the original survey did not treat the issue of the future of the land in sufficient detail, seven individuals were questioned in follow-up interviews focused specifically on land use practices and plans for future management of the land. Among those questioned were three community leaders, two homemakers and two farmers. This group was knowingly biased toward those more involved in the workings of the community in an effort to extract accurate information about these issues.

When asked how the community would deal with the impending lack of land of a quality that would sustain the slash and burn agricultural cycle to which they were

accustomed, six out of the eight replied that the future of agriculture was in mechanization. They seemed to have accepted the fact that the land was no longer sufficient to support their old cultivation patterns, for they spoke of the change without remorse. Of this group, five individuals specifically mentioned one government program, "Mechanization of the Land", a capacitation program run by the Ministry of Agropecuary Development (MIDA), that was helping them convert to modern agricultural techniques such as the use of fertilizers, biocontrol agents and heavy machinery, as well as convert to horticultural crops as opposed to the roots they are currently accustomed to producing.

While mechanisation was the only practical alternative offered by the individuals surveyed, reservations were also expressed. The Cacique commented that although the techniques were good, the people did not have money to buy the expensive additives or to acquire the heavy machinery needed to aerate the soil and transition the land from rudimentary to mechanised production. Another community leader, the same individual who shared the Latino view of that the Emberá should make better more productive use of their land, suggested that people do have enough money to invest in the necessary chemical supplements, especially if their harvest will improve in the short and the long term. He believed that the excuse offered by the Cacique was merely rhetoric aimed at getting even more money and free help from the government (EMBLD2). This attitude has been shared by government officials since they began to work with the Emberá after the relocation in the 1970s. (Wali, 1989).

When asked how the community would handle the lack of available farmland for the next generation, 5 out of 7 were unable to offer a solution; they responded that it was a difficult problem and that the future would bring hardship. Two of the community leaders, however, including the Cacique, offered different commentary:

both believed that a significant number of young people would necessarily move toward the city. Some would go because they desired to enter the professional world, and others would go because there was no more land, and thus nothing left for them in Piriati. The majority of the responses collected in the supplementary survey indicate a lack of clear vision of the future of the land, and the vision described by the two community leaders reflected a resignation to the deterioration of the land and the necessity for a change in the lifestyle of the people.

The lack of a clear concept among the Emberá of how to move forward in the use of the land is a concern not only for them, but also for members of the national and international conservation and development communities. The environmental and social sustainability of the Alto Bayano region is an issue that affects the rest of Panamá and the world. In an effort to take control of the status of the natural environment in ways that the Emberá are not politically equipped to accomplish, government and non-government entities are in the process of planning and implementing several projects in the area of Alto Bayano. As previously mentioned, MIDA is involved in efforts to train local farmers in modern farming alternatives.

The major international project currently affecting Piriati is the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor: The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor stretches from Mexico to Panamá. In each community within the Corridor and the buffer zone, several projects of environmental and social character are initiated. In Piriati, a new Cultural House is being constructed as this report is being written. In the future it will provide a venue for the more established sale of traditional arts and crafts to tourists. Ethnotourism and the production of artesanias are seen as two less destructive alternatives to industries such as cattle and timber that are currently one of the only workable ways to earn a living in a place like Piriati. Another of the Biological Corridor's projects aimed at creating

environmentally sound economic alternatives is the reforestation of individual parcels of land with native species of fruit trees that will offer both forest cover and income for the families who own the land (Fondo Mundial, 1998).

changes the character of the landscape and life within the region irrevocably. It is the effects of these changes, and the resultant processes of cultural, economic and political transformation that ensued, that make up the topic of this study.

Conclusions:

The purpose of this research project was, through getting to know the people and politics of one Emberá community, to gain a window of understanding into the complex processes of social, economic and environmental change that are occurring in the Alto Bayano region. Likewise, by studying the complex processes of change, the goal was to contextualize the experience of Piriati within the larger picture, and to understand how well its lessons match those of other Emberá communities.

Piriati was an excellent example of a community that is culturally caught between the traditional and the modern, and economically balanced between subsistence and cash-based systems. While very few individuals have completely given up on traditional forms of subsistence agriculture, few would assert that the future means more of the same. New industries are taking hold which, rather than producing food for direct consumption, earn the worker cash income. Ever increasing exposure to the conveniences and novelties of the modern world forever entice individuals, young and old, to be successful in the cash economy so that they might improve their material situation.

Based on current trends of social and economic change, Piriati's future appears to be one of increasing integration with the Latino community, for the disorganized political structure of the community and the lack of unity among the people of the town point toward chaos and individual decision making. Although many in the community are concerned about the loss of the culture, few real solutions to the problem are being presented; even though the little children understand the importance of learning their language, the vast majority refuse to speak Emberá and speak only Spanish.

However, there are two possible factors that may change this course of events. First, as this new generation is beginning to graduate from high school and a few from college as well, we will begin to see whether or not such individuals can make a difference in the life of the community, and whether or not they will be able to fulfill the hope of the people: to be able to improve themselves and their economic situation without losing the culture. We have seen that this is possible in other cases – that of the Kuna, for example – but we have yet to test whether the Emberá are willing to live by very strict rules in order to conserve something that few truly believe in anymore.

One other future scenario speaks of the need for the younger generation to truly understand what it is that is being lost. Currently the old folks are still there, ready to tell a story about the old days, or remind us how a legend goes. When they are no longer around, one of two things will happen: the culture will slip away completely, without hope of returning to its previous vitality, or, the younger generation will realize just in time what they need to do to save the culture and pass it on to their own grandchildren.

Piriati is at once very traditional and straying very far from tradition. Currently the dichotomy is still alive, embodied in a simultaneous experience of the oldest and the youngest members of a family. Today, a grandfather and his granddaughter have grown

up with completely different experiences. The grandfather did not go to school, but instead trained to be a botanist, with knowledge about the use of almost every plant in the jungle. His knowledge is a less useful than it once was, for everyone he now knows is more interested in going to the hospital on the outside rather than visiting him when they get sick, and besides, the forest is located too far away for his cures to be of any real practicality.

The granddaughter goes to school every day, and studies hard to learn her Spanish and her mathematics. She wants to go to high school after she graduated from primary school. She looks at her grandfather with great admiration, loving his stories and the sound of his voice as it sings in Emberá, a language with which she has trouble expressing herself. She respects him and the traditions that his generation represents. But she can feel how different from him she is. But at the root of the question, the same vibrant culture binds them together. They know they lack much of what people on the outside have, and they know at the same instant that they have something those people can never have. To be Emberá, and to understand the idiosyncrasies of a way of life that is only shared by a few thousand people in the entire world is a blessing and a curse. We are all different, and yet we are all unique. Differences cause problems, and many want to conform to blend in with the crowd and to make life easier. But these same differences also provide us with richness and beauty.

We can't go back to where we were yesterday or the day before, but we can plan ahead for the future in order to feel empowered that we have selected the option that suits us best. It is my hope that the Emberá of Piriati, and throughout Panamá, can find a way to organize themselves effectively, and come together to choose a future that they want for themselves.

Methodology:

A total of three weeks were spent in the Alto Bayano region to complete this research project. 2 full weeks were spent in the town of Piriati. In addition to general conversation with the people of Piriati, two separate styles of data collection were employed during this time. First, a General Questionnaire included questions about basic economic information, such as occupation of male and female heads of household, number of individuals in each dwelling, date of arrival in Piriati, previous location of residence, amount of land in hectares possessed by the family, etc. 21 families completed the Questionnaire. In addition to the Questionnaire, an Opinion Survey was conducted, allowing the interviewee much more freedom in style and content of response. A total of 47 individuals participated in the Opinion Survey. Of these 47, 15 were men over the age of 35, 14 were women over the age of 35, 3 were men between the ages of 25 and 35, 5 were women between the ages of 25 and 35, 6 were men younger than 25, and 4 were women younger than 25.

A total of one week was spent travelling around the Alto Bayano area to other indigenous and non-indigenous communities in an effort to contextualize the experience in Piriati. In Ipeti Emberá, Majé Cordillera (Emberá) and Pintupu (Kuna) I interviewed leaders of the respective communities. I also visited the Latino colonist communities of Torti, Cañita, and Tres Quebradas.

An additional note in the methodology of this study is the manner of citing quotes from interviews. I used a system of identification of interviewees according to the following pattern: Ethnicity, Category, and Number of Interview. Two possible ethnicities, Kuna and Emberá, are indicated as “KN” and “EM”. Categories of people include Community Leaders (LD), Homemakers (HM), Farmers (FM) and Youth (YO).

Based on the order in which the interviews were conducted, each interviewee was assigned a number within the category into which he or she fell.

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