

The Ngäbe People of Isla Colón: An Overview of the Demographics, Employment, and Opinions of the Indigenous Panamanian Group

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Neo-Tropics in Latin America

Abstract

We surveyed the community of Boca del Drago in Panama to gather insight on the employment situation and political and social opinions of the indigenous Ngäbe people who reside there. We created a questionnaire and traveled through the community finding subjects and recording their responses. It was found that those who had a positive opinion of the effect of tourism were on average older than those who had a neutral opinion. The average age of those who spoke the Ngäbe language in addition to Spanish was also higher than the average age of those who spoke Spanish and not Ngäbe. These results and others demonstrate some of the shifts that this indigenous culture has undergone in recent decades, and may serve as guidance for future work with the Ngäbe and other groups.

Introduction

There have not been many studies or surveys done regarding the Ngäbe people of Bocas del Toro. The most recent study that was done was regarding poverty in Panama as a whole, and was not focused directly on the Ngäbe people. In that 1999 study, Lindert found that 14.8% of all ethnically indigenous students were being taught in Ngäbe. Connected to this, it was found that 34% of the population of Ngäbe people living outside indigenous areas were monolingual in Spanish. The average Ngäbe household size was 6.8 in 1999. Regarding labor, the labor force participation rate among the Ngäbe was 44% overall and an average of 8.4 months were worked per year. In 1999 0% of indigenous workers from any group were working in the tourism industry. In our research, we find that many of these statistics have changed in the almost 22 years since this last survey was conducted. The questions that we aim to answer in our work pertain to language, job status, family size, and opinions on tourism and the government. Changes in this small rural community would otherwise be overlooked if not for studies such as these. Such communities serve as a lens through which to view the effect of tourism and an influx of expats on a community which at the time of the mentioned study was only just starting to see its first tourists on the island. We aim to better understand the extent of what changes in the course of just over two decades.

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out on Isla Colón, in the Bocas del Toro province of Panama. More specifically, interviews were conducted in the community of Boca del Drago, located within a section of the island also known as Boca del Drago. The town is home to a population of the indigenous Ngäbe people of Panama. A questionnaire was developed, which included questions about demographics (sex, age, family size, languages spoken) and employment (type of work, employment status, working conditions), opinion-based questions regarding tourism and the government, and whether or not the subject planned to vote.¹ In the town, we generally found subjects by going from house and speaking to those outside or calling out to anyone inside, asking whether they would like to participate. We first traveled into the most concentrated area of town, stopping at as many houses as possible, and subsequently traveled in both directions of the main road, where houses were sparser. Some subjects were also found walking down the street or waiting by the side of the road. We sought out people of working age. If an individual agreed to respond, we would ask our list of questions and write down their responses.

¹ See appendix for the complete questionnaire.

Results

Demographics

Of the 45 people questioned, 22 were female (49%) and 23 were male (51%). The average age of respondents was 33.2. The average household size was 5.2.

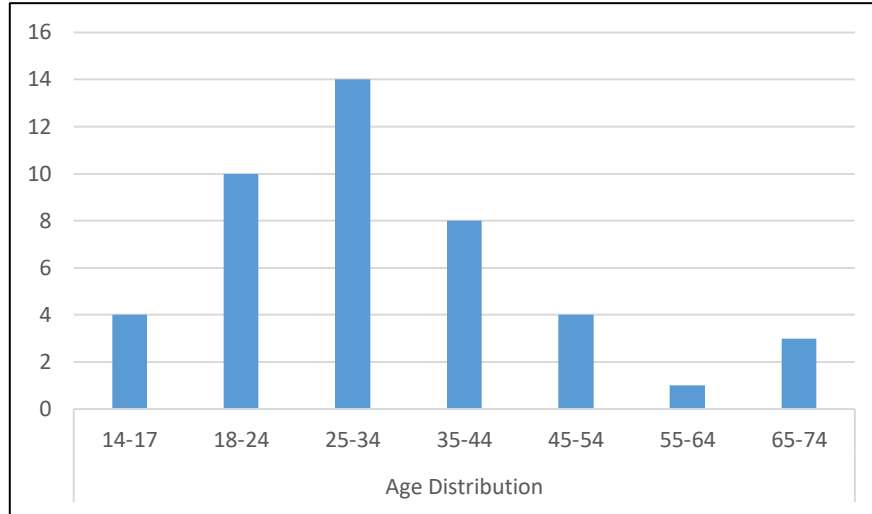


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents. 4 people fell into the age range of 14-17, 10 into the range of 18-24, 14 into the range of 25-34, 8 into the range of 35-44, 4 in the range of 45-54, 1 into the range of 55-64, and 3 into the range of 65-74.

Every subject interviewed spoke Spanish. 30 respondents (66.6%) *only* spoke Spanish. 12 (26.6%) spoke Ngäbe (also known as Guaymí or simply *el dialecto*). 4 reported to speak at least some English. This includes one man who spoke French, Italian, English, and Arabic in addition to Spanish. One man spoke Naso Teribe, the language of a different indigenous Panamanian group. Everyone but three people spoke Spanish the majority of the time at home. Two people reported that they used Ngäbe the majority of the time at home, and one, the polygot, used French. (It is worth noting that the French speaker and one of the Ngäbe speakers lived alone). Every employed subject used Spanish at work, and one person, a teacher, used both Spanish and Ngäbe at work (this person was one of the two who used Ngäbe at home).

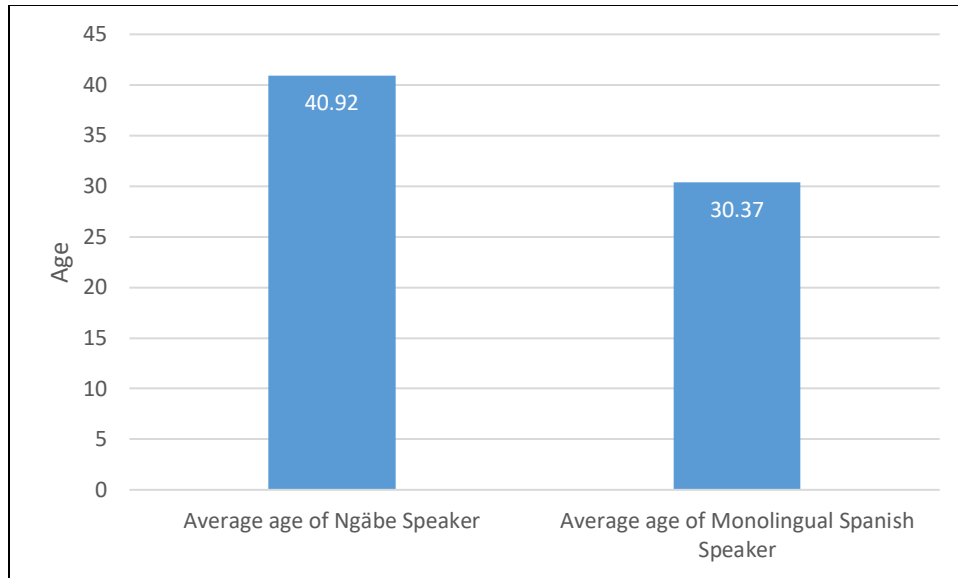


Figure 2: The Average Age of Ngäbe and Spanish vs. Monolingual Spanish Speakers. The average age of a respondent who spoke Ngäbe was 40.9, about 10 years older than the age of a respondent who did not speak Ngäbe, 30.4. The p-value between these two groups was 0.02. (This chart excludes the French-speaker and the Naso Teribe-speaker.)

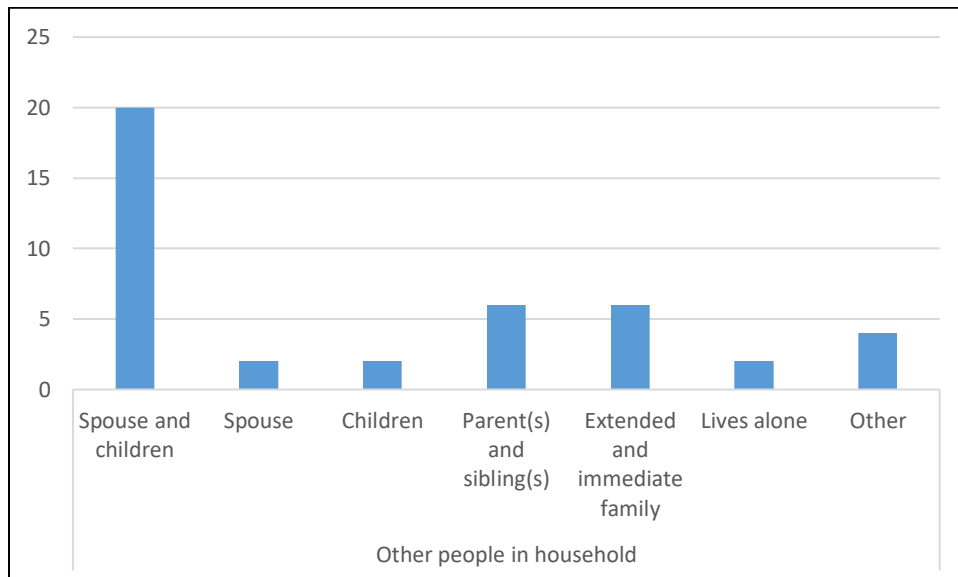


Figure 3: People Living with Respondents. 20 participants lived with their spouse and children, 6 lived with their parent(s) and sibling(s), and 6 lived with extended and immediate family. Others lived with only their spouse, only their children, alone, or in a different situation (“other” on the graph).

Employment

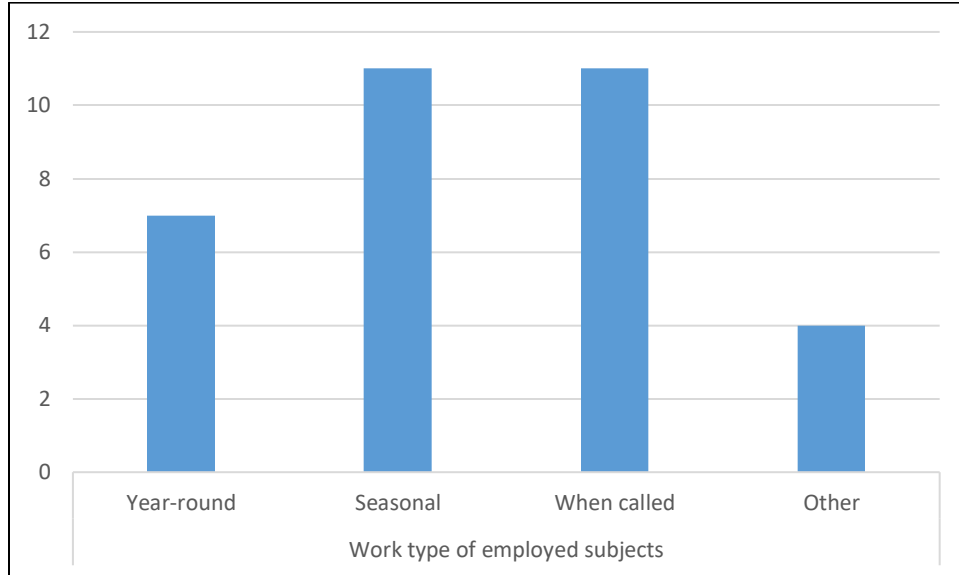


Figure 4: Timing of Work of Employed Subjects. 33 of those interviewed participated in some kind of paid work. Of these, 7 had year-round work, 11 had seasonal work, 11 had work “when called,” and 4 fell into “other” (this includes those who worked independently).

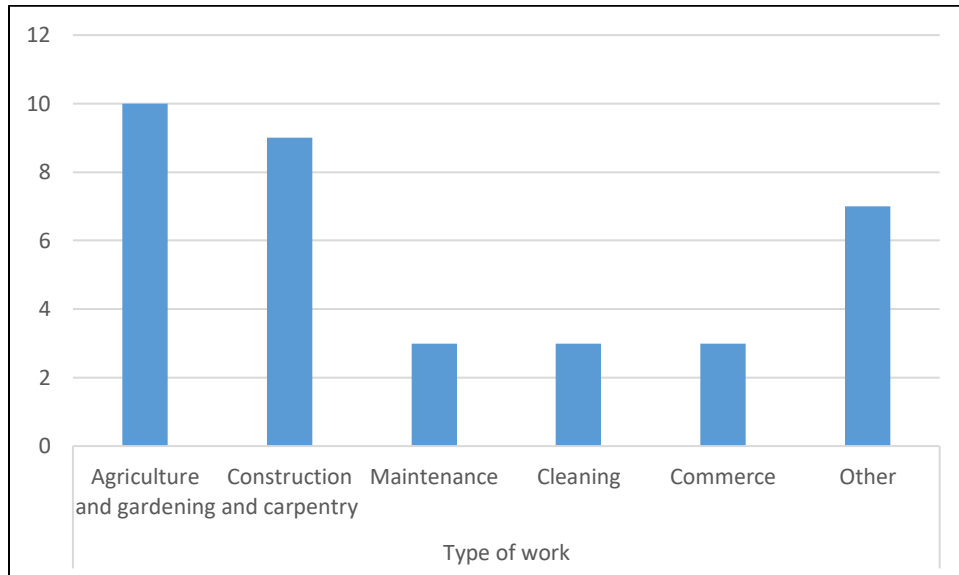


Figure 5: Type of Work Done by Employed Subjects. Ten people worked in agriculture or gardening, 9 in construction or carpentry, 3 in maintenance, 3 in cleaning, 3 in commerce (some had two jobs and were counted in two categories), and 7 had jobs that did not fall into these categories. Those other jobs include fisherman, teacher, and chef.

Every participant that had a boss said they felt respected by him or her, and all but two said they felt physically safe at work. Only two people had jobs that involved interacting with tourists, and both said that they felt respected by those tourists. Of those who were not employed, 9 were not looking for work (including housewives), and 4 were looking for work.

Opinions and Voting

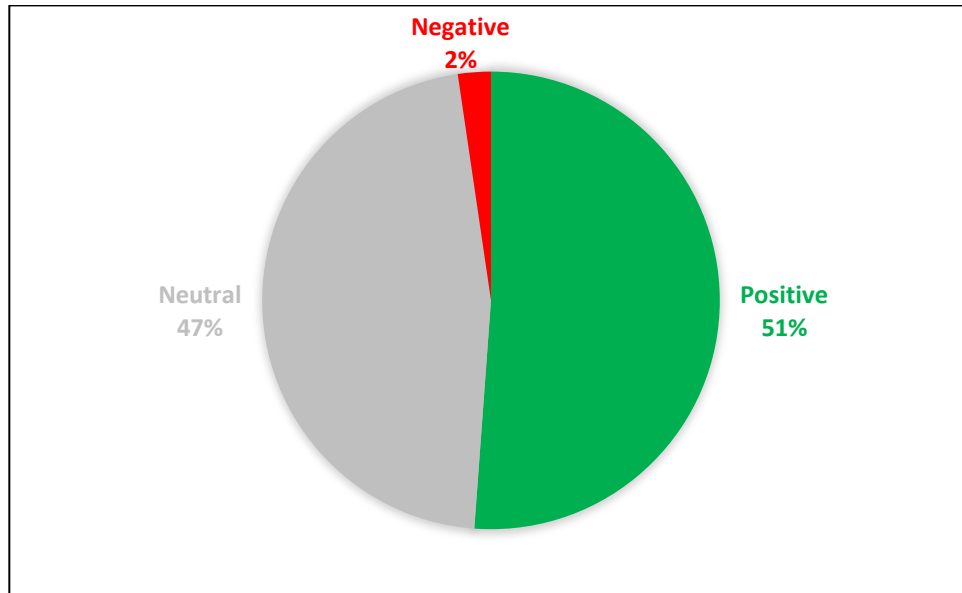


Figure 6: "What effect has tourism had on your community?" When subjects were asked whether tourism had had a *positive*, *neutral*, or *negative* effect on their community, the responses were largely split between *positive* and *neutral*. 22 people (51%) responded *positive*, 20 people (47%) responded *neutral*, and only 1 person (2%) responded *negative*.

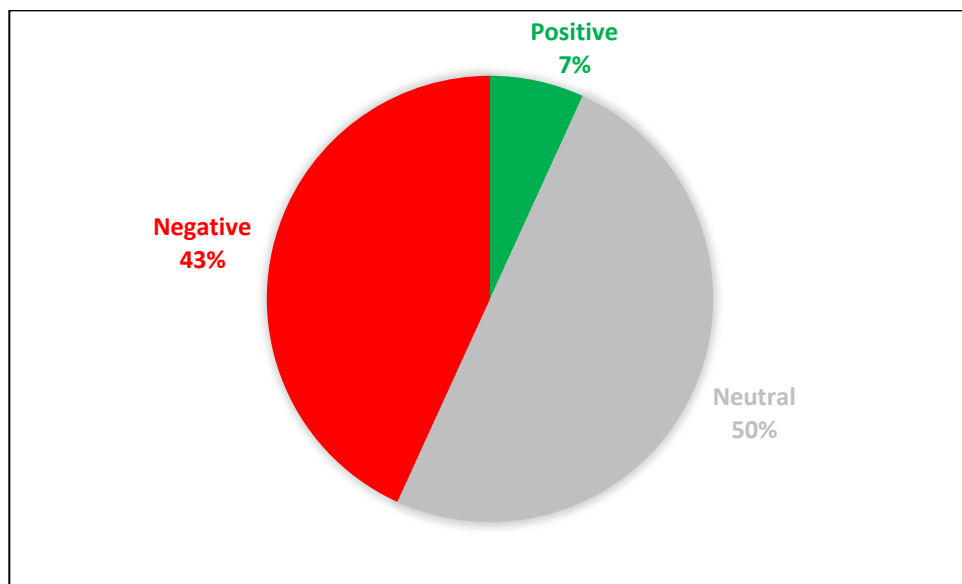


Figure 7: "What effect has the government had on your community?" When subjects were asked whether the government had had a *positive*, *neutral*, or *negative* effect on their community, the responses were largely split between *neutral* and *negative*. 22 people (50%) responded *neutral*, 19 people (43%) responded *negative*, and only 3 people (7%) responded *positive*.

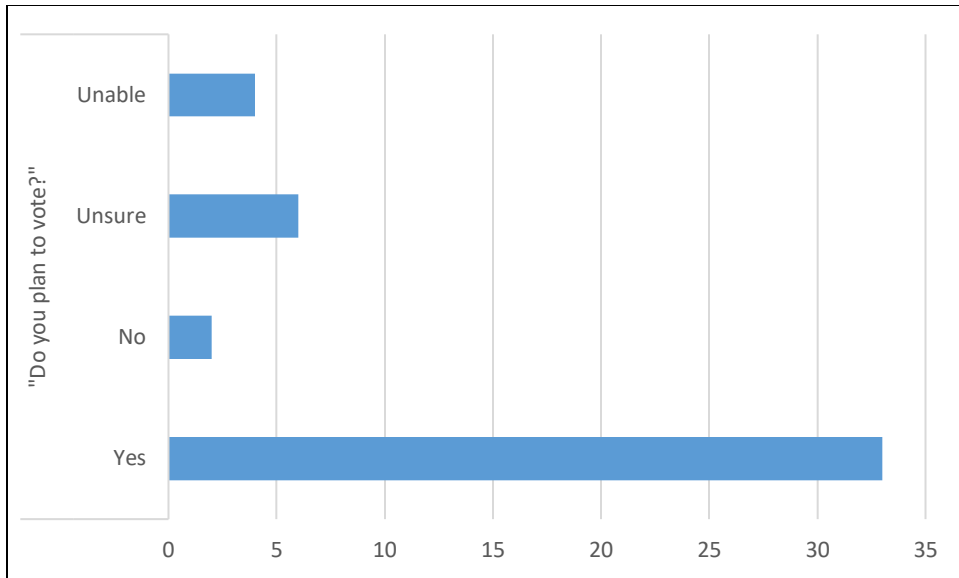


Figure 8: Voting Plans for the Next Election. When subjects were asked whether they planned to vote, 33 said they did plan to vote, 2 said they did not, 6 said they were unsure, and 4 were unable to vote (3 were too young, 1 was not a citizen). 80.4% of respondents able to vote reported that they planned to.

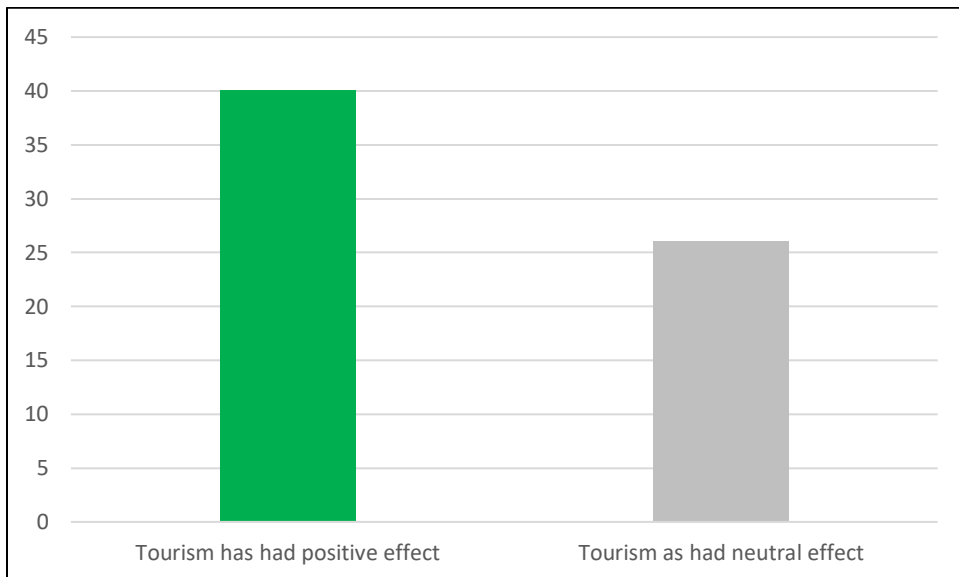


Figure 9: Average Ages of Those with Different Opinions of Tourism's Effect. The average age of an individual who said tourism had had a positive effect on the community was 40.1. The average age of an individual who said tourism had had a neutral effect on the community was 26. Only one person said that tourism had had a negative effect — they were 31. The p-value between the *positive* and *neutral* values was 0.0008.

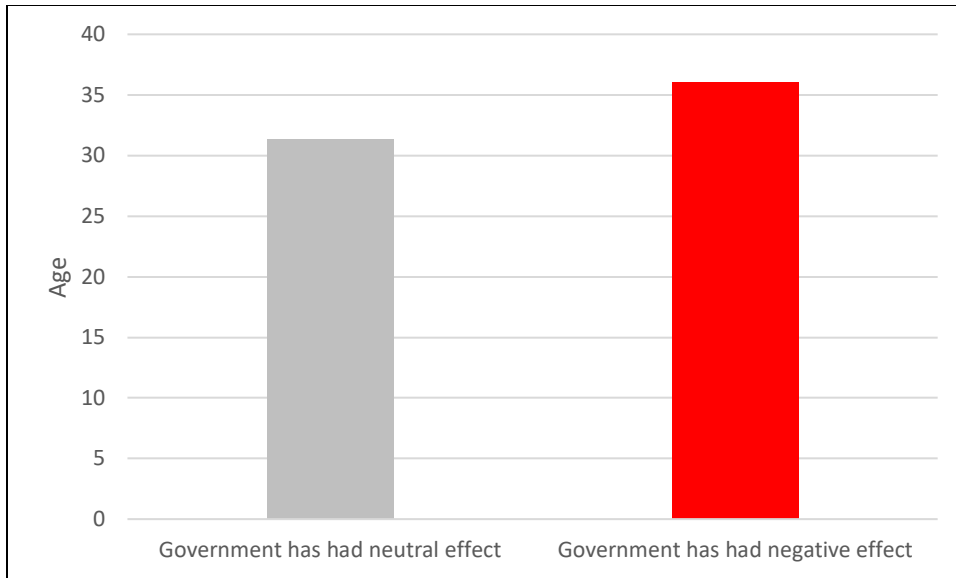


Figure 10: Average Ages of Those with Different Opinions of Tourism’s Effect. The average age of an individual who said the government had had a neutral effect on the community was 31. The average age of an individual who said the government had had a negative effect on the community was 36. Only three people said the government had had a positive effect on their community — the two who gave their age were 31 and 33. The p-value between the *neutral* and *negative* values was 0.295.

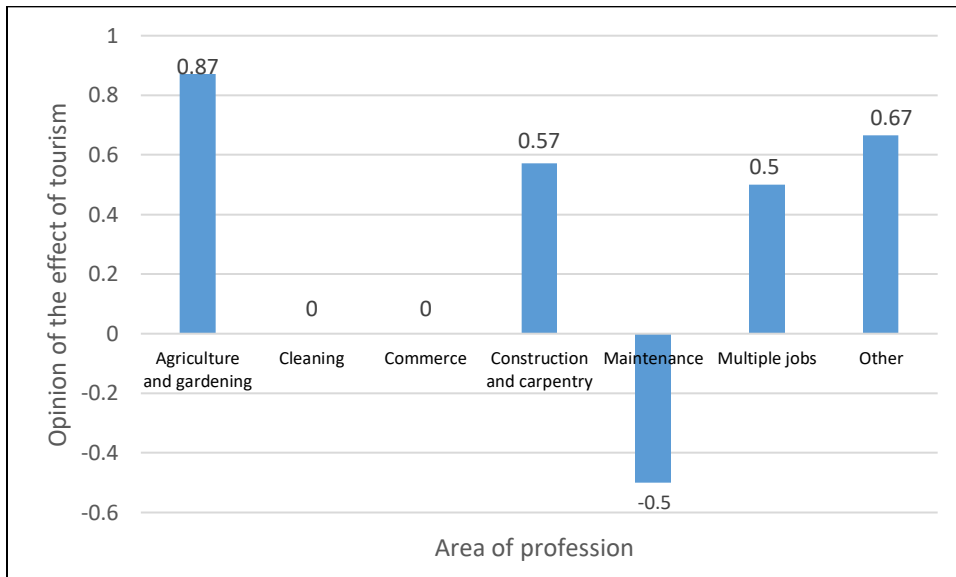


Figure 11: Opinion of the Effect of Tourism by Area of Profession. When respondents were split into employment areas and *positive*, *neutral*, and *negative* opinions were converted into numbers (*positive* being 1, *neutral* being 0, and *negative* being -1), it became possible to compare the average tourism and government opinions of those groups. Those who worked in agriculture or gardening had the most positive opinion of tourism, at an average of 0.87. The most negative opinion came from those working in maintenance, though this is the average of only two people (the third person working in maintenance falls into the “multiple jobs” category

on this graph). Everyone working in cleaning or commerce had a neutral opinion of the effect of tourism.

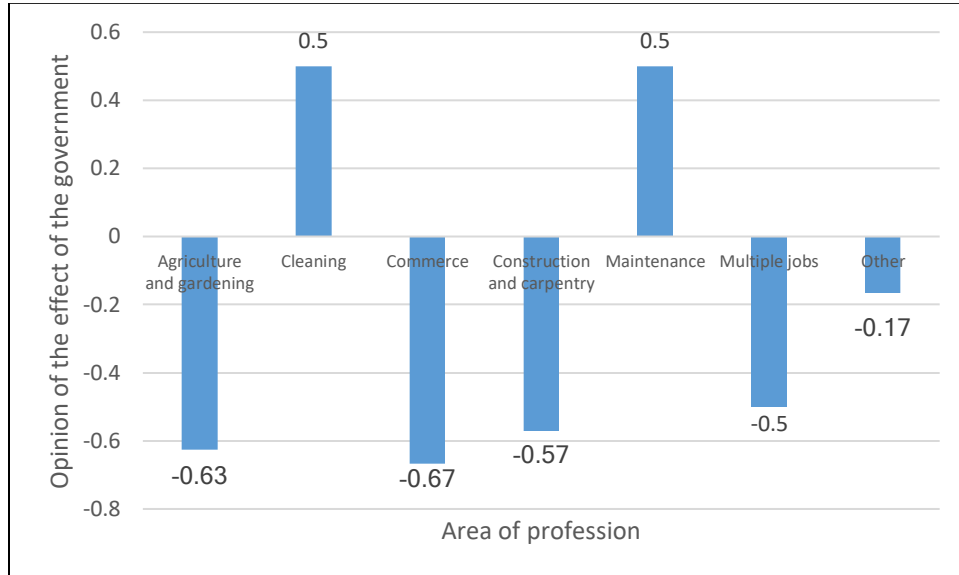


Figure 12: Opinion of the Effect of the Government by Area of Profession. Those who worked in cleaning or maintenance were the only to have a positive opinion of the effect of the government on average. However, both of these values are the averages of only two respondents (one woman working in cleaning did not respond, we believe because she had recently moved to the area). All other groups had a negative average opinion of the effect of the government.

Discussion

Language

The fact that two thirds of subjects only spoke Spanish is a major shift from the 1997 report that found that 34% of Ngäbe people living outside of indigenous areas were monolingual in Spanish. While the previous study gave no information regarding what percentage of the population spoke Ngäbe at home, our finding that only 2 people out of the 45 interviewed used Ngäbe the majority of the time at home does not bode well for the longevity of the indigenous language. Of course, the focus of this study meant that younger children were not interviewed, and we cannot assume whether or not those below, say, 14 would be significantly less likely to know the language. Nonetheless, when we calculated the average age of a person who spoke Spanish and not Ngäbe and a person who spoke Ngäbe in addition to Spanish, we saw a significant difference. The average age of a person who spoke Ngäbe was 41 while the average age of a person who spoke Spanish and not Ngäbe was 30, and the calculated p-value between these groups (0.027242881) shows that this difference is significant. Knowing that the average age of a respondent was 33 we see that Ngäbe speakers are older on average, and Spanish monolinguals are younger on average. This is in line with the belief that the Ngäbe language is in decline.

Tourism

Lindert (1990) found that 0% of indigenous workers were involved in the tourism industry. 2 of the 45 respondents to this survey said they interacted with tourists in their work, putting this rate at 4.4%. However, we believe that this percentage should be much higher (see the “Possible Sources of Error” section for an explanation). Either way, the portion of the population working in tourism has increased. This is in line with the broader trend in Panama, in which tourism began in Panama around the turn of the century, and has been increasing ever since.

There was a significant difference found between the average age of those who thought tourism had had a positive effect on the community and those who thought it had had a neutral effect on the community (only one person responded that it had had a negative effect, and thus their age by itself would not be a reliable value). Interestingly, the average age of someone who thought tourism had had a neutral effect was 14 years younger than that of someone who thought tourism had had a positive effect. Tourism is new to the area. A possible explanation is that older members of the community had a better reference point of what the community was like prior to the introduction of tourism, and thus believed that it had had a positive impact. Conversely, perhaps younger subjects were less likely to know what the community had been like prior to the introduction of tourism, and thus believed that it did not affect the community. Younger people, especially teenagers, would also most likely be less aware of employment opportunity and the financial situation of their family, which could lead to any positive effects of tourism not registering to them. Only one respondent believed that tourism had had a negative effect. This lack of negative opinions could be due to the fact that there is not much tourist activity specifically within the community of Boca del Drago. While traveling through the town to collect data, the only tourists we encountered were passing through town on bikes or the bus. This also contributes to the possible explanation of why many people would respond *neutral*.

Government

It was found that there was not a significant difference between the average age of a respondent who felt that the government had had a neutral effect on the community and the average age of a respondent who felt that it had had a negative effect. The average age of someone believing the government had a neutral effect was 31, while the average age of someone who had a negative opinion of the government was 36. The difference of 5 years is shown to be negligible by taking the p-value (0.295956148). This lack of correlation could be explained by the fact that younger and less informed people generally follow the political beliefs of their parents. Seeing that taking positive opinions out of the poll creates a situation in which opinions are almost evenly split between negative (43%) and neutral (50%), the population as a whole can be assumed to follow this same trend. Following our logic, this creates a situation in which age makes no difference in opinion of government.

Effect of Employment on Opinions

When comparing the area of a respondent’s profession to their opinion on the government and tourism a few patterns emerged. To compare the opinions of different groups, responses were converted to numbers — *positive* being 1, *neutral* being 0, and *negative* being -1. We found that in the Agricultural sector, which includes workers who defined themselves as farmers and as gardeners, subjects on average gave a “response value” of 0.87 for the effect of

tourism, meaning that they generally believed that tourism had had a positive effect on the community. This value was interesting, because poor farmers could stand a lot to lose from the general price increases associated with the presence of tourism. The only group that didn't have a positive or neutral average opinion on tourism was the maintenance group. Perhaps this is because the farmers are less educated or aware of the effects of tourism because they stay on their farms, while the maintenance workers move more place to place for their work. Of course, as there were only 3 subjects recorded in the maintenance group, their average is not necessarily representative of that whole portion of the population. The cleaning and commerce groups both had neutral opinions. The commerce sector gave the lowest response value of -0.66 for the effect of the government, though it is important to remember that this statistic is derived from only 3 respondents. In the agricultural and construction sectors it was found that average responses were -0.62 and -0.57, respectively. People in these areas of work would be likely to be more reliant on government policy and assistance (e.g. creation of jobs, farm subsidies) and thus be more sensitive to and critical of the role of the government in the community. Tourism would most likely not have a major effect on these lines of work, which could perhaps explain these respondents' more positive opinion of the effect of tourism compared to the government.

Possible Sources of Error

Our lack of *negative* responses for the question regarding the impact of tourism could have been the result of respondents viewing us as tourists. If this were the case, there is a chance that subjects felt less inclined to give a negative opinion of a group that included ourselves. However, from the way respondents typically acted, they did not come across as if they were altering their answers in an effort to not offend us.

We encountered only two subjects who worked with tourists. We do not feel that this is representative of the community due to the timing of our work. We visited the town in the morning, from roughly 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM. Those who work outside of the community would likely not be at home during this interval, and thus anyone working with tourists at the beach would be unable to respond. (In fact, we nearly interviewed two people working in the tourism, but before we could their bus to the beach arrived).

Though 45 respondents were a significant portion of the community, it was a small enough sample size that some statistics may have been weighted too heavily on individual responses (e.g. in the case of the opinions of those in areas of work such as commerce and maintenance, which only had a few respondents each).

Conclusion

The findings of this study depict an indigenous society that is currently experiencing cultural shifts. Two thirds of respondents spoke only Spanish, a major increase from Lindert's (1999) finding that 34% of the population of Ngäbe living outside of reservations spoke only Spanish. While that statistic did not only apply to the Ngäbe of Isla Colón, our finding suggests that use of the language is on the decline, particularly due to the lack of Ngäbe spoken at home by those who do speak the language. The average household size has decreased from 6.8 to 5.2, and the majority of a population that once had no interaction with the tourism industry now believe that it has had a positive effect on their community. This positive view of tourism is reassuring, suggesting the increase in visitors to Panama over the past couple decades has proved to be beneficial to indigenous populations. At the same time, the decline in Ngäbe speakers could

perhaps be linked to increasing involvement in tourism at the expense of intracultural involvement.

The near-absence of those who felt that the government had had a positive effect on the community is telling, and suggests that the government's involvement in the community should be addressed. Though our data comes from members of a small island community, it nonetheless holds important implications for other indigenous populations in Panama. Studies such as this one are therefore vital to understanding the lives of these people, particularly at a time when their lifestyles are shifting due to the influx of tourism and other factors. In turn, we hope that this study might help inform the actions of the Panamanian government or others in dealing with the needs of the Ngäbe and other indigenous groups at this significant point in their history.

Literature Cited

Lindert, K. (April 21, 1999). *Panama Poverty Assessment: Priorities and Strategies for Poverty Reduction* The World Bank, Washington D.C. Retrieved from https://books.google.com.pa/books?id=VQJVMXfRoasC&pg=RA2-PA1&lpg=RA2-PA1&dq=guaymi+census&source=bl&ots=4TEQzWDXfm&sig=ACfU3U3eVbnOIz6dyajH0H4OsP93Q89sBA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiwrN2jrfjgAhXGt1kKHa3mB_4Q6AEwBXoECAUQAQ#v=onepage&q=guaymi%20census&f=true.

Appendix

Questionnaire

Cuestionario de Las Demografías del Empleo • Tommy Shenefield y Ben Duffy-Howard

DEMOGRAFÍAS

Hombre Mujer

¿Cuántos años tiene? _____

¿Cuántas personas viven en su hogar? _____

¿Quiénes son?

¿Cuáles idiomas habla? _____

¿Cuál idioma usa con su familia? _____

¿Cuál idioma usa cuando trabaja? _____

INFORMACIÓN ADICIONAL:

TRABAJO

¿Cuál es su título de trabajo o su área de profesión (Si lo tiene)? _____

¿Hace su trabajo por todo el año, por una temporada, o cuando le llamen ?

Si no tiene un trabajo ahora, usted es: Buscando trabajo No poder trabajar Jubilado

¿Se siente seguro físicamente en su trabajo? Sí No

¿Se siente respetado por su empleador? Sí No

Si trabaja en la industria del turismo: ¿Se siente respetado por los turistas? Sí No

INFORMACIÓN ADICIONAL:

OPINIONES

¿Cree que el turismo ha tenido un efecto
Positivo, Negativo, o Neutral en su comunidad?

¿Cree que el gobierno ha tenido un efecto
Positivo, Negativo, o Neutral en su comunidad?

¿Va a votar en la próxima elección?
Sí No No seguro

INFORMACIÓN ADICIONAL: