

Bolivia - Afro-Bolivians

minorityrights.org/minorities/afro-bolivians/

June 19, 2015



Profile

Most of the 23,300 Afro-Bolivians live in the Yungas region of the Department of La Paz, where they are employed on farms, cultivating the coca-leaf, coffee or citrus fruits. Many Afro-Bolivians are bilingual in Aymara and Spanish and their religion shares the Roman Catholic Andean syncretism. They are usually distinguished from 'whites' and *mestizos* in economic rather than racial terms, and the majority tend to think of themselves as Bolivian rather than African.

'Afro-Bolivian' was adopted as a self-description with the emergence of a black consciousness movement in the early 1990s; but the movement has faced organizational problems as well as a split between the interests of urban intellectuals and rural peasant farmers.

Historical context

Bolivia's Afro-Latin population is descended from slaves who were brought to work in the silver mines in Potosí in the early 1500s. Many died due to maltreatment and inhumane conditions. They were also unaccustomed to the high altitude and cold temperatures. When mining declined they migrated to the Yungas, where they were exploited as slaves on the large haciendas. The agrarian reform of 1953 ended this form of slavery. Since the 1980s a large number of Afro-Bolivians have migrated from the Yungas to the cities of La Paz, Santa Cruz and Cochabamba.

Over time many Afro-Bolivians adopted Aymara language and culture, and the Afro-Bolivian Spanish dialect, and their music and dance, became less distinctive. However, this trend was reversed in the late twentieth century with the revival of the *saya* dance, as part of a black consciousness movement. The Movimiento Cultural Negro was formed in 1994; literature on the country also makes reference to a Casa Afro-Boliviana in Santa Cruz and a Centre for Afro-Bolivian Development in La Paz. The most well-known group, however, is the Movimiento

Saya Afro Boliviano, which aims to recuperate, strengthen and promote the values and cultural identity of Afro-Bolivians.

Due to improving access to education since the revolution of 1952, some Afro-Bolivians have been successful in areas such as medicine, law and teaching, but most are extremely poor farmers. They have shared the same problems as other rural workers: environmental deterioration, low prices for agricultural produce and US-sponsored demands for coca eradication. In contrast to Bolivia's indigenous peoples, the census of 2001 failed to recognize Afro-Bolivians, although the passing of Law 200 entailed that future censuses had to include Afro-Bolivians as a distinct ethnic/cultural group. The 2012 census was the first to do so.

Current issues

The Afro-Bolivian community did not figure in Bolivia's previous Constitution and many community members complained that the government failed to recognize and appreciate the contribution of black people to Bolivian society. This was reflected in their exclusion from Bolivia's official census for more than a century, despite the repeated demands of Afro-Bolivians to be included. In addition, Afro-Bolivians have long faced severe disadvantages in health, life expectancy, education, income, literacy and employment. Rural areas are still lacking in many basic services such as running water, electricity, drains and roads.

However, the election of Evo Morales in 2005 was welcomed by many Afro-Bolivians: he vowed to improve the living standards of Bolivia's socially excluded, indeed, to end their exclusion, and since his election he has stopped the US sponsored coca-eradication campaigns (affecting many Afro-Bolivian coca-growers in the Yungas). While there were some initial complaints about the lack of Afro-Bolivian candidates included in Morales' new Constituent Assembly, however, since then the government has taken a number of steps, including recognizing and naming Afro-Bolivians as a specific minority ethnic group in the 2009 Constitution, including the provision that 'the Afro-Bolivian people enjoy, in everything corresponding, the economic, social, political and cultural rights that are recognized in the Constitution for the nations and the rural native indigenous peoples.' Afro-Bolivians were also included in the 2012 census as a distinct category, allowing for a more accurate assessment of their population as well as providing further formal recognition of their place in Bolivian society.

Updated January 2018