El Salvador - Pipils

Profile

Pipils are considered to be a branch of the pre-Columbian Toltec civilization that flourished in Central Mexico near the end of the 1st millennium CE.

The present day Pipil population was formed from at least two different streams that were loosely joined by conquest and cooperation. The earliest group consisted of nomadic farmers who migrated into Central America after 200 BC. Until the ninth century CE they also interacted with Maya communities whose limestone pyramid ruins are found in western El Salvador along with a giant Olmec stone sculpted head.

After the collapse of the Mayan dynasty, a second group called the Izalco Pipil, are thought to have migrated into the region late in the tenth century occupying an area west of the Lempa River which marked the frontier with Lenca lands. Archaeological research suggest these new migrants were ethnically and culturally related to the Toltecs, as well as to the earlier Nahua and spoke an Aztecan related language called Na:wat.

Most of the migrant Izalco Pipil settled in El Salvador and organized a nation known as Cuzcatlán, with at least two centralized city-states that integrated some of the Maya groups. Like the Maya before them, the maize-based Pipil agricultural economy produced cotton textiles, and carried on a wide-ranging trade network for woven goods and agricultural products.

By the time the Spanish arrived, the Pipils controlled almost all of western El Salvador, and a large portion of the central area up to the banks of the river Lempa. Some Pipil urban centres developed into present-day cities, such as Sonsonate and Ahuachapán.

Spanish efforts to control El Salvador were firmly resisted by the Pipils and the remaining Mayan-speaking indigenous groups. Led by a war leader named Atiacatl, the Pipils repelled the Spaniards and forced them to withdraw to Guatemala. It took two expeditions in 1525 and 1528 to finally bring the territory under control of the Spanish invaders.

Salvadoran indigenous peoples for the most part are descendants of the Pipils, a migrant Nahua speaking group from central Mexico. The Pipils reside in the southwestern region in the states of Sonsonate (especially the communities Nahuizalco and Izalco), Ahuachapán, La Libertad and (to a lesser extent) Santa Ana. The best known communities are Santo Domingo de Guzmán (Sonsonate), Cacaopera (Morazan) and Panchimalco, just outside of the capital San Salvador.
Virtually all of El Salvador’s indigenous population speak Spanish as their only language. A few Pipils still speak the Nahuat language and follow traditional ways of life. The traditional communities live mainly in the southwestern highlands near the Guatemalan border. Very few indigenous Pipils now wear traditional dress, such as the *huipiles* (skirts worn by women).

The Pipils have had a strong influence on the current culture of El Salvador, with a large portion of the population claiming ancestry from this indigenous people.

In July 2011, the Nahuizalco municipality in Sonsonate passed an ordinance recognizing the Pipils as the original setters of the territory and encouraging the participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making processes. It is the first ordinance of its kind in El Salvador.

In 2012, the Ministry of Education and Don Bosco University partnered for a new project aimed at the revitalization of the Pipil language of El Salvador through intercultural education.