

Indigenous peoples

Profile

According to the National Salvadoran Indigenous Coordination Council (CCNIS) and CONCULTURA (National Council for Art and Culture at the Ministry of Education), approximately 600,000 or 10 per cent of Salvadorian peoples are indigenous.

The majority of the El Salvador indigenous population is Nahua-Pipil. They reside in the southwestern region in the states of Sonsonate (especially the communities Nahuizalco and Izalco), Ahuachapan, La Libertad, and (to a lesser extent) Santa Ana. The best known communities are Santo Domingo de Guzman (Sonsonate), Cacaoopera (Morazan) and Panchimalco, just outside of the capital San Salvador.

Virtually all of El Salvador's indigenous speak Spanish as their only language. A few Pipil still speak the Nahuat language and follow traditional ways of life. The traditional groups live mainly in the southwestern highlands near the Guatemalan border. Very few indigenous Pipil now wear traditional dress, such as the huipiles (skirts worn by women).

The Lencas, reside in the Eastern departments of Usulután, San Miguel, Morazán and La Unión north and east of the Lempa river. Few Lenca still speak the language 'Potón Lenca' however a few Potón Lenca texts have been published aimed at promoting and protecting the language and culture.

The Cacaoopera (Kakawira) community resides in the department of Morazán. In some schools, the communities have taken advantage of the standard school Institutional Project (PIC) of the Ministry of Education to organize cultural rehabilitation programs of the Ulwa 'language using speakers or 'caciques' (elder leaders) as community instructors.

A few Maya Chorti live in the department of Ahuachapán, near Guatemala.

Historical context

Before the Spanish colonial period El Salvador was inhabited by a sizeable indigenous population. These groups included, Lenca, Maya Chortí, Maya Pocomam, Cacaoopera and Nahua Pipil. Some like the Lenca occupied a large territory that also encompassed present day Honduras.

Salvadoran indigenous people for the most part are the descendants of the Pipils, a migrant Nahua speaking group from central Mexico. Pipil are considered to be a branch of the pre-Columbian Toltec civilization that flourished in Central Mexico near the end of 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 B.C. Until the ninth century CE they also interacted with Maya groups 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 Pipil 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 Ahuachapan.

Spanish efforts to control El Salvador were firmly resisted by the Pipil and the remaining Mayan-speaking indigenous groups. Led by a war leader named Atlacatl, the Pipil 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.

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

In addition to Pocomam (original settlers related to the Maya) and Maya Chorti, the Izalco Pipil migrants also found the Lenca already well established in the region. Lenca ruled sizeable areas of what is now Honduras and El Salvador.

In their efforts to control the area, the Spanish also invaded the Lenca Kingdom in the 16th century. Under Crown Princess Antu Silan Ulap I the Lenca , organized a war of resistance conducted by combatants drawn from all Lenca cities including the eastern region of present day El Salvador. These warriors were later put under the command of a war chief named Lempira who led a ten-year resistance struggle that ended with his assassination. In 1536 The Spanish called for peace talks apparently with ulterior motives. On his arrival Lempira was shot by the Spanish. (See Honduras).

The Lenca in El Salvador have maintained the memory of the ancient dynasty through oral tradition and have instituted programs with universities and community councils to preserve and promote their heritage, history, health and human rights.

Having gained control of the territory the Spanish destroyed indigenous villages expropriated land and developed cash crop plantations using indigenous and imported African forced labour. This pattern eventually led to the concentration of El Salvador land in the hands of a small, Spanish-descended landowning elite.

Through the 19th and 20th centuries land ownership lay at the core of a series of unsuccessful uprisings by indigenous people. Efforts to redress the social and economic imbalances were usually met with severe repression

In 1932, 35 ladinos were killed during an anti-government uprising by rural campesinos and indigenous people. In response, the government systematically killed between 35,000 and 50,000 people in a massacre called 'La Matanza.' Anyone who looked indigenous was especially at risk. Consequently

many indigenous people were deterred from using their traditional clothing or practicing their customs and culture for fear of losing their lives. Many adopted the mainstream language and catholic religion restricting traditional practices to the privacy of their homes.

This process accelerated during the 1980-1992 civil war, when death squads killed thousands. That further affected indigenous people who, as part of the marginalized rural poor, were sometimes associated with targeted grassroots organizations.

Despite the participation of indigenous organizations in the peace process in El Salvador, none of the peace accords raised questions of indigenous rights or issues of self-determination. Equally, since 1994 elections, none of the electoral programmes have included proposals for solving indigenous peoples' demands.

Current issues

The constitution of El Salvador states that all people are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, or religion. However a World Bank sponsored Social Assessment Study carried out in 2004 highlighted the stark inequalities experienced by the indigenous population.

The study revealed that although half of the Salvadoran population living in the rural areas is poor, Salvadoran indigenous groups constitute the poorest segments. The municipalities with the highest presence of indigenous people are among the poorest in the country. They lack most of the basic services with a consequent impact on family and environmental health, education and mortality.

80 per cent of indigenous people obtain water at the ground source and the other 20 per cent from a river or public fountain. Obtaining this water is the responsibility of women and children. Most indigenous housing is rudimentary. 80 per cent of roofs are made of zinc, plastic or cardboard. The average number of people in an indigenous household is 13 versus six for non-indigenous poor. The illiteracy rate for children is 78 per cent compared to 43 per cent for non-indigenous poor.

Land ownership plays a big role in the equation. While 95 per cent of non-indigenous people in El Salvador live on their own land and 5 per cent are renters only 5 per cent of indigenous people own land. 60 per cent of indigenous people live on communal lands with another 35 being renters.

Furthermore with the shrinkage of the low wage agricultural sector the traditional source of income that was formally derived from harvesting coffee and sugar cane has been diminishing. This has particularly affected men and youth of working age prompting many to consider risking everything to try informal undocumented migration to the USA.

Under present social and economic conditions the situation of indigenous people in El Salvador is not likely to undergo any quick or dramatic change for the better. The indigenous population wants and needs protection of communal lands and customs, equal civil rights, bilingual education programs, and greater political rights in their own communities. Indigenous organizations like ANSI argue that the establishment by the state of a national commission to address indigenous concerns and improved working conditions would be a useful first step towards acknowledgment of their problems and efforts to remedy them.