

Wayúu

Profile

The Wayúu are known as the people of the sun, sand, and wind. They are located in the arid Guajira, which is in the Páez municipality and the states of Zulia, Mérida and Trujillo in Venezuela. The Wayúu language is part of the Arawak family and is called Wayuunaiki. The community is matrilineal and is made up of about 30 clans that are represented by distinct animals. The mother's brother is an important father figure for the children, and women have a great deal of autonomy and are active in the political life of the community. Women and men are both spiritual leaders.

Historical context

The Wayúu have faced tremendous discrimination and are artists, merchants, and activists. Water is a constant problem for this desert community, and has historically made the Wayúu very vulnerable during periods of drought. The Wayúu are the largest indigenous population in Venezuela, where they represent 10% of the population in Zulia, where they number over 300,000.

Current issues

Wayúu (Guajiro) lands on the border with Venezuela have been granted to mining interests by the Colombian Tourist Agency. The Colombian constitution recognises the right of the indigenous to manage the resources found on their territories, but whereas private concessions to extract salt on Wayúu land have been granted, Wayúu have been denied the right to do so. Coal mining which has been undertaken on their lands also appears to be in contravention of constitutional law. The presence of multi-national mining companies in their territory not only monopolises land but spreads pollution. The ILO has requested information on the suitability of the lands on which, owing to the resulting contamination, the Wayúu were relocated, and as to whether damages for this contamination have been paid. There is also a report of the assassination of a Wayúu leader by the military.