

Colombian Cultural Overview

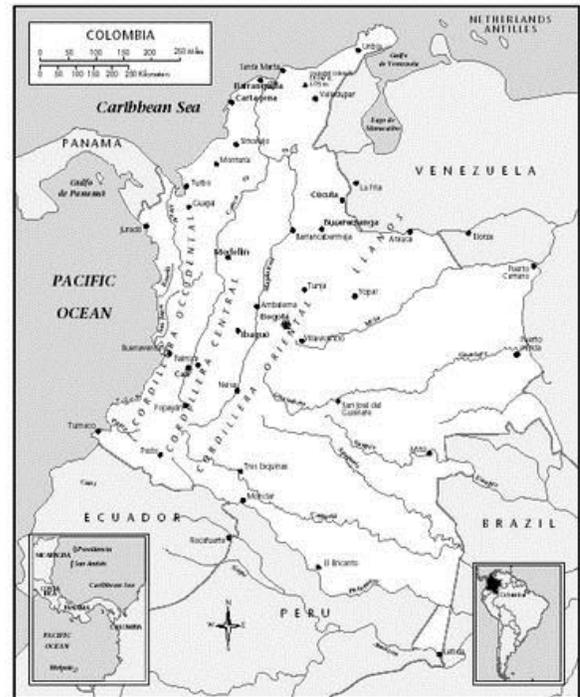
(taken from <http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Colombia.html> accessed 6/12/13)

Identification: Since declaring independence on 20 July 1810 and achieving it in 1819, Colombia has changed its name seven times. Regional cultural traditions are diverse, with a broad range of distinct groups that have unique customs, accents, social patterns, and cultural adaptations. These groups are classified into three cultures: those in the interior, the countryside, and the coastal regions. Only during elections, sporting events, and beauty pageants do the regional cultures unite for a common goal.

History and Ethnic Relations

Emergence of the Nation: The discovery of the country's coastal lands in 1499, followed by Spanish occupation for the next 300 years, indicates the integral role Spain played in the region's cultural, religious, and political development. In the early part of the 1500s, Spain attempted to control the Caribbean and Pacific coastlines, establishing Santa Marta in 1525 and Cartagena de Indias in 1533. In that year, the conquest of the Incas in Peru gave the Spaniards strategic positions in the north and south for the subjugation and colonization of Colombia. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Spaniards had established a major foothold in the Americas.

During this period, the Andes were occupied by a number of indigenous groups that ranged from stratified agricultural chiefdoms to tropical farm villages and nomadic hunter-gatherer groups. The social structures of these groups were destroyed during the conquest, as Indians were forced into slavery to exploit the natural riches of the country. As the number of casualties in the Indian population increased due to starvation and disease brought by the conquistadors and to the intense labor of slavery, Spain imported slaves from Africa for gold and silver mining on the Pacific coast. The triethnic composition of the population during this period led to the ethnic terminology still used today. Spaniards were referred to as Peninsulars, while their South-Americanborn descendants were called criollos (Creoles). Miscegenation produced people of mixed race known to the Spaniards as the castas (castes). These were mestizos from the intermarriage of whites and natives, mulattoes from that of blacks and whites, and zambos from that of blacks and Indians. Unfair practices and decrees by the Spaniards created a desire for independence. Most traumatic was the practice of *encomiendas*, an institutionalized system in which Indians were "entrusted" to the care of Spaniards called *Encomienderos*. These "caretakers" provided the Indians with religious instruction and a livelihood in exchange for their labor. In practice, this system amounted to enslavement. In 1781, 20,000 Indians and mestizos attempted to march on the capital in what became



known as the Comuneros revolt, but the revolt was crushed and its leaders were executed. There was little or no support from the Creole population, but some Creoles were appalled by the brutality of the Spaniards and began to spread the rebellious sentiment. The call for vengeance spread to other provinces, as government officials excluded Creoles from high governmental positions. After several minor uprisings, Colombia achieved independence after the decisive battle of Boyacá on 9 August 1819 under Simon Bolivar, a Creole who joined the patriotic movement in 1810.

Ethnic Relations: Past relations with other regional cultures were based on the hierarchical society imposed by Spain, in which the upper echelon of "white" Spaniards enjoyed wealth, power, and prestige while blacks and Indians were at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. After independence, Creoles quickly replaced Spaniards in the upper echelons of the new society. Qualified mestizos and mulattoes also ascended to high positions, but their inclusion was based on their level of education, wealth, and "whiteness." Colombians continue to identify themselves according to their regional heritage, physical appearance, and socioeconomic status.

Food in Daily Life: Most middle-class families eat elaborate meals that reflect Spanish and indigenous traditions. A typical meal is identified by size rather than content, such as a light breakfast, a substantive midday lunch, and a lighter meal in the early evening. Dinner consists of fresh fruit, homemade soup, and a main dish with meat or fish accompanied by rice and/or potatoes. Lower-income people eat a more carbohydraterich diet. Meals usually end with a very sweet dessert, frequently made from panela, a type of brown sugar. There are regional differences in foods. In the interior rural regions, a hearty breakfast consists of a strip of pork, rice and beans, sweet plantains, and a large steak with fried eggs. Dinner is similar, except for the eggs. In the coastal region, the emphasis is on seafood. In Cartagena, the typical lunch consists of rice with coconut, fried plantains, and shrimp. Colombians enjoy a variety of national and international cuisines. Specialty dishes are eaten during holidays. A dish associated with the capital is ajiaco, a stew with three types of potato, chicken, and corn, that is served with capers, cream, and avocado. Another dish served during religious holidays is pasteles, while along the coast, people eat sancocho, a fish or chicken stew. Colombians consume large quantities of beer and coffee and relatively little milk or wine. Aguardiente combines local rum and a corn of sugar brandy.

Classes and Castes: The massive urban migration that began in the 1950s saw a middle class emerge, resulting in a three-class system: upper, middle, and lower. The upper class, which includes 20 percent of the population, accounts for about 75 to 80 percent of the gross national product. This group tends to be made up of individuals of unmixed European ancestry. Within this class, there is an elite referred to as the "oligarchy" that enjoys wealth and financial security, political power, and education. This group may be considered a caste, since membership is largely due to birthright, not to individual ability. A wide gap separates the elite from the masses. Unlike the elite, this group has few opportunities for social mobility. Social inequality is evident in the lower class, whose members are often malnourished, poorly housed, disease-ridden, and illiterate. White people continue to dominate the upper class, while mestizos and mulattoes constitute the

middle and lower classes. Blacks and Indians make up a significant portion of the lower class. Historically, blacks felt socially superior to Indians despite the fact that Indians occupied an officially higher position in society.

The Relative Status of Women and Men: Gender roles have changed with the migration from rural to urban areas, but family and household organization is still marked by sexual segregation and a difference between male and female goals and aspirations. As a result of colonial influence, Colombian society adopted a culture in which men occupy a dominant role within the household as breadwinner and disciplinarian and assume responsibility for maintaining family pride and position within the community. The role of machismo is an important characteristic of public life. Machismo is not synonymous with strict male dominance—it applies to the public personification of the male family head. Machismo requires separate male and female roles in economic life and consumption, the reliance of women on men, and distinct sets of life goals for men and women. With more women holding higher-paying jobs and occupying prominent positions in society, the role of machismo is now less dominant in urban centers but is still evident in rural regions. Machismo defines a woman's role as a mother in addition to her conjugal role. The traditional male-female relationship assumes that the woman puts her husband's wishes before her own. She is responsible for the care of the children and household, but the husband makes decisions about the household's basic necessities. While male familial roles are relatively consistent across economic groups, female roles vary as a result of the modern economy. In upper class and some middle class families, women avoid working outside the home in order to preserve family status, honor, and virtue. Women from lower class and lower-middle class families often hold jobs outside the home or work in the fields to contribute to the family's subsistence, giving them a greater degree of equality. Many couples farm fields owned through the wife's family, and in this case it is difficult for a husband living with his wife's family to exercise control over the wife. Women have assumed visible and important roles in society. Upper class and middle class women dedicate themselves not only to the family but also to social issues and the church. Women from these groups hold a number of prominent public positions and are considered among the most politically active in Latin America.

Marriage: Arranged marriages are no longer common, especially among the uppermiddle and upper classes, but the members of these groups are encouraged to marry within their own class. While men and women can date whomever they wish, they must be accompanied by a chaperone. Before marrying, couples usually court for at least a year.

Members of the lower and middle classes strive to marry someone outside of their class; mestizos, mulattoes, and blacks prefer to marry into white families. However, when intermarriage takes place, it is generally white males who marry Indians or blacks. Most people, especially in urban centers, are married in the Catholic Church. Upper class people use this religious rite to create powerful family unions. Church weddings are expensive and allow families to demonstrate their financial and social status. Because of the expense, members of the lower middle class may opt for a civil marriage. Others choose a consensual marriage. Divorce for civil marriages was not permitted until 1970.

Domestic Unit: The nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and their children is the basic household unit. Upper class families usually have many children. The father is the head of the household, while the mother is responsible for child rearing, homemaking, and the basic education of the children. Lower class and some middle class wives work in the city or next to kin in the fields.

Inheritance: Parents bequeath property to their children in equal shares. In rural families, sons and daughters may inherit property with the condition that they will continue to work the land. In urban centers, parents may leave a family business to their children to share and run.

Kin Groups: Large upper class families have an extended kin group in which the oldest member receives the most wealth and prestige. Family and kin group members interact regularly and generally live close to each other in urban areas or on the same land or estate in rural locations. Family members participate in social activities to expand the family's wealth. In times of severe financial difficulties, families lacking a socioeconomic network, may be displaced into a lower class.

Religious Beliefs: Ninety-five percent of the people consider themselves members of the Roman Catholic Church and attach great importance to Catholic sacraments. More than 85 percent of Catholics in urban parishes attend mass regularly. People in rural areas are said to be more devout than those in the cities, but their Catholicism is different from that of the urban upper and middle classes. In the countryside, Catholic practices and beliefs have been combined with indigenous, African, and sixteenth-century Spanish customs. People pray to a patron saint, who is considered to be more accessible than God. Rural villages have a patron saint who is honored each year with a fiesta. Traces of rural folk religion also are found in urban lower class communities, particularly those with many rural migrants. Although the 1991 constitution established religious freedom and does not mention the Church by name, the Catholic Church continues to have significant influence. A Protestant movement has attracted more than 260,000 people. Protestants are a minority on the mainland but a majority on San Andres and Providencia islands. There are also small contingents of Muslims and Jews. The Spanish began a process of conversion among the Indians in the sixteenth century, and the institutionalization of the Catholic Church was a high priority for the colonial government. That church destroyed most of the indigenous rituals and religious customs. The Inquisition had the authority to summon and interrogate, often using torture, any subject accused of heresy and had the power to confiscate the property of convicted persons.

Death and the Afterlife: Christian dogma holds that the spirit lives on after the body has died. A divine judgment of the person's life determines the well-being of the spirit after death. An elaborate ceremony involving the preparation of the deceased for burial by relatives is accompanied by prayer and followed by a period of mourning.

Medicine and Health Care: Health care has improved dramatically over the last 30 years, but this has occurred mostly in upper class and middle class urban areas. The urban poor and people in remote regions have limited access to food, housing, and medical

treatment. There has been a reduction in the infant mortality rate and an increase in life expectancy over the last decade. In rural areas, women must contend with cultural and legal restrictions on health care. Twenty percent to thirty percent of maternal deaths in those areas are due to induced abortions, which usually are performed outside of medical facilities. Sangre muertas "blood deaths," are violent criminal attacks and murders related to activity by drug cartels that primarily affect men under age forty-five. The increase in guerilla activities also has resulted in many deaths, especially in remote areas. Malaria affects approximately 15 percent of the population, although the prevalence of AIDS is low. The health care system has taken an aggressive role in controlling the spread of AIDS by giving patients free access to therapy. Colombians have been exposed to a number of endemic tropical diseases. Traditional remedies are commonly used, particularly in rural and remote areas. Many forms of traditional medicine rely on indigenous plants. Traditional healers called Taitas from the yagé culture have tried to maintain their indigenous medical practices. In recognition of the importance of the plants used in traditional medicine, those healers have attempted to preserve the forest in the Amazonian region.