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Peoples of South America

Overview

People of South America have a diverse racial and ethnic background. Many have European, African, and native American ancestry. *Mestizo* is a name referring to a person with combined European and Native South American descent.

During the 15th to 18th century, Europeans traveled around the world in search of new trading routes, resources, and land. This was called the **Age of Exploration**. During this time, explorers like **Christopher Columbus** found the “**New World**” and began the colonization and exploitation of its native peoples in the Americas. **Hernan Cortes** conquered the Aztec Kingdom in 1521 and **Francisco Pizarro** conquered the Inca Empire in 1533. By the mid 16th century Central America and much of western South America were controlled by Spain and much of eastern South America was controlled by Portugal.

Indigenous people were forced to grow crops and work in mines for the Spanish and Portuguese settlers. South America was colonized primarily for gold and to convert people to Christianity. By the mid 17th century nearly 80% of the indigenous population of the Americas was **decimated** by disease brought by the Europeans. This created a demand for labor on plantations, and the slave trade from Africa was increased.

Spanish – People from Spain. Descendants of Spanish colonists and speak Spanish. Referred to as “Latino”

Chibchan/Cariban – Carib Indians, were a warlike group of South American tribes who lived mainly in the Amazon River Valley and the Guiana lowlands. These fierce Indians ate their war captives. Our word *cannibal* comes from the Spanish name for these Indians. About 1300 of the Carib moved from northeastern South America to islands in the Caribbean Sea now known as the Windward Islands. They captured these islands from the Arawak Indians. The Carib were farmers and raised *cassava*, a root crop. They also fished, hunted, and gathered wild plants for food. They lived in small, independent villages. The people had no tribal chiefs or permanent village chiefs, but followed special leaders in time of war. The Carib, especially those who lived on the islands, were expert canoeists. They used large, planked dugouts. They hunted with traps, javelins, and clubs, and shot fish with poison arrows. The Carib are said to have valued personal independence so highly that they looked down on Spaniards who took orders from others. Like other aggressive tribes, the Carib trained their sons for war from childhood. A boy had to prove his skill and endurance with weapons when he came of age. If he passed the tests, the tribe accepted him as a warrior and gave him a new name. Most of the Carib died from warfare and disease soon after the Spanish invasion. Today, hundreds of Carib live on the islands, in the Guianas, and in the Amazon Valley.

Arawakan – Arawak Indians, were the first American Indians that Christopher Columbus met in the Americas in 1492. The Arawak lived in most of the islands of the West Indies. Arawak who lived in what are now eastern Cuba and the Caribbean islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico are also called Taino Indians. Other groups of Indians speaking Arawakan languages lived in the Amazon River Basin and other parts of South America. Some Arawak villages may have had as many as 3,000 people. The villages were organized into chiefdoms, with up to 80 villages under the leadership of one *cacique*, or chief. Villages competed with one another in a ceremonial game played with a rubberlike ball on courts lined with standing slabs of stone. The Arawak grew such crops as corn, yams, cotton, and *cassava*, a root crop. Their diet included fish, shellfish, and the meat of iguanas, sea turtles, and a Caribbean rodent called the *hutia*. Many Arawak died from diseases brought to the Americas by European explorers. Spanish colonists forced the Arawak to mine gold or perform other physical labor. This forced labor further reduced the Arawak population and destroyed their traditional way of life. By the mid-1500's, nearly all the Arawak Indians of the Caribbean had died.

Tupian – are Amerindians whose pre-Columbian ancestors lived in Central South America. The Tupians were tropical rain forest farmers, river men, and coastal navigators. Using slash-and-burn cultivation, they grew cassava, sweet potatoes, corn (maize), beans, peanuts (groundnuts), cotton, and dyes. They collected turtles and turtle eggs and caught fish and river mammals with arrows and harpoons from large dugout canoes. They also used vegetable drugs for fishing. The hunting of wild game was secondary. The basic unit of Tupian society was the extended family (including parents, married children, and their families), occupying a single large thatched house, but some Tupians had patrilineal clans. On the lower Amazon and the coast, palisaded multi-house villages of several thousand persons occurred. These villages warred incessantly, capturing, torturing, and eating their victims. Religion was largely shamanistic with little village ceremonialism.

German – People from Germany

Portuguese – People from Portugal. Descendants of Portuguese colonists and speak Portuguese. Live primarily in Brazil.

Guarani – Tupi-Guarani Indians, formed many tribes that lived in eastern and central South America. The tribes included the Tupinamba, Tupinikin, Guarani, and Omagua. These tribes spoke related languages. Today, the Guarani language is widely spoken in Paraguay and is one of the nation's two official languages. The other official language is Spanish.

The Tupi-Guarani were farmers. Cassava, a root crop, provided their main food. They also planted yams, corn, peppers, and cotton. In addition, the tribes hunted, fished, and gathered fruits. Most of their villages consisted of one or more large rectangular houses. Each family had its own partitioned section in a house. Some tribes, especially along the Brazilian coast, were fiercely warlike. But they are extinct. A few Tupi-Guarani tribes still live in Brazil and Paraguay.

Quechuan – South American Indians living in the Andean highlands from Ecuador to Bolivia. They speak many regional varieties of **Quechua**, which was the language of the **Inca** empire (though it predates the Inca). The Quechua have formed an important part of the agricultural backbone of Andean civilization since the early 15th century, when they were conquered by the Chancas, who were themselves subjugated by the Incas in the later years of that century. The Inca requirements of public service did not much disturb the traditional Quechua way of life. When the Spanish conquered the Inca empire in the 16th century, however, and the Quechua came under Spanish rule, Quechua society was drastically altered. The Spanish *encomienda* system of tribute required the Quechua to produce unfamiliar crops for the Spanish at the expense of their own food supply. The Spanish system, unlike its Inca predecessor, did not provide for the welfare of the laborer and his family during his term of forced labor. The Spanish concentrated the Quechua in larger, more populous villages than they were accustomed to, thus further straining Quechua political and social institutions. A growing desire for the trappings of Spanish wealth even further alienated the Quechua from their own society. By the time Spanish rule ended in the 19th century, the Quechua had been so changed that many remained as servants on the grand haciendas and estates. Others went to the towns and cities of the lowlands to find employment, though some stayed in their mountainous homeland. In the early 21st century the Quechua lead isolated lives as marginal farmers in the high Andes. Their religion is an amalgam of Roman Catholicism and native folk beliefs. They practice their traditional fiber handicrafts, spinning wool and weaving fabrics for both domestic use and sale to outsiders. Quechuan is the most widely spoken native American Language.

Aymaran are mostly agriculturalists and herders. The Aymara live in an area of poor soil and harsh climate. Coarse grass gives pasturage for llama and alpaca herds. Staple crops include potatoes, oca (*Oxalis tuberosa*), ullucu (*Ullucus tuberosus*), quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*), corn (maize), beans, barley, and wheat. Fishing is done from rowboats and totora-reed rafts. Before they were conquered by the **Incas**, the Aymara had a number of independent states, the most important being those of the Colla and the Lupaca. In about 1430 the Inca emperor **Viracocha** began conquests southward from his capital at Cuzco. Aymara territories ultimately formed a major part of the Inca empire, against which the Aymara continually revolted. The **Spanish conquest**, beginning in 1535, brought seekers of gold and Indian labor, followed by Dominican and Jesuit friars in search of converts. The colonial agrarian economy was based on the systematic exploitation of the Aymara in agriculture, in the mines, as household servants, and on the coca plantations in the jungles. A period of rebellion began in 1780, during which the Indians killed large numbers of Spaniards, and continued until **Peruvian** independence from the Spanish crown was proclaimed in 1821. Today the Aymara maintain their beliefs in a multispirit world, have many categories of magicians, diviners, medicine men, and witches, but are Christian in their beliefs about the afterworld. Independence and economic development brought changes in social organization and a decline in traditional arts and crafts. Men wear conical, ear-flapped, knit wool *gorros*; women wear round, native-made wool derbies, with wool wimples in cold weather. The single-room, rectangular, gabled Aymara house, about 8 by 10 feet (2.5 by 3 metres) in size, is made of turf, thatched with wild grass over pole rafters; it contains a family sleeping platform of mud at one end and a clay stove near the door. The basic social unit is the extended family, consisting of a man and his brothers, their wives, sons, and unmarried daughters, living in a cluster of houses within a compound. This structure is changing as many Aymara seek wages in urban settings. The political unit is the *ayllu*, or *comunidad*, composed of several extended families. It has little resemblance to the aboriginal *ayllu*.

Directions: Answer the following questions based on the reading. Use complete sentences.

1. What indigenous (pre Columbian) people speak the language of the Inca Empire?
2. What people predominately live in the Amazon Rainforest region?
3. What European peoples predominate regions of South America?
4. What is the most widely spoken Native American language?
5. What country is Portuguese spoken?
6. What people's ancestry and culture are connected to the modern country of Paraguay?
7. Why was slavery introduced to South America?
8. Explain why many people in South America have a diverse ethnic background.