

The Blending of Ethnic Groups in Latin America and the Caribbean

(What groups of people blended to create the people of Latin America today?)

The cultures of Latin America are diverse. Each region has its own character, which reflects its history. The languages, customs, beliefs, and even the foods from an area are a result of its history. Latin America also has diversity in its races. Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans were the largest groups. Members of these groups have intermarried and developed unique cultures over time.

Many of the Europeans that came to the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries forced the native people to work on plantations or in mines. Disease and death followed, and most of the natives on the islands were wiped out. However, in Central and South America, many Native Americans were able to preserve their cultures by moving to *remote* mountain or forest regions.

In order to get workers, Europeans brought Africans to the New World and forced them to work as slaves. Descendants of these people live there today. There are also people of mixed ancestry.

Mulattoes in Brazil, Panama, and the West Indies are numerous. Their ancestors were both African and European. Most of the people in Venezuela are **mestizos**. Their ancestors were both European and Native American.

The main religion in Latin America and the Caribbean is Roman Catholic (*a denomination of Christianity*). However, the practices of Native Americans and Africans have blended with Roman Catholic beliefs. Unique festivals such as the “Day of the Dead” in Mexico are one result. This holiday coincides with the Catholic All Saints’ Day. The Day of the Dead blends Native American beliefs about the afterlife with Roman Catholic beliefs. Religions based on African traditional beliefs are also present. In Peru and Bolivia, many native people continue their traditional beliefs and ceremonies.

The groups in Latin America are proud of their *heritage*. There are some problems, though. People with European ancestors often have higher paying jobs, better education and health care, and more money than others. Native Americans, blacks, and mestizos have begun to demand equality in their countries. In Bolivia, for instance, a Native American was elected president for the first time in 2005.

The Region of “Latin America” and its Relationship

to Spanish and Portuguese Languages

(Why did the first Europeans go to Latin America?)

Christopher Columbus made his first famous voyage to the New World in 1492. He was working for the king and queen of Spain trying to find a quick and safe passage to China. He hoped such a passage would be profitable to him and the Spanish king and queen. Of course, we now know that Columbus did not reach China or anywhere in Asia. He had, in fact, “discovered” continents unknown to the Europeans at that time.

Over the next two hundred years, Spain, its neighbor Portugal, and other European countries sent ships to explore these “new” lands. The Spanish explored, conquered (*Conquistadors*), and settled areas of Florida, Mexico, and large parts of Central and South America. The Spanish also claimed many islands of the West Indies. Portugal’s claim was Brazil. This land stretched from the Atlantic Ocean across South America to the Andes Mountains. It covered most of the vast Amazon River region. The Spanish and Portuguese spread their culture and religion across the region and discovered communities that were similar to their home countries.

The Portuguese and Spanish followed similar patterns in their history in the region. Each conquered the native population and attempted to use these people as a source of slave labor. Africans were later imported as slaves to work in mines and large farms such as sugar cane plantations. Why did the Europeans bring Africans to Latin America as slaves?

The British colonies in North America fought for *independence* from their mother country, Great Britain. In the same way, the regions of Central and South America fought for independence from Spain and Portugal. What does it mean to fight for independence? Spain lost its colony of Mexico in the early

1800s. By 1898, Puerto Rico, the last Spanish colony in the New World, had been ceded (*given up*) to the United States.

French, English, Dutch, and hundreds of native languages are spoken in Central and South America and the Caribbean today. Despite this fact, the term **Latin America** was started in the 1800s to group the countries that spoke languages based on the ancient Latin language (Spanish and Portuguese). The shared history and culture, and the dominance of Portuguese and Spanish languages, have made the term **Latin America** one that unites Central and South America and the Caribbean based on its two primary languages. The English language is based on an ancient German language... So English-speaking countries of North America are not included in the term Latin America.

Literacy and the Standard of Living in Latin America

(What does it mean to be illiterate? Why is it important to be literate? Why is it that some people are illiterate?)

A literate person is one who can read and write. Literacy is a major factor in whether a person is able to get a job and be successful in the workplace. The countries of Latin America have improved the literacy rate of their people. On average, 89 percent of the people in Latin America and the Caribbean are literate. That leaves an illiteracy rate of 11 percent. The standard of living (the “economic level” achieved by a person, family, or country) is often lower in countries where the illiteracy rate is high.

In some cultures, it is believed to be more important for boys to have an education than girls. This fact is shown in the fact that 12 percent of girls are illiterate in this region while only 9 percent of boys are illiterate. In some countries, the difference between boys’ and girls’ literacy rates is very large. In other countries, the illiteracy rates are about the same. Either way, the goal of most governments is to have 100 percent literacy among their people. Many governments, missionaries, and aid groups come to the poorest of these countries to assist the people in educating all their children.

One reason that many of the poor cannot learn to read and write is because their communities cannot afford to pay for teachers and schools. Having these basic skills, however, is important. Without the basic skills of reading and writing, workers are stuck in the lowest-paying jobs. Countries with large numbers of illiterate workers cannot build and operate modern industries.

A *cycle of poverty* can develop in which people cannot get an education, so they can only get low-paying jobs. Because they can only get low-paying jobs, they cannot get enough money to pay for their children’s education. The standard of living remains low for these families because their education level remains low. It becomes a cycle.