

# Diversity in Central America

## Race/Ethnicity

Central America has a long history of conquest, colonialism, and neo-colonialism that has been marked by racial and/or ethnic discrimination. You will find that ethnic, racial and class conflicts are a result of continued colonial power struggles. In North America the white settlers imposed the separation of Indians and Blacks, while in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador a process of mestizaje (mixing) took place, thus producing racial gradations.

### Nicaragua

In Nicaragua an apparent homogeneous mestizo national identity emerged after the Conquest. Almost all of the population has been linguistically, culturally, and ethnically mixed. People of indigenous or black/Afro-Nicaraguan identity primarily live on the Atlantic Coast and constitute only a small fraction of the total population (approximately 5% and 9%). Indigenous communities on the Pacific Coast have lost their languages and dress; however they continue to struggle for their land rights.



### Guatemala

Over half of the population of Guatemala identify as indigenous, maintaining Maya languages and culture. The division between Maya people and people of Spanish descent (ladino) is fairly strict and continues to be a source of conflict. There are Afro-Guatemalan communities in the coastal areas; however, it makes up a small portion of the total population.

### El Salvador



In El Salvador a homogeneous mestizo national identity emerged after the Conquest due to the heavy repression of indigenous populations. Most all of the population was linguistically, culturally and ethnically mixed. Very few people identify as indigenous and there is almost no population of African descent.

## Discrimination

In general, throughout the region you will find that racism is still deeply rooted and very much alive. "Masked racism" is manifested in the exaggerated valuation of "whiteness" and a negative vision of Indigenous peoples and blacks. There is prejudice against indigenous people and blacks who continue to be seen as "backward" and inferior. Segregation exists and is manifested in that indigenous people are among the poorest and most abandoned. Meanwhile, poor neighborhoods in cities contain a larger proportion of people with dark skin. In many cases social class overlaps with skin color i.e. the darker the skin, the lower the class.



Central Americans may give you nicknames that you feel don't reflect your reality. It is much more socially accepted to comment on people's physical characteristics than in the United States. Asian Americans might be identified as "chinos(as)", African-American as "negros(as)", and white participants as "chelita(o)" or "canche" which are terms used in the region to identify light-skinned people. Also, people who are thin, heavy, or short might be called "flaca(o)", "gorda" or "chaparra", etc. This is uncomfortable to many, but these terms are not necessarily intended to be insulting.

## Religion

### Nicaragua

Over 90% of Nicaragua's population identify themselves as belonging to a Christian denomination. Over 70% identify with the Roman Catholic religion. However there has been significant growth of Evangelical churches. It is estimated that 20 % of the population attends Evangelical churches. There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion. Catholicism and Evangelical denominations are concentrated in the central and Pacific areas of Nicaragua. While, Creoles and indigenous peoples who generally live along the Atlantic coast, are more likely to belong to the Moravian (2% ) or Episcopal Churches (0.1%) . About 2% of the population belongs to a variety of religious groups including Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Amish or Mennonite communities. The Jewish and Muslim community are a small minority.



Source: International Religious Freedom Report 2007

### El Salvador

The country is predominantly Roman Catholic (48% of the population). Some 28.2% of Salvadorans are members of Protestant churches (approximately

35 % are Baptists and members of Assemblies of God.). Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons; 14.6 percent are not affiliated with any religious group. There are small communities of Hare Krishna, Muslims and Jews.

Source: Public Opinion Center. Technological University. October, 2006

## **Guatemala**



No official census of religious affiliation exists. Historically, the country was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic; however, in recent years new religious groups have flourished. A 2006 survey conducted by Latinobarómetro indicated that Catholics comprise 56.9 % of the population and Evangelicals 30.7 % . The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assembly of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church, as

well as many independent evangelical groups. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Seventh-day Adventists are present, as are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jews (approximately 2,000) and Muslims reside primarily in the capital. Few citizens consider themselves atheists. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations and Catholic and Protestant missionaries, many indigenous Catholics and some Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual ritual.

Source: International Religious Freedom Report 2007

## **Sexual orientation**

Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua are in general still very machista societies so you will find that gay and lesbians are frequently subject to prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. Nonetheless, these traditionally Catholic countries are becoming more open to gay and lesbians, especially among youth. Increasingly, you will find in the capital cities some gay and lesbian bars and nightclubs. There are also diverse organizations working actively on promoting acceptance and equal rights for gay and lesbian populations.

## **Ability**

The cities and towns that you will visit in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua present many barriers for people with different abilities. It is difficult for people with mobility issues to get around independently. Streets are characterized by a large numbers of barriers sitting on the sidewalks. These impediments affect walking, access to buildings and the use of services. Most

buildings also present barriers for users. There are a few organizations that work on sensitizing the population on issues of different abilities and their rights.

Despite these limitations, in the past we have had participants with diverse physical abilities participate in our semester programs and travel seminars (blind people and a paraplegic student on travel seminars in Nicaragua). Our house in Nicaragua has been adapted to fit the basic needs of people with different physical abilities, i.e. an entry access ramp, support bars in some bathrooms, and wide doors for wheelchair access.

### **Further readings on racism and discrimination in Latin America:**

*Ethnic Discrimination and the Mayan Defense.* Kevin Pepper.

*A Region in Denial: Racial Discrimination and Racism in Latin America.*  
Ariel E. Dulitzky

### **Addressing diversity in Central America:**

#### **Guatemala**

- Participate in a Maya spiritual ceremony and learn about Mayan spirituality and Cosmovision
- Learn about the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, including discrimination, poverty, and inequality
- Learn about traditional Mayan arts and crafts and other community development initiatives
- Visit Livingston, an Afro-Guatemalan community

#### **Nicaragua**

- Visit and talk to indigenous peoples from the Pacific and the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and learn about people's struggles for indigenous rights, discrimination and struggles for equality
- Visit a pottery village and learn about the history of pre-Columbian pottery and indigenous traditions.
- Meet with founders and representatives of movements and non-governmental organizations working on promoting the rights of gay and lesbians.
- Meeting with organizations working with children with different abilities
- Meeting with people from different faith backgrounds

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