

Guarani

The Guarani are the original people of Paraguay and today, 95% of Paraguayans have Guarani blood and speak the Guarani language. Textile handicrafts such as hammocks, lace, embroidery and a finely woven linen called *ahó poi* display a distinct Guarani style. Most practice a form of folk Catholicism which blends the Catholic faith with traditional occultist beliefs and rituals. The evangelical church is very small but growing.



Location

The Guarani-speaking Indians were the original inhabitants of much of southeastern South America including the present day countries of Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. These semi-nomadic Indian tribes were known for their fierce warrior traditions. In fact, the word *guarani* means warrior. Ninety-five percent of modern Paraguayans have Guarani ancestry. The majority have dark hair and brown eyes, and their lighter skin reflects a mixture of European and Guarani heritage.

History

Before the time of the Spanish conquest, the Guarani were widely scattered throughout central and southern South America. Early in the sixteenth century, the Spanish came to Guarani territory in search of wealth. The Guarani shared with the Spanish a common desire to topple the Inca Empire and obtain its gold and silver.

Jesuit missionaries arrived in 1558 to convert the Guarani to Catholicism. In the southeastern region they formed settlements known as *reducciones* among the Indians. These efforts were similar to those in Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia at that time. The number of *reducciones* reached about 35, and approximately 200,000 Indians were baptized before the Jesuits were expelled in 1767. In many ways, traditional Guarani religion proved amenable to blending with Catholicism.

When the Jesuits left, their heavily paternalistic settlements disintegrated. The Catholic Church became completely subservient to the State, which appointed its bishops. During this period the Catholic Church suffered for a lack of trained clergy.

Protestant work in Paraguay began in 1856 with the American Bible Society. Over the following decades, other Protestant groups entered the country including American Methodists, German Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, New Testament Missionary Union and Disciples of Christ (USA).

Paraguay gained its independence from Spain in 1811 and was ruled by dictators for many years. Independence has been a difficult road. Long standing pressure by both Brazil and Argentina to incorporate Paraguay into their respective countries led to Paraguay's war against the Triple Alliance of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.



Lasting from 1864-1870, the war was disastrous for Paraguay. Seventy percent of its population - including all but 25,000 adult males - were killed. Following the war, Brazilian troops occupied Paraguay until 1874. Since that time the country has experienced repeated coups, political repression, and economic instability.

The Russian revolution of 1917 precipitated the arrival of Russian Mennonite refugees who, seeing the need among the Chaco Indians, appealed to United States Mennonites for assistance. Mennonites have the largest Protestant Christian community in the country, claiming over 20,000 members, followed closely by the Assemblies of God.

Evangelistic crusades by Luis Palau and others have been heavily attended, and many have professed faith in Christ. The percentage of evangelical Christians in urban centers grew from 1.8% in 1986 to about 4.8% in 2003.

Today, however, Paraguay is moving toward a more democratic government and is now led by civilian President Macchi. A new level of freedom is felt although the military still plays a major role in governmental affairs.

Religion

The Roman Catholic Church: The vast majority of Paraguayans today are baptized Roman Catholics, although this Catholicism is mixed with widespread occult and folk practices. Areas of the country not serviced by a resident priest generally have local lay "coordinators." Devotion to Mary is strong. However, many are not faithful to Catholic teachings regarding fidelity in marriage. Half of all couples are unmarried and, correspondingly, half of all births are out of wedlock. The most recent constitution removed the Catholic Church from its privileged position as the official state religion, but it continues to exert significant influence on the government. It was one of the strongest voices for civil rights and was instrumental in the fall of the Stroessner dictatorship. Catholic spokesmen continue to speak out boldly against the corruption and materialism prevalent in Paraguay today.

The Protestant Church: Protestant churches, while growing, are small. By some estimates, 4.8% of the total population are evangelical Christian. However, it is difficult to accurately judge the number of evangelicals because some attend both evangelical and Roman Catholic services and would identify themselves as Catholic.

Culture

Guarani Food: Guarani are proud of their heritage and often define themselves by three aspects of their culture: speaking Guarani, drinking *yerba* (herb) tea, and eating *mandioca* (cassava). Mandioca is served at nearly every meal. *Mate* (mah-tay) leaves are made into a mildly stimulating tea. Served cold, it's called *tereré*; served hot, it's *mate*. *Yerba* tea has been part of the culture for hundreds of years.



Guarani Arts: Distinct native Indian art forms include Feather Art which uses the flamboyant feathers of exotic species, some of which are endangered, to create collars and ornaments. Sculptures of birds and animals carved from palo santo or timbó wood also express a distinct Guarani style. Guarani also practice the arts of basketry, ceramics and many textile handicrafts including the creation of hammocks, lace, embroidery and *ahó poi* which is a finely woven linen made into clothes or napkins.

Livelihood: Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Guarani lived by hunting, fishing and gathering. Their weapons were the bow and arrow and the club, and they built homes of thatched huts around a central area or plaza. Handicrafts included pottery, basketry and weaving. They slept in hammocks woven on simple, upright looms. Their religious leaders, called *shamans*, held great power and influence.

Rural people today live in simple brick or wood houses, with one or two rooms and large areas covered by a roof. They tend to rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Food crops are grown for home consumption working the land by hand or with oxen. Animals are kept as 'bank accounts' - in times of need or emergency they can be sold.

A recent effort has brought electric power to most rural villages. Water is usually drawn by hand from shallow wells, but some areas now have deep wells and piped water to the houses – even in some fairly small villages. People travel on horseback, motorbike, bicycle or public transport. Few own their own cars and many areas have dirt roads.

Guarani traditional society is centered on the extended family. In some cases, three generations live together in the same house; however, this system is on the decline as more children move to the city or want their own homes.

The capital of Asuncion has a wide spread of classes, from very wealthy and influential, to squatter camps and street dwellers. Houses are built of brick with a tile roof. Electricity and running water are available in most neighbourhoods. Public transport is frequent, reliable and accessible.

Upper class families move in politically powerful circles. They own large businesses or ranches, use private transport and speak less Guarani and more Spanish. The professional class work hard to keep ahead, deal with an environment of unrelenting corruption, and relate to a fairly closed circle of friends and business contacts.

Language

Today 95% of the population speaks Guarani, a language derived from the Tupian linguistic stock, and 95% also speak Spanish. Because most people are bilingual, the two languages have naturally influenced one another. Spanish influence on Guarani has resulted in a mixture called Guarani-Jopará - jopará means 'mixture' in Guarani. A traditional dish of beans and maize is also called jopará. Guarani is considered a onomatopoeic language, which means many of its sounds imitate the natural sounds of the forest and animals.

SIM Involvement

SIM began ministry in Paraguay in December 1987. Several mission families are involved in evangelism, discipleship, and enabling the Paraguayan church, particularly in the capital of Asuncion, to grow. Other SIM missionaries minister in Villarrica and Caazapa through Bible studies, youth ministry, animal health care, Christian videos, and agricultural development.

The Guarani are open and willing to talk about Christianity, but many do not understand why baptism and prayers to the saints are not the way to salvation. Another challenge is that of local healers and those participating in witchcraft who specialize in blessings and curses, retaining their power by exploiting the people's fears. However, more recently, the Guarani have been more open towards evangelicals.

Scripture Availability

The New Testament was translated into the Guarani language by 1977. The translation of the entire Bible was completed in 1996.

Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.