

*COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT IMPACT OVER INDIGENOUS CULTURE*

**COLOMBIAN INDIGENOUS CULTURE AFFECTED BY THE  
GOVERNMENT INCLUSION POLICIES**

A Literature Review submitted as a requirement to obtain the degree of Professional in  
Modern Languages

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## Abstract

The present literature review has as a main object to identify and analyze the alteration caused by the Colombian government inclusion policies over the indigenous culture of the country, based on historical events concerning about the American discovery and conquest, as well as the colonization of the Colombian indigenous population. The purpose of this research is to expose the different losses or changes that these communities have suffered, creating a social inquiry regarding the treatment that our indigenous cultures are receiving, and how this is degrading the autochthonous Colombian culture.

**Key Words:** Culture, Indigenous people, Changes, Language, Religion, Policies, Inclusion, Government, Spaniards, Muisca.

## Resumen

La presente revisión literaria tuvo como objetivo general analizar e identificar la alteración que causan las políticas de inclusión del gobierno colombiano sobre la cultura indígena del país, tomando como base hechos históricos referentes al descubrimiento y la conquista de América, así como la colonización de los pueblos indígenas colombianos. La finalidad de esta investigación es exponer los diferentes cambios o pérdidas que han sufrido estas comunidades, generando un cuestionamiento en la sociedad con respecto al trato que están recibiendo nuestras culturas indígenas, y cómo esto va degradando nuestra cultura autóctona.

**Palabras Clave:** Cultura, Indígenas, Cambios, Lenguaje, Religión, Políticas, Inclusión, Gobierno, Españoles, Muisca.

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## **Introduction**

This research contemplates the situation of the Colombian indigenous, their culture and the position they have currently into the society. First of all, a description will be made taking into account the most representative aspects during the conquest time in America, highlighting a variety events such as Spaniards arrival, European's behavior against native people and the importance of the Spaniards heritage.

After that, the research will pass from the general American context to a specific context in Colombia, describing and evaluating three important factors: the economy, the language and the religion, where we will show a contrast between the statuses of theses aspects before and after the conquest time.

Finally, we will review the policies that are implemented nowadays in order to keep the indigenous culture in our country, and also the influence that these programs have over the cultural habits of these native people.

## Statement of the Problem

Nowadays, people are extremely busy trying to carry their daily routines within an “urban society” which make them act, think and behave as if they were robots, just programmed to perform certain activities. In some way, the idea of an urban society is beneficial, taking into account the advantages such as technology, studies, and the way people live and also the way people know and interact in different cultures; but it is also important to remember our ancestors and background. In our specific case, the indigenous culture in Colombia is a patrimony people cannot forget, it cannot be just a topic learned at primary school in history subjects. Raigosa (2010) emphasized that the 3.36% of the national population is represented by the indigenous and they fight in order to preserve their livelihood trying to resist situations related with colonization or expropriation, war and even climate changes. (Pérdida de la diversidad cultural, para. 4). In fact, it is essential to recover our native culture, and more important to bring up to date about the actual situation of these groups and how the government is working to include them into the society.

Regarding the government efforts to look after the indigenous population, it must be highlighted some policies created to integrate the indigenous groups and cover them with the same rights and conditions that the urban population have. According to this, we decided to research about the most common policies in our country and the influence they have over the indigenous people, leading us to state the following question: *“How do the government inclusion policies affect Colombian indigenous culture?”*

## Literature Review

### Going Back in Historical Events

#### The American Conquest by Spaniards

The background represents an important point to review on this research, taking into account that the indigenous culture has been influenced since ancient times. In this particular case, the American conquest by Spaniards symbolizes exactly what we want to highlight, considering the meddling this European people had over the indigenous and their habits. For instance, Fraser (n.d.) stated, “La Conquista also triggered a large amount of cultural change in Latin America. This change constituted a process of acculturation, with the indigenous people living in the Spanish empire having to assimilate the ways of their colonizers” (p. 9).

Accordingly, the researchers on this project contemplate that the idea of religion is a precise example because it was imposed to the natives by conquerors that brought their strict guidelines of Catholicism. However, we found information about one Spanish catholic man who marked the difference in that time, due to the significance he gave to native people; even, he could narrate about the inhumane treatment from Europeans to indigenous population; his name was Bartolome de Las Casas (1552) who mentioned, “For in the beginning the Indians regarded the Spaniards as angels from Heaven. Only after the Spaniards had used violence against them, killing, robbing, torturing, did the Indians ever rise up against them (...)” (As cited in Hall, 2007, p. 355). Indeed, watching the news nowadays, we can identify some examples of the previous situation in which the Spaniards feel rejection for Latin American people, sometimes acting against their lives and integrity. These could be a kind of thought which had been inherited by their European ancestors.

Although in the present time we can witness many discriminatory behaviors by Spaniards, we are unable compare them entirely with their ancestor’s practices, exposed by Stannard (1992) who described in considerable detail a horrible practice perpetrated by the conquerors:

The Spaniards found pleasure in inventing all kinds of odd cruelties, the more cruel the better, with which to spill human blood. They built a long gibbet, low enough for the toes to touch the ground and prevent strangling, and hanged thirteen (natives) at a time (...) When the Indians were thus still alive and hanging, the Spaniards tested their strength and their blades against them, ripping chests open with one blow and exposing entrails, and there were those who did worse (...) One man caught two children about two years old, pierced their throats with a dagger, then hurled them down a precipice. (p. 14).

Despite we are aware about the sacrileges and murders that occurred in the conquest time, we cannot set aside positive opinions about this cultural meeting. According to Veksler (n.d.) Christopher Columbus' expedition was one of the greatest events in human history, due to the fact that people become aware of real planet's magnitude and they had the opportunity to connect cultures geographically located in different places (p. 2). Actually, the researchers on this project agree with this statement, taking into account that this type of encounter could happen at any time in history, even nowadays, where the technology is so advanced. In other words, the meeting of cultures was an inevitable fact.

Consequently, Saavedra (n.d.) makes an indisputable observation with reference to the integration process among European culture and the Pre-Hispanic one, stating that indigenous had inherited from Spaniards one of the most important gifts a human being can receive: the writing (p. 4). Saavedra (n.d.) also stressed that in that time native people had lacked of writing, with no options to leave valuable evidence of history, poetry and intellectual works (p. 4). In this last case, we do assent with the writing's importance given by this author, since writings are synonym of legacy, the heritage to the world. Undoubtedly, our history always will remain through the paper, from generation to generation providing us with realities on the ground.

Nevertheless, it is indispensable to remember that although before the conquest the indigenous did not have an structured alphabetical system like the Spaniards one, these aboriginal population were capable to create a communication scheme related with hieroglyphs; Pearson Education (2012) described it better with the following example:

Like the Inca, who lived in what is now Ecuador, Peru, and northern Chile, the Mayan and Toltec peoples of Central Mexico built vast cities, formed government bureaucracies that dominated large tributary populations, and developed hieroglyphic writing and an accurate solar calendar. Their cities, which housed several hundred thousand people, impressed the Spanish conquerors. (p. 7).

After all these conceptions mentioned previously and making an assembling, we are able to understand that the meeting of cultures will always be an unavoidable and necessary fact, in which people have the aim and the opportunity to learn about particular aspects that make one culture unique, but we disagree with the Spaniards' behavior in Conquest time, since the evidence exposed could show the worst part of their performance in front of this historical moment of exchange. As researchers, we believe that if 1942 had had a more human approach, many attributes of ancient culture remain in force.

After having talked about the American colonization by Spain and went through the positive and negative aspects, it is necessary for us to review some factors, such as: the economy, the language and the religion regarding Colombian indigenous culture before and after the conquest.

## **Before the Conquest of Colombia**

### **Economic aspects of Colombian Indigenous**

During the XVI century, Muisca and some other indigenous tribes inhabited in Colombia; the tribes were spread from the center of the country through the north, where they bordered with the Caribbean and Arawak cultures; Martinez (n.d.) emphasized that despite the fact that Indigenous had a different language, they made commercial exchanges called “trueques”:

Muisca, Laches and Guanes, three of them part of the Chibcha linguistic family had a free market where they exchange in specific days different products such as Coca for blankets, blankets for gold; birds, beeswax, collar beads, honey, firewood, pumpkins among others between them and the Arawak and Caribbean cultures. (p. 1).

In addition, we can observe that those were not the only products this cultures exchanged, they also had special and more valued products as the blog “Descubriendo la Literatura Colombiana” (2012) described, “Other fundamental economic activities were the goldsmithing and pottery” (“Economía,” para. 2). “The typical currency was discs made of gold even though emeralds were used as monetary equivalents to make easier the “trueque”” (“Economía,” para. 3).

Then we can deduct that indigenous tribes already had an advantage in which refers to a market idea and the ways to obtain products that they need for their subsistence, creating a commercial environment where everybody could interact without being ruled under another.

### **Language of Colombian Indigenous Tribes**

The languages for the Colombian tribes were different one from another one, and the one that predominated was the Muisca or Chibcha language, spoken between cultures located in the middle of the country. Also, the cultures located through the northern part of the country spoke Muisca language despite of northern tribes had certain variations, Archivo General de la Nación de Colombia (2010) expressed that Indigenous could established a specific communication system to do their negotiations among themselves:



“Muisca language belonged to the Chibcha linguistic family. It has been proven that at the arrival of the Spaniards at the beginning of the XVI century, the inhabitants from the central part of the country shared some characteristics of language, housing, outfit and organization methods, therefore they have been classified under the same denomination of Muisca, but many historical researches and evidences tend to determine that they did not constitute an homogeneous community, that means they had important dialectic variations in the language that could corresponded to variations if their political organization. (para. 1)

In accordance to the foregoing, it is important for our research to expose how our native people had a very well structured language created by themselves without any external influence and more remarkable, the fact that they also had language variations between the tribes, being they able to implement an intercultural process.

### **Religion of Colombian Indigenous**

Castellanos 1 (n.d.) explained that our indigenous ancestors did not have an established religion but they believed in deities:

According to the Epitome, the Muisca tribes conceived the Sun and the Moon as a couple and fathers of people. In that way Muisca populations used the celestial bodies as a representation of male and female genders union, symbolizing the articulation of marriage as an unification of fertility the power provided by the day and night light (as cited in Correa, 2005, p. 202).

Through this, we consider that this situation differs significantly from the current one, due to our ancestors brought with them their traditional beliefs, showing gratitude to the nature and offering oblations, while nowadays our society has a variety of religions to believe in, that do not have relation with the nature but with material stuff like money.

Furthermore, in the book “Relaciones con la historia y las culturas” (n.d.), some examples of the rituals practiced on the tribes are described:

As Muisca thought their leaders were the reincarnation of the godly powers, when one of them died they were mummified preserving their bodies after the decease (...) The chiefs were buried with a luxury funeral’s dowry accompanied by their wives still alive (p. 60).

From our point of view, the rituals and devotion that our ancestors had were kind of radical if we compare them with today’s beliefs. Although the dedication to the religion is the same before the conquest and now in the twenty first century, we cannot agree with this type of rites.

## **After the Conquest of Colombia**

### **Economic aspects of Colombian Indigenous**

With the arrival of the Spaniards in Colombia, the conditions for native population were altered dramatically, because they went through a transition. As we mentioned previously, the indigenous were able to support themselves exchanging their products according with the needs, however conquerors changed this scene transforming the aborigines from businesspeople into merchandise. Melo (1996) explained that the *encomienda* consisted in the right obtained by one conqueror over a group of native people, using them in a variety of economical transactions, asking them to pay tribute and forcing them to indoctrinate. (p. 123).

Even though Spaniards showed they were taking care of their indigenous with that new economic system, they were not helping the natives at all. In fact, the researchers on this review consider that conquerors were hiding the slavery they were applying against the indigenous population. Moreover, we are in agreement with Zuleta (1973) who described that in the *Encomienda* the master did not have duties but all the rights, meanwhile indigenous had many assignments and they were rightless. Between the Spaniard and the native person did not exist mutual service delivery, thus allowing that the *Encomienda* was servitude and often slavery (as cited in Machado, 2009, p. 40)

### **Language of Colombian Indigenous Tribes**

As students of modern languages, we know that meetings among people generate a constant learning, unconcernedly of each one's place of origin. Thus, Thomason and Kaufman (1987); Thomason (2001) and Winford (2003), illustrated us better, mentioning that when two communities with different languages are in geographical proximity, it is almost impossible to avoid that come into contact. The linguistic contact is highly probable, whether from social, political or economic reasons (as cited in Ramirez, 2004, p. 1). It seems that in Colombia, the encounter between indigenous and Spaniards were not an exception. Giraldo (2011) described wisely the start of this exchange of cultures:

The arrival of the conqueror Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada and his soldiers to these lands meant not only their settlement in inhabited lands but also the contact with people, objects and unknown languages. Thus, the colonization became the extra linguistic factor that triggers the contact between these two communities. (p. 3)

Indeed, as time went on in the colonization season, the Muisca language still represented a role for the Spaniard educators, taking into account that the only way for teaching indigenous about religion was through this language; however, Alvar (2000)

reported that the King Carlos V specified in every decree the same problems: "using the indigenous languages, the mysteries of our faith cannot be explained in a properly way" (as cited in Giraldo, 2011, p. 5). Rodríguez de Montes (1984) expressed that, after Carlos V, the King Felipe IV determined that Spanish language may be used for all the policies and administrative needs, but finally in 1770 the Duke Carlos III is the one who decided to impose the Spanish as the official language (as cited in Giraldo, 2011, p. 5).

In this manner, we can comprehend how the Colombian indigenous had to leave behind their own language, only because someone who had authority in another country thought he had the same dominance in a place that actually did not correspond to him. Honestly, it is complicated for us as learners of languages try to imagine how it will be if someone with different ideas came to force us to understand a life outside from our teachings, those that have been in our culture since ancient time. We estimate that the fact of possessing weapons or being more advanced technologically does not grant rights over others and definitely, freedom of expression is one of the reasons why we are human beings, to make decisions without being questioned.

### **Religion of Colombian Indigenous**

One of the most important and relevant changes that Spaniards imposed over our indigenous tribes was the Catholic religion. The article Descubrimiento, conquista y colonia del territorio colombiano (n.d.) described its implementation:

The church got adapted to the conquest and colony social situation. Also endorsed the slavery and the war against the aboriginals, forced as was ordered by the capitulations, but it could never alienate the religious beliefs from the majority of the tribes. Moreover, the church participated in the dispossession together with the other colonizer forces. The Indian council legalized the lootings under protection of the fight against the idolatry and sacrilege. (p. 17).

### **Reflecting about the impact of Government Inclusion Policies in Colombian Indigenous Culture**

All of the events discussed above allow us to think about the difficult situation that indigenous groups had to live in our country since the colonization time. Fortunately, the Political Constitution of Colombia (1991), determined, "The State recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation" (Título 1 - De los principios fundamentales, para, 7). We believe that this statement into a document of such importance,

represents a major change for the indigenous people because it turned into an official way of asserting their legitimate rights; however, throughout the last part of this literature review, we will be able to identify how the inclusion programs prepared by the government affect the indigenous culture, even without realizing it.

In accordance with our Constitution, it is supposed that every single person who belongs to the society in Colombia, should know, apply and respect the article mentioned before, but Yepéz (2003) gave us an idea of the reality that indigenous had to live:

Cities in Colombia are not prepared to receive indigenous, neither indigenous to inhabit the city (...) Women and girls work in domestic service without labor guarantees and legal protection. In certain cities such as Pasto or Popayan, those women are discriminated and exploited (as cited in Sánchez, 2013, p. 30)

It is clear that Colombians are not completely aware about the official policies; besides it seems for us that Spaniard behavior is still remaining into the urban population, because it is not fair that after so much time, natives continue suffering maltreatment.

Another relevant scene where indigenous are being breached is related with the armed conflict that has stunned our country for so long. In the first place, it is necessary to recover what Rodríguez (n.d.) emphasized, “Colombia, as a multiethnic and multicultural nation, has established that indigenous and black communities have the right to decide upon their territories” (p. 8), which is complemented with the sentence issued by the Constitutional Court in 1993, declaring that without the recognition of land rights, rights to cultural identity and autonomy are only formal recognition (as cited in Rodríguez, n.d., p. 8).

However, on the obverse side of the coin, we can see despite the government efforts to integrate and take care of the indigenous tribes and their lands, external agents like the armed conflict interferes in the government goal, since illegal groups violate any police created by the state. Also, they promote the integration of native people not to the society but to the armed groups, whether for cultivate drugs or for being part of the guerrilla movement; in every way, the indigenous will be affected because if they do not accept the guerrilla conditions, they will be displaced from their territories. In a worst-case scenario, natives could be murdered. This reflection can be supported by the article issued by the Constitutional Court in 2009, that specify that indigenous people are caught into the conflict and any of the parties respect their non-involvement or special protection, neither one of them recognize the particular vulnerability and fragility of natives (as cited in Indepaz, 2009, p. 18)

## Conclusions

After this research, we are able to state that unquestionably our native tribes have suffered and cross over different struggles since ancient times, being the ones that have to lose their culture, lands, believes, and even their lives.

Also, we cannot deny the importance of the heritage provided to us by the Spaniards regarding the writing ability, because as students of modern languages we know that communication is the bridge between cultures and languages and the best way to preserve it is through our written legacy. However, we will never agree with the method used by these Europeans to impose this knowledge to the native population.

In addition, our Country had many changes as we could find, talking about the religious aspect in the indigenous culture. Natives were forced to believe in the Catholicism, and for us it was a deprivation of liberty, a fact that seems contradictory since this religion always has expressed concepts of freedom and nowadays it is the predominant in our country.

Moreover, despite of the policies created by the Colombian government to include the native cultures into the society, we as urban people do not know the policies clearly, and sometimes with or without intention disrespect that authority, offending and rejecting our aborigines.

Furthermore, we identified some specific cases where the Colombian indigenous culture is affected by the inclusion policies; for instance, although it is supposed that this country offers job opportunities without paying attention to the people's background, the responsible person in companies do not take into account the indigenous candidates, decreasing the chances for them. Also, in the education level, institutions are not capable to teach this population in their native language, giving them two options: first one, learn Spanish language and second, to leave their desires to learn and improve their education.

Finally, we believe that Government should create and apply new policies for urban people in whom we guarantee the respect to indigenous population being the inclusion a team work between the government and the urban population.

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## APPENDICES

