

This article is one of a series of cultural profile snapshots that was written for and published by *Relocation Journal*.

## **Brazil - A Cultural Profile**

*by Bob Riel*

Brazil is the largest and most diverse country in South America. Although its history parallels that of other Latin American nations, there are important differences that have resulted in the unique culture and mindset of the Brazilian people. For one, it is a Portuguese nation, which sets it apart from the Spanish influences in neighboring countries. In addition, many of the races and cultures that settled in Brazil have intermarried. Nearly half of all Brazilians can trace their heritage to a mixture of European, Indian and African blood. The result is one of the most friendly, fun-loving and expressive cultures in the world. Following are some key themes that are helpful to understanding the people of Brazil.

### **Love me, love my family**

Although the family is an important part of life in most Latin American countries, it is especially so in Brazil. Brazilians often refer to their *parantela* or extended family, and even ancestors are commonly included in this grouping.

Members of the extended family are usually very involved in each other's lives. Grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles provide emotional support, as well as tangible help when needed. Relatives often live in the same neighborhoods, and leave their doors open for one another. This strong family network not only provides a sense of stability in people's lives, it also impacts the Brazilian perspective on the world.

### **The influence of personalism**

Since the Brazilian concept of family carries over into other areas of life, nothing of any real importance is accomplished in business without the influence of personal relationships. Just as families congregate, so do business executives. Managers commonly gather at the end of the day for conversation over coffee. Business deals are often negotiated only after a personal relationship has been developed between the principals. In fact, an individual's power may be more the result of his personal authority than his job title. Even in the decision-making process, subjective feelings and personal relationships often play a more important role than objective facts.

### **A hierarchical society**

As is true in most Latin American nations, Brazilians respect hierarchical relationships, and their society is structured along the lines of economic class and social status. Most organizations also adhere to a strict hierarchy, and decisions are often centralized. Authority is

seldom diffused and Brazilians look to individuals for leadership. In most instances, it is considered disrespectful to break the chain of hierarchy.

Such hierarchical values are typical in countries with a Catholic heritage, since people have been conditioned to respect the authority of priests and bishops. In Brazil, plantation owners, a common feature of the country's colonial history, further strengthened these values by providing yet another instance where the general population relied on the authority of individuals.

### **A focus on the here and now**

Brazilians focus on the present, something outsiders may misconstrue as laziness. This is especially true when it results in projects or activities being put off until "tomorrow." A more precise interpretation is that the Brazilian realizes there *is* a tomorrow. Since he can always do tomorrow what he doesn't get done today, he takes full advantage of the present, and relationships almost always take precedence over the clock.

Brazilians are also apt to change plans or leave tasks until the last minute, which has led to an emphasis on quick solutions and urgent decision-making. They take interruptions in stride and don't always feel compelled to be on time; unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the world, Brazilians are not noted for their punctuality.

### **No way out**

Brazil's rigid hierarchies and emphasis on the present time have produced a trait known as *jeitinho*, which literally means "little way around" and refers to the adaptability of Brazilians. In a culture where last-minute decisions are as common as the extensive bureaucracies and regulations, people have learned to be flexible. *Jeitinho* is the way in which Brazilians adjust to the needs of the moment.

### **Making the most of maleness**

*Machismo* is a distinguishing characteristic of most Latin American countries and Brazil is no exception. Whether through sexual, combative or intellectual accomplishments, males feel obligated to prove themselves worthy of being men. As a result, they often feel the need to dominate other people or situations.

However, Brazil -- along with Costa Rica and Chile -- is less concerned with *machismo* than some other Latin American nations. Overall, expats will find that the Brazilian inclination to be considerate and avoid confrontation puts a softer edge on its hierarchical society.

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