

THE LINKS THAT BIND BRAZIL TO AFRICA

Brazil's relations with Africa have not always been happy

THERE are many reasons why African countries should expect that Brazil, Africa's sprawling neighbour in South America, should be intimately involved in the problems of the Continent of Africa. The geographical proximity is only one such reason: a cluster of West African States look straight into the eastern-most tip of Brazil.

Essential historical links and potential possibilities of co-operation – politically and economically – in the present, perhaps provide a more solid rationale for Afro-Brazilian ties.

Brazil occupies about half of the South American continent, exceeded in area only by the Soviet Union, China, Canada and the United States. As a colony, Brazil was a distinct case: though vast, it was ruled by the weakest colonial power in Europe, Portugal. It was not one country, but was made up of the Portuguese colonies in South America – unlike the Spanish colonies which on independence became separate national entities.

And an even more unique element is the fact that although it is now 156 years since Brazil became independent of Portugal, it still considers Portugal as some sort of a "mother country", with Brazilians sticking to the Portuguese language despite linguistic influences in the past.

Brazil's economy and culture have flourished over the centuries through, among others, the African slaves who were brought to Brazil by Portugal to work on the sugar plantations. Between the 16th and the 19th centuries, around three to four million Africans were shipped out to work with the indigenous Indians. The Africans were rich carriers of culture, a culture which later came to almost dominate Brazilian cultural life. The principal African groups came from West Africa – from what was formerly Dahomey and the Yoruba areas of the region – and from Angola (also a Portuguese colony at that time). So the differences were essentially those of the differences in the ways of life back home.

For instance, according to historians, those from Guinea to the Niger, who had a fairly developed political and cultural background, provided the bulk of domestic and craft slaves, while the field hands came mainly from the less powerful Bantu people of the Congo and Angola region.

Such differences have continued over the centuries and are reflected even today in the nostalgic memories of the Kings of the Congo and the stylised fighting dance reminiscent of Capoeira de Angola.

African influence on the Brazilian way of life is the strongest in the old plantation region in the north-eastern areas along the coast from Rio de Janeiro, and in Salvador, the capital of Bahia State, where there are traditional dishes of African origin.

If Yoruba, Ijexà and other similar cultural traits have flourished, so have the music and rhythm of West Africa. In many cases, links with the past are so vivid that a number of Africans have actually gone back to West Africa and as in Lagos, Nigeria, have come to form a distinct group of craftsmen and traders. No wonder African deities are worshipped, and the religious cults like *macumba* in Rio de Janeiro and *candomblé* in Bahia are found to be analogues to the voodoo.

However, despite all this strong Afro-Brazilian link, this is not the only reason

Angola's President Neto: trade with Brazil, but will the past be forgotten?



why Africa expects more from Brazil. At best it may be just one of the more pressing ones.

Brazil still considers Portugal a "mother country", and it was this nostalgia which estranged it from many African countries in early 1970s when the liberation struggles in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, were at their peak. Brazil continued to foster close relations with Lisbon and the Salazar dictatorship there, and, of course, with the colonial administrations in these colonies.

While resenting this collaboration of a former Portuguese colony with Portuguese colonialism in Africa, independent African countries in the Organisation of African Unity preferred not to totally boycott Brazil, as was the case with White minority regimes in Africa, and instead called on Brazil to mediate between Lisbon and the liberation movements. This it consistently refused.

A time had indeed come when Africans were asking Brazil to choose its friends once and for all and let the Africans know whether it wanted to continue its links with Portugal and South Africa – its biggest single trade partner on the continent – or discontinue them in favour of independent Africa.

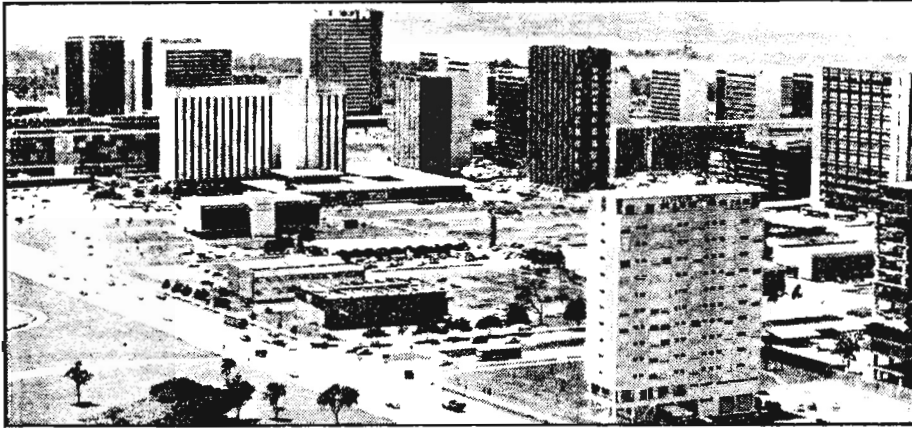
However, a change in Brazil's policy did take place in 1972, when it eventually offered to mediate in the independence disputes. The mediation offer was made by the then Brazilian Foreign Minister Mario Gibson Barboza, during his 29-day "African friendship mission" in November 1972.

The mission took him to Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Zaire, Nigeria, Gabon and Senegal. Mr. Barboza's talks with heads of state and government in these countries centred on cocoa, coffee and colonialism. For Brazil, cocoa and coffee were important subjects in so far as they brought it into a community with African countries, themselves important producers of these goods and suffering, as Brazil did, from international quota and price controls; for the Africans, colonialism was a much more important issue. The Brazilian Foreign Minister was, therefore, at pains to emphasise to his African hosts that Brazil's close relations with Portugal did not imply any underwriting of Portuguese policies in Africa.

Further, he said, that while Brazil intended to maintain relations with South Africa, it attempted to keep them at "a correct rather than cordial" level. In this connection, it was emphasised that Brazil would refuse to upgrade its diplomatic mission in Pretoria to ambassadorial level.

While it remained doubtful whether such gestures impressed his hosts and their colleagues in the OAU, the Brazilian Minister did succeed in building bridges on the level of trade and economic relations with African countries. With Ivory Coast, for instance, Brazil set up a joint commission on cocoa and coffee marketing policy and signed a trade treaty and technical cooperation agreement. In Togo and Benin, too, the Brazilian Minister signed technical cooperation agreements,

Brazil's policies anywhere would follow the commercial interests or "responsible pragmatism" as Foreign Minister Senhor Antonio Azeredo da Silveira has tended to pursue since 1974. It is under this policy that the Government of President Ernesto Geisel not only took the 1972 decisions further, but took the bold decision of recognising the independence of Guinea-Bissau before Portugal conceded it, and was also the first country to recognise independent Angola under the MPLA.



Brasilia – ultra-modern capital city

and in Ghana the Brazilian petroleum company proposed participation in the distribution of oil. A cultural agreement was also concluded.

Although this was definitely a turning point in Brazil's Africa policy, it did not materially change its attitude toward Portugal. The mediation efforts were hardly ever needed following the turn of events in Portugal itself in early 1974, and eventual independence of Portuguese African colonies.

Suspensions have, therefore, lurked and have been reinforced by Brazil's continued close relations with South Africa, leading to speculation that it may be planning a South Atlantic Treaty Organisation with, among others, South Africa.

Brazil's acquisition of nuclear plants and the development of nuclear power in South Africa have raised fears about such an organisation becoming a reality – threatening the security, among others, of the African continent.

Moreover, Brazil, though having a sizeable Black population, greater in number than that in the United States, has turned to the West (and even to the East) but not to Africa in any real terms. It is already considered to be the Western world's eighth largest economy – with a rapidly growing economy and a foreign trade worth \$25,000m. that has grown 1,000% in 15 years. Trade with Eastern Europe's economic market COMECON has soared to over \$1,500m.

Although Brazil continues to profess closeness to Africa, there is no doubt that

It is believed that such gestures are largely meant to win African markets. Like India, with wide gap between the rich and the poor and a large population, Brazil is also a fast developing country with a high and rapidly growing level of industrialisation. This leaves scope not only for the imports of raw materials from Africa but also for the export of finished products to African countries.

For instance, ten years ago, 80% of Brazil's trade in Africa was with South Africa, today, trade with South Africa, though as large as at \$1,000m., is only 30%

of Brazil's total trade with Africa. Small consumer articles apart, Brazil has sold warplanes to Mozambique and Angola, fishing boats to Mozambique and trainer aircraft to Nigeria. Exports of tractors and motor vehicles to Africa have grown sizeably and there are growing prospects of industrial collaboration. For instance, Volkswagen cars assembled in Nigeria now incorporate 60% of parts made in Brazil. And in April this year, the Brazilian firm Rabelle agreed to build a dam on the Oued Isser, 30km. north of Tlemcen in Western Algeria.

There is no doubt Africa needs and is bound to benefit from such economic collaboration, particularly with developing countries like Brazil. But placed as Brazil is in strong position both geographically and politically, African countries not only expect economic co-operation from her but also political understanding. Brazil's continuing intimate relations with South Africa – especially its economic ones at a time when African countries, backed by the international community, are planning an economic squeeze on the apartheid state – will keep it suspect in the eyes of the Africans.

The anger in Africa over Brazil's collaboration with Portugal in the past is still far from forgotten. The Nigerian Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Brig. Joseph Garba recently reminded Brazil of the African resentment during a trip to that country, when he said: "The African continent owes no debt to Brazil and if support given to the Blacks contemplates economic advantages, that would be a very unfortunate policy".

Above all, Brazil, has yet to impress the Africans about the treatment given to Blacks inside the country. Africans, though almost in a majority, are largely relegated to the slums and the ghettos ●