



## The History of Brazil–Africa Relations

### KEY MESSAGES

- Brazil has strong historic, social, and geopolitical bonds with Africa; in recent years, economic connections have emerged.
- Brazil has revived its Africa policy in the twenty-first century, even as Africa has changed substantially.
- Brazil and Africa are forging a model of South–South relations.

Traditionally, studies of relations between Brazil and Africa have tended to concentrate on the links of both to countries in the northern hemisphere. While these North–South studies have contributed to an understanding of Brazil and Africa in an international context, they have also distorted the cultural, political, and social history that binds Brazil and Africa, including the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

This chapter, instead of concentrating on links between the “center” and the “periphery,” examines the historical background of South–South relations between Brazil and Africa. It illuminates the connections, cultural identities, and common patterns created by the long-term experiences of Africa in Brazil and of Brazil in Africa.

Several authors have brought new perspectives to the traditional pattern of North–South analysis by looking at the South Atlantic as a channel of cultural transfers or political and social experiences, rather than as a geopolitical ocean like the North Atlantic. These perspectives have improved the historiography of Brazil–Africa relations. The global dimensions of the African diaspora (Harris 1982); merchant capitalism and the slave trade (Miller 1988); Brazilian perceptions of the South Atlantic routes as “Mediterranean” channels of peace and trade (Saraiva 1996); and human perspectives of the South Atlantic transfers, including slave trade movements (Alencastro 2000)—these constitute the new historiography of Brazil–Africa relations and form the background for this chapter.

## FIVE PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF BRAZIL–AFRICA RELATIONS

Brazil–Africa relations may be divided into five distinct and unequal periods. The first covers Brazil’s colonial history from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. Starting with the transatlantic slave trade, links between Brazil and Africa—including trade in goods, economic and social interactions, and exchanges of ideas and skills—expanded during this period. Portuguese historians, such as Oliveira Martins (1880) and Jaime Cortesão (1933), pointed out that large parts of the Guinea Coast and Angola were directly dependent on Brazil during the eighteenth century.

The second period, which began in 1822 with Brazil’s independence, is characterized by a gradual marginalization of relations between Brazil and Africa. A silence grew between the two after Portugal signed the Treaty of Acknowledgment of Brazilian Independence in 1826. With the ending of the slave trade and the acceleration of Europe’s penetration of Africa, Brazil put the African continent aside and concentrated instead on international relations with Latin America, Europe, and North America. This pattern continued until the 1950s.

The third period includes the fading of European colonialism in Africa and many new developments within Brazil. In the late 1950s, the relationship between Brazil and the United States began to create conditions favorable to a rekindling of relations between Brazil and Africa. Brazil had to adapt its foreign policy to an international environment that included newly independent African governments. But the Brazilian stance on Portuguese colonialism in the African continent—a type of hesitant support for anti-colonialism, constrained by traditional relations with the former colonizer—continued to block its rapprochement with these newly independent African states. Brazil’s foreign policy toward Africa would eventually have to cut this Gordian knot.

The fourth period extends from January 1961 to the mid-1980s, during which time many significant changes took place in Brazilian foreign policy. This period, except for the years immediately following Brazil’s 1964 military coup, saw an active political and economic rapprochement with Africa. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a relatively strong flow of capital and goods across the South Atlantic. From Brazil’s point of view, the South Atlantic became an important focus of both foreign policy and commerce. Brazil’s recognition as the government of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola or MPLA) on November 11, 1975 (the same day the Portuguese left Angola and the MPLA unilaterally declared the country’s independence), ahead of progressive African countries such as Nigeria and Tanzania, was to be a turning point for Brazil’s relationship with Africa.

During the fifth period, which extends into the twenty-first century, Africa has become one of the major fronts of Brazil’s international agenda. The continent is rapidly changing, and Brazil has gradually expressed more interest in supporting and participating in African development. The administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10) revived Brazil’s interest in Africa and set it on a surer footing, as part of the search to extend Brazil’s global influence. The new, global Brazil coincided with the emergence of the new Africa described in the previous chapter.

Two convergent discourses of solidarity are available to justify Brazil's new rapprochement with Africa. The first emphasizes the direct cultural and historical affinities with the black people of the African continent and cultural transfer. The second emphasizes the ethnic and cultural affinities with the Lusophone countries of Africa. The possibilities created by community of language has remained a specific aspect of Brazil's policy in Africa into the twenty-first century, as demonstrated by initiatives to enhance the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), which includes social and cultural cooperation with Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on language marks an important difference between Brazil's rapprochement with Africa and the policies of China and India.

## THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF BRAZIL–AFRICA RELATIONS: SLAVERY AND BEYOND

Contacts between Brazil and Africa began in the sixteenth century against the background of Portuguese colonization. Under Portuguese rule, the African coastline supplied slaves for colonial Brazil's sugarcane plantations. The arrival of the first Africans in Brazil dates to about 1530, but transfers of enslaved Africans to Brazil become more significant after 1550, when sugarcane plantations became better organized. So great was the demand for African slaves in Brazil that it diverted the Portuguese slave trade from the Spanish-American colonies (such as Mexico, Peru, and Santo Domingo) to Brazil (Goulart 1949). A transatlantic trade structure was created in which capital accumulation based on exploitation of cheap slave labor ruled the economy.

This was just the beginning of a long history of slave trade between Africa and Brazil, however. Year after year, the annual import of Africans to Brazil increased, ranging from 1,000 a year in the sixteenth century to a record 60,000 in 1848 alone. Smugglers continued to bring slaves into Brazil after the slave trade (but not slavery) was formally banned in 1850. Goulart estimates the total number of Africans transported as slaves to Brazil at 3,500,000–3,600,000, while Curtin (1969) puts the figure at 3,646,800.

Brazil's African slaves had varied origins. Most were transplanted from the western coast of Africa, though some came from as far east as Mozambique. The zone known as the Slave Coast, which spanned the coast from around modern-day Togo to Nigeria, was where Portuguese and Brazilian traders conducted negotiations for slaves not only for sugarcane production, but also for exploitation of mines in the seventeenth century and for work on coffee plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Common items traded for slaves on the African coast included tobacco, gold, sugar, and *cachaça* (“firewater” or sugarcane alcohol), which came from Brazil. But the history of Afro-Brazilian relations also includes exchanges of

<sup>13</sup> See Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa website, [www.cplp.org/](http://www.cplp.org/).

other, less important commodities, such as salt, cloth, and Asian spices, as well as the social transfer of skills, and political and cultural exchanges. For instance, many Brazilians went to Africa as soldiers, sailors, administrators, and merchants. Prominent Brazilians became administrators in Portuguese colonies in Africa—the governors João Fernandes Vieira, André Vidal de Negreiros, and Baron José de Oliveira Barbosa in Angola were all Brazilian (Rodrigues 1961).

Not all Africans traveling to Brazil were slaves. In 1750, King Tegnabessou of Dahomey sent a diplomatic mission to Brazil to persuade Brazilian merchants to keep the Luso-Brazilian slave trade concentrated in Whydah rather than in Dahomey—even though Dahomey had conquered the Kingdom of Whydah some years before. Other Dahomean missions to Portugal stopped in Brazil in 1795, 1796, and 1800. Two successive governors-general of Brazil, Dom Fernando José de Portugal and Dom Francisco da Cunha Mendes, welcomed the African ambassadors and discussed with them a proposed monopoly of Brazilian trade on the Slave Coast. At the time, envoys of African rulers were given full diplomatic honors in Brazil (Almeida Prado 1955).

Relations between Brazil and Africa reached a turning point in 1648, when Portugal took back Angola from the Dutch with an expedition that departed from Rio de Janeiro. Alongside the Portuguese, the mission included Brazilians who strengthened the ties between Brazil and the areas of Africa under Portuguese rule. Over time, Angolan relations with Portugal diminished while relations with Brazil intensified; by the mid-1800s, the substantial trade out of Cabinda was proceeding directly with Rio de Janeiro, with no intermediation by Portugal. Angola became increasingly dependent on Brazil from the sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. During that time, Rio de Janeiro became an important and dynamic entrepôt in South America. Salvador Correia de Sá e Benevides, the commanding officer of the expedition that ousted the Dutch, was a member of the dominant aristocracy of Rio de Janeiro and a landowner in the region of Tucumán, near the mines of Potosí, Bolivia, in the Andes. At that time, Rio de Janeiro was the door to the slave-trade corridors extending into the south of Brazil, the River Plate area, and the mining regions dominated by Spain in South America.

Angola in effect became an appendix of Brazil in the eighteenth century. In 1770, Martinho de Melo Castro, Portugal's foreign minister, wrote that he could not tolerate the fact that Brazil had control over all trade and navigation between the two sides of the Atlantic to the total exclusion of Portugal. In his view, the Brazilians had developed two branches of trade: first, the legal and useful slave trade—and second, the illegal trade of Asian and European goods.

The close relations continued, however, into the nineteenth century. Following Brazil's independence in 1822, Benguelan traders were tempted by the idea of a political union between Brazil and Angola. A movement of emancipation was organized in Luanda and Benguela between 1822 and 1826, with the explicit aim of turning Angola into an overseas province of Brazil. The traders requested that the new Brazilian monarchy ensure the continuation of the special relationship they had enjoyed during previous centuries. In 1822, two

Angolan members of the Portuguese parliament joined the Brazilian independence movement and moved to Brazil as representatives of Angola, resigning their seats in the Portuguese parliament (Santos 1979).

The United Kingdom, which had acted as the mediator between Portugal and Brazil in the negotiations that followed independence, did not favor the idea of direct political links between an independent Brazil on the one hand, and Angola, West Africa, and Mozambique on the other. Citing humanitarian and commercial reasons, it preferred a free South Atlantic Cone, with no barriers to its interests in the region. Brazil thus came under constant pressure from British interests not to accept the union with Angola. The negotiations conditioned Portuguese and British recognition of Brazilian independence on complete cessation of political ties between Brazil and Angola. The result is embodied in the third clause of the treaty signed by Portugal in 1826 (with British mediation) acknowledging Brazilian independence: “His Imperial [Brazilian] Majesty promises not to accept proposals by any Portuguese colonies to join the Empire of Brazil” (Saraiva 1996).

## AFRICAN DESCENDANTS IN BRAZIL: CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In the years after Brazil abolished slavery in 1888, few people of African descent penetrated Brazil’s intellectual and political circles. Cultural traits, values, and beliefs of African origin remained alive in popular culture, but interest in the African continent was virtually excluded from what was regarded as high culture.

Brazil’s class society inherited the patterns of race relations that had developed under slavery, and the liberated slaves still encountered the inequalities they had faced during the time of slavery. A market economy, free labor, and institutional modernization did not erase these structures (Fernandes 1969). Economic and educational disadvantages, combined with the system of alliances, bargaining, and patronage that recruited the political and diplomatic elites, marginalized Brazilians of African descent and deprived them of the benefits of modernity and progress. Such obstacles needed to be removed, rather than deepened, and access to education broadened.

The tone of Brazil’s dominant, liberal culture was derived from the contradictions of the “*bourgeois gentilhomme*,” who lived in Brazil but had Europe as his point of reference. This planter class used slaves to produce goods for the international market, keeping one eye on profit and the other on gentility. The same contradiction extended to the precarious alliance between African descendants, among whom were the so-called mulatto (ethnically mixed) intellectuals, with the ruling classes of entrepreneurs, and in the alliance between the rural oligarchies of men of modest origins with the power elite.

Some mulatto intellectuals simultaneously criticized and embraced the contradictions of their situation. One of them, Luís Gama—born of a slave

mother and a white father, and sold as a slave but later emancipated—mocked in his verses the conceited elite who denied their African roots. Yet this did not prevent him from becoming one of them.

Another prominent mulatto writer in the late nineteenth century was Machado de Assis, who depicted with irony the white world to which he belonged. In one of his books, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, the author presents a funny and tragic picture of a member of the white liberal Brazilian community whose characteristic trait was volubility (Schwarz 1990). The range of intellectual European references in the universalist discourse of the book's protagonist was a perfect example of the glibness that characterized the elite as a whole. This cultured discourse swept under the carpet the legacy of slavery, and studiously ignored the legacy of Africa.

Some scholars explored the survival of African culture in Brazil, including the vestiges of African languages and religions, in the early twentieth century. Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, who based his best-known book, *Os africanos no Brasil*, on personal observations and interviews with Africans in Brazil, was a pioneer of these Afro-Brazilian studies (Nina Rodrigues 1982). Although a mulatto himself, and despite being one of the few authors to devote attention not only to the presence of African culture in Brazil but also to the African continent itself, he fell prey to ideas of “scientific racism.” Scholars such as Manuel Raymundo Querino, Arthur Ramos, Evaristo de Moraes, Gilberto Freyre, and Edison Carneiro subsequently produced substantial studies of the role of African culture in Brazil.

Cultural and social inequality affected Brazil's relations with African nations. When, in the second half of the twentieth century, Brazil began to revive its interest in Africa, Brazilian society still had not come to terms with its African descendants and the African legacy. Widespread criticism of the cultural hierarchy inherited from slavery led to a rather naïve discourse on rapprochement with Africa, much of which remained blind to the fact that Brazil, in spite of its historical and cultural links with the continent, was dismally ill-equipped to build a new relationship with it. For instance, when professional diplomats of African descent were needed to enact the new Brazilian foreign policy, none were to be found. And there were virtually no Brazilian experts on the history and cultures of the African continent at Brazilian universities.

In recent years, the Brazilian “Black movement” has helped to develop a new set of public policies and norms, including the creation of new federal institutions on racial issues.<sup>14</sup> One initiative, made part of Brazilian law in 2003, stipulates that “Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture” become a compulsory subject in public and private schools. The law is a major step forward for the Brazilian Black movement, though it faces constraints in full implementation because of a lack of professionals with the required teaching expertise. Several universities are now responding to the new call by train-

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<sup>14</sup>For example, the Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality (Secretaria de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial or SEPPIR) was created in March 2003, and directly linked to the Office of the President ([www.seppir.gov.br/](http://www.seppir.gov.br/)).

ing a new generation of teachers. The Department of History at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, for example, created two new mandatory courses for its undergraduates in 2008: Africa I, covering the Atlantic slave traffic and sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Africa; and Africa II, on contemporary Africa.

Also in the past few years, several universities have begun to target admissions efforts toward particular groups, including Afro-descendants. Innovative affirmative-action programs were needed, and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico or CNPq), with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), created a special scholarship for Afro-descendants applying to the Instituto Rio Branco (IRBr), the renowned Brazilian diplomatic school. Rather than granting access under a traditional quota system, the program provides teaching assistance to increase beneficiaries' chances in the highly competitive admissions process. Ten months before the exam, the IRBr candidate receives a monthly stipend of US\$1,500 from the government to prepare for the exam.

## FROM A FICKLE PAST TO A PROMISING FUTURE

The history of relations between Brazil and Africa is long and deep. The South Atlantic was the stage on which Brazil's contacts with Africa ebbed and flowed from the sixteenth to the early twenty-first century. The contacts resonated with elements of Brazil's national identity. Cultural discrimination, both official and unofficial, muddied the waters. But Brazil has revived its African policy in the twenty-first century, even as Africa has changed substantially. Together, Brazil and Africa are forging a model of South–South relations.

There are conceptual, as well as practical, innovations in Brazil's new policy of rapprochement with Africa. One is the abandonment of culturally discriminatory attitudes in favor of a more structural and pragmatic approach to cooperation with the new African elites. Another is the activism of civil society, both in Brazil and in Africa, as nongovernmental groups develop new channels of cooperation for development. A third innovation is the emphasis on trade, cooperation, and political exchanges between stable democratic states, which does not forget Brazil's political and emotional debt to Africa, incurred through the centuries-long slave trade.

