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Brazil and Africa: A New Policy?

Prudente de Moraes 805, c/6  
Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
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Mr. Richard Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Contact between Brazil and the countries of Africa began with the first arrival of African slaves to work on the plantations in the 16th century. From that time until 1836, when Portugal legally stopped its slave trade, untold numbers of Africans were shipped to Brazilian ports. One authority estimates that over two million slaves were sent to Brazil from the Congo-Angola area alone. In addition many came from the West African countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Dahomey and Portuguese Guinea as well as from Portugal's east African colony, Mozambique. Today many Brazilians are descended from African ancestors (according to recent estimates about 35% can be considered to be non-White, mulatto or black, but the percentage having at least one African ancestor is probably much higher) and the country's culture has a decided African influence. Brazilian-African scholar, José Honório Rodrigues claims that "Brazil, like Cuba, is the most Africanized of the American states with the exception of Haiti." From African cultures have come the noted samba rhythms, the Afro-Christian cults of the candomblé and macumba, linguistic additions to the Portuguese language and the special way of cooking that makes Bahia (the heart of the northeastern "black belt") famous for its food.

In its way Brazil has also had certain influences on Africa. While the Portuguese were extracting slaves they helped introduce to Africa such crops as maize, manioc, citrus fruits and potatoes from Brazil in the Americas. The development of the West African cities of Lagos and Accra was aided in the 19th century by the return of Brazilian Africans who were skilled craftsmen. They brought back not only needed skills but an Afro-Portuguese language and customs as well.



Brazil's strongest historical link to Africa has been Angola. When Portugal was struggling for independence from Spain in the 1640's the Dutch occupied the main Angolan ports of

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President Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal  
and President Marechal Humberto Castelo  
Branco of Brazil

Luanda and Benguela. In 1648 Brazilian ships and men rescued the ports for Portugal and for the next twenty years Angola's Governor and his assistants were Brazilian. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and into the 19th the two colonies remained linked by slavery and Portuguese rule: Angola's African labour supported Brazil and Brazil's wealth supported Portugal. Angola is often referred to as the "black mother" of Brazil.

When Brazil declared her independence in 1822 a number of Angolan leaders sought to tie their country to her in a federation. But Brazil, in order to get recognition from England and France as well as Portugal, was forced to agree not to seek the association of other Portuguese territories to herself. This agreement has largely determined her continuing relationship with Africa, particularly in those areas of Portuguese influence.

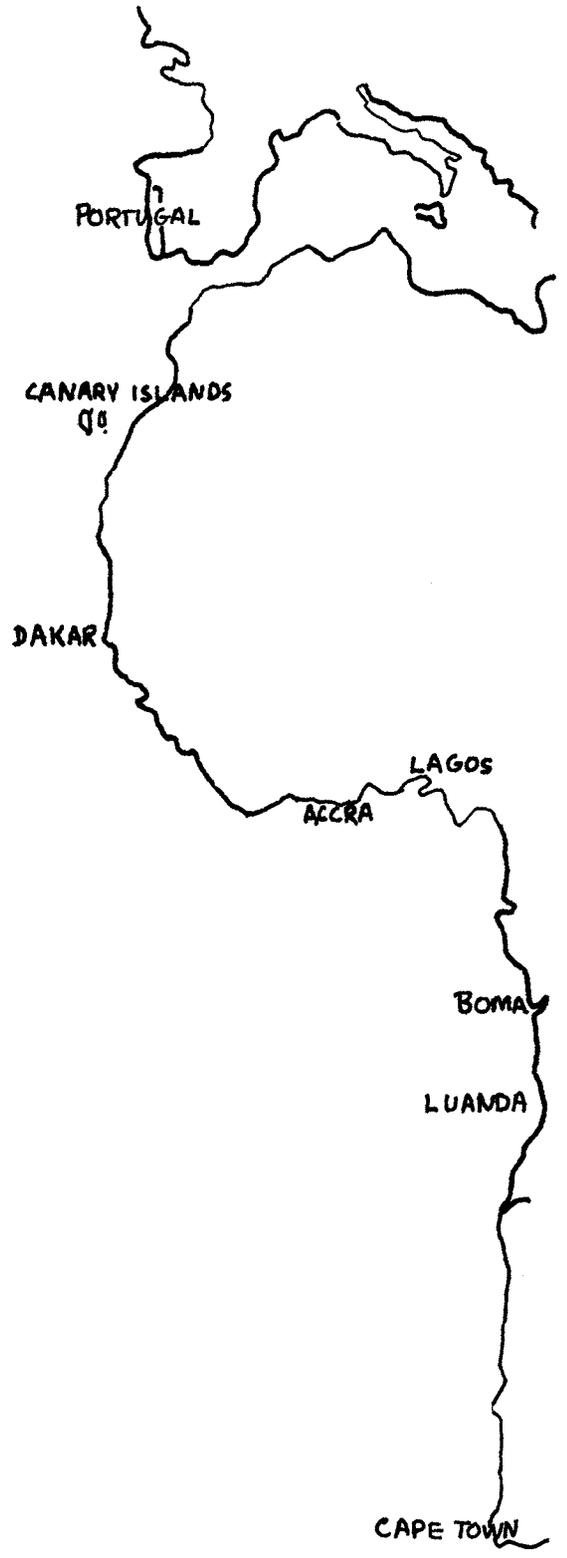
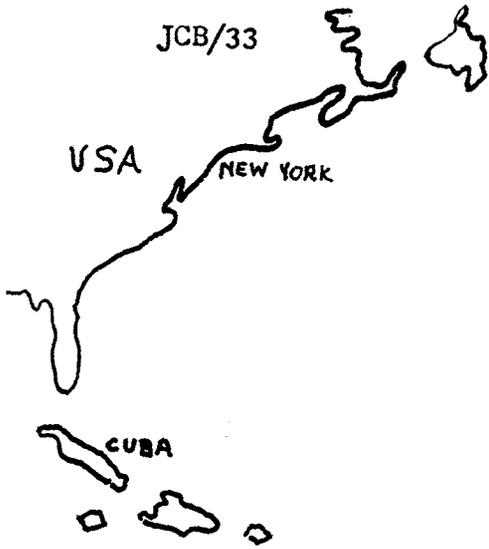
Although many Portuguese Angolans and Mozambiquians would like their areas to become "new Brazils" in Africa, relations between them and this country have been quite limited over the last 100 years. Brazil did maintain an interest in Angola after independence but only until the abolition of the slave traffic. Over the years a few diplomatic and consular posts were established in sub-Sahara Africa and today there exist three embassies in West Africa: Dakar, Senegal; Accra, Ghana; and Lagos, Nigeria. There is also one in Pretoria, Republic of South Africa. Her three consulates are in Southern Africa: Cape Town, South Africa; Lorenzo Marques, Mozambique and Luanda, Angola.

While Brazil's main interests in the last century have become more closely tied to those of the United States she has continued to consider her cultural ties to be with Portugal and other European nations. Her contact with Africa remained limited until after World War II because most African countries were under European colonial rule. And during the 1950's when there was increased criticism of Portugal's colonial rule Brazil remained true in spirit to the 1822 agreement not to interfere with Portugal and her colonies.

In fact, Brazil has served Portugal well. Besides largely financing the mother country from the 16th to the 19th centuries, thus making possible the continuation of its colonial empire, she rescued, in the 17th century, the Northeast of Brazil and Angola from Dutch control. She gave Portugal life itself when she accepted the Portuguese court in the early 19th century. As the largest Portuguese-speaking nation in the world she has served to expand greatly the influence of Portugal and Portuguese culture. After the war, although the two countries were not on the same side, Brazil once again gave her support when she signed pacts of solidarity in 1953 and 1960, voted with Portugal in the United Nations against anti-Portugal resolutions of the Afro-Asian nations and accepted the thesis that Angola and Mozambique were integral parts of Portugal. Together they also discussed the possibility of creating a Lusitanian commonwealth of Portuguese-speaking nations.

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This was Brazilian policy until Janio Quadros took office as President in 1961. He fashioned a foreign policy which he believed would make his country more neutral and thus more independent of the major western powers. He turned Brazil's interest to the developing nations in Africa as well as in Asia. He gave unequivocal support to African demands for self-determination and opposed Portugal's rule in Africa. He explained this new interest in Africa as part of Brazil's new interest in herself. In the October, 1961, issue of Foreign Affairs he wrote that one of the basic points of the new foreign policy was "the recognition of the legitimacy of the struggle for economic and political freedom. Development is an aim common to Brazil and to the nations with which we endeavor to have closer relations and the rejection of colonialism is the inevitable and imperative corollary of this aim." He continued, "Africa.. represents a new dimension in Brazilian policy. Our country should become the link between Africa and the West since we are intimately bound to both peoples.....For many years Brazil made the mistake of supporting European colonialism in the United Nations.....Our fraternal relationship with Portugal played its part in the complacency shown by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the matter.

"Therefore everything points to a necessary change of position with regard to colonialism, which in all its guises will from now on meet with the determined opposition of Brazil. This is our policy, not merely in the interests of Africa, nor for the sake of a platonic solidarity, but because it is in keeping with Brazilian national interests."

As a result he launched new efforts to increase regular trade and exchanges between his country and those of West Africa. He created for the first time a Brazilian Government Institute of Afro-Asian Studies and encouraged the formation of the first Brazilian University center of Afro-Asian studies at the University of Bahia in Salvador. He instituted a student exchange which initially brought a number of students from West Africa and named for the first time a Negro as the country's ambassador to Ghana.

After his sudden resignation in August of 1961, Joao Goulart continued his policy until he was removed from the Presidency by the golpe of March 31st-April 1st of this year. However, because of the country's increasingly difficult domestic problems Goulart's government was unable to do much to strengthen ties with Africa. Both the Government and the University African study centers languished from lack of attention and the visit of President Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, originally scheduled for December, 1963, had to be postponed.

With the ascendancy of Marechal Humberto Castelo Branco to the Presidency in April another change in foreign policy became apparent. The independent neutralism of the Quadros-Goulart regimes was denounced. Brazil would make her own decisions independently but

they would be made as allies of the Western Christian nations. Ties with the United States and Europe would be strengthened and a suggestion was offered to Portugal about the creation of a Luso-Brazilian-African sphere of influence.

When President Senghor finally arrived in September of this year President Castelo Branco told him in effect that the new Government would be restrained in her support of African independence. He said, "Brazil proposes a solution, peaceful and ordered, that would annul colonial rule," but one that does not assure "on the pretext of liberation what merely produces a change in submission." Brazil was not going to support a regime that would displace colonial rule by Black racism.

This attitude takes on particular significance since Portugal is about the only colonial power left in Africa. (South African and Rhodesian governments are not controlled by any European government but by the native White Africans living in those countries.) Portugal is again the key to Brazil's foreign policy. As usually pro-Government Jornal do Brasil stated in an editorial summarizing the President's position, "Brazil has special relations with Portugal which must be cultivated in the common interest. This common interest excludes any doctrinal opposition or negative criticism that would ignore.....the political stability of the Salazar regime..."

Columnist Amilcar Alencastre, writing in the often anti-Government Correio de Manhã, indicated the danger of pursuing such a pro-Portugal policy. "African and Asian countries together dispute the Portuguese position (in Africa). For them the named 'provinces' (Mozambique and Angola) are nothing more than colonies....Brazil, as all countries that desire friendly relations with Africa, has to face this dilemma: to support Portuguese colonialism is to lose the support and collaboration in international organizations of nearly 50 Afro-Asian nations and their European supporters."

A prominent Brazilian Africanist told me, "Before, Brazil was the friend of the under-developed nations in Africa. We supported them because we realized that in many ways our futures were tied together. We no longer let Portugal influence our policy toward Africa. In the United Nations we voted with Africa for self-determination against Portugal. Now when it comes time to vote again we will vote with Portugal. We have returned to our old position and Brazil has jeopardized her position of influence in Africa."

In order to have a better understanding of the Government's Africa policy I called at the Itamarati (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The Minister for African Affairs (who also handles Western Europe and the Near East) indicated that there were no changes in policy worth discussing. The most substantial information on policy that I could get from him was the fact that Brazil was still interested in Africa.

I was then passed along to the Secretary for African Affairs who told me "We are closer to the West now than before, but except for some minor differences our present policy toward Africa is about the same as it was under Quadros and Goulart." But the longer I talked with him the more he confirmed the pro-Portugal position which Castelo Branco had indicated in public. Brazil is not going to be an active supporter of African demands that Portugal remove itself from Africa or that the Whites in South Africa should abandon the Government to Black Africans. The "minor differences" about which he talked but never fully explained are essential differences: a decided softening toward South Africa (which the head of that legation in Brazil denies) and Portugal. Brazil supposedly hopes to influence a change in Portuguese Africa through influence alone. The Secretary said, "We may dislike certain aspects of Portugal's rule but we will not interfere with Portugal and her provinces. We do not and will not recognize any Angolan or Mozambique government-in-exile. We would like to help in the development of those areas but we cannot until Portugal changes and allows us to do so."

"Brazil's position toward South Africa," he continued, "is similar to that of the United States and European nations: opposition to its racial policies but also to economic boycott and military intervention as ways to change policy." At present the bulk of Brazil's trade with Africa is with South Africa, as it was under Quadros and Goulart. He recalled that "of the ten million dollars worth of goods exported last year to Africa about 8½ million was purchased by South Africa. Also a good portion of our imports from Africa come from and through South Africa."

He explained that trade with the African countries was one of Brazil's major problems in dealing with Africa. "We are still searching for ways to increase our trade but there are major obstacles. We have goods which we can export to the countries such as Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria. However there are very few things which we can import from them. Most of their crops, their products, their minerals which they want to sell we already have. More than this, they are also the ones which we want to sell. So in certain areas we are competitors instead of trade partners. Today we do not have enough trade back and forth from West Africa to warrant the establishment of a direct shipping line. Our goods are sent to West Africa via Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, Cape Town, New Orleans, New York or ports in Europe and this, of course, increases the cost of our shipments." It was clear that African trade has a far from positive influence on Brazil's present foreign policy.

While the pro-West-neutralist-African policy or the soft-Portugal policy of the present Government has its critics, supporters range from pro-Portugal Carlos Lacerda to Brazilians critical of Portugal's colonialism. At the banquet welcoming President Senghor, Governor Lacerda made it clear where he stands. "Brazil does not have reason to impose through the force of others an independence on Angola and Mozambique that they are not appealing for in order to give them a dignity they already have."

A number of business men and journalists who have visited Angola or Mozambique recently came away favorably impressed by what they saw and with Portugal's plans for the further development of those countries. Even the Director of the Afro-Oriental Institute at the University of Bahia, who recently wrote an article criticizing the lack of racial equality in Angola, believes that it would be detrimental to have that country taken away from Portugal now and turned over to the Black Africans. "They are not equipped to take on the responsibility of running the country. What is needed is a more just and dedicated Portuguese rule in which more Africans could have a part."

At an October press conference President Castelo Branco further clarified his African policy. "In relation to Portugal's overseas policy Brazil, while ratifying her position in the matter of self-determination, will point out her conviction that Portugal will know how to solve its problems in the spirit of its historical traditions, traditions that presided at the formation of the Brazilian nationality and helped to form the multi-racial type of society that is dominant in Brazil. The confidence of Brazil in the civilizing mission of Portugal derives from the conviction of concrete facts confirmed by sociology and history."

Thus, in spite of the geographical proximity between eastern Brazil and Western Africa, in spite of Brazil's advantageous multi-racial position and her significant historical and cultural ties, her interest in Africa lies mainly in her relationship with Portugal. Most Brazilians are involved so deeply in domestic problems that they simply don't care about the continent to the east.

But there is again talk of a Portuguese-speaking commonwealth. This time the idea is Castelo Branco's, who would be happy to have his country serve as a mediator between Portugal and its African provinces, a position not yet acceptable to Portugal. Portugal's acknowledgement of Brazil in this capacity would give her the status which her leaders seek. They do not want their country to be considered in the same category as the under-developed nations of Africa. Nor do they care to have her identified as a Negro nation. Under-developed and multi-racial she may be, but Brazilians have a fierce pride and right now they would rather be associated with their wealthy relatives in Europe rather than with their impoverished ones in Africa.

Sincerely yours,

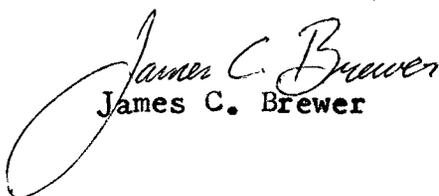
  
James C. Brewer

Photo courtesy of Manchete