

BOOK REVIEW

Gerhard Seibert and Paulo F. Visentini, editors. *Brazil-Africa Relations: Historical Dimensions and Contemporary Engagements, From the 1960s to the Present*. New York: James Currey, 2019. xx + 279 pp. List of Illustrations. Notes on Contributors. Acknowledgements. List of Abbreviations. Chronology. Bibliography. Index. £60. Cloth. ISBN 978-1-84701-195-4.

Brazil supposedly has the largest black population in the world after Nigeria; why then has its foreign agenda concerning Africa been so inconsistent? Edited by Gerhard Seibert and Paulo Visentini, *Brazil-Africa Relations: Historical Dimensions and Contemporary Engagements, From the 1960s to the Present* shares some insights in this regard. Its seven chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion, were written by four senior scholars with longstanding careers and active participation in both the academic field and government administration.

The book provides an all-encompassing narrative of Brazil-Africa relations, emphasizing the economic, technical, and sociocultural connections, and paying particular attention to official government relations, which alternate between concern and indifference, solidarity and unresponsiveness. Although offering a closer look at the time period from the 1960s onward, the authors correlate the present with major events that have conditioned Brazil-Africa connections since the sixteenth century, including colonialism, slavery, the rise of capitalism, and globalization. They illustrate how oscillations in Brazil's domestic political scenario impacted its relationship with Africa in the ideological priorities of the civil-military dictatorship (1964–85), the transformations brought about by Brazilian redemocratization (1985), the blossoming of Brazil's neo developmentalist turn (2000s), and the void that has emerged since the dusk of Lula da Silva's era (2003–2010). At their core, the chapters provide a closer look at the period from 2000 to 2020, during which Brazil underwent dramatic transformations (five presidents and twelve ministers of foreign affairs), exhibiting a different, sometimes conflicting, drive regarding external policy.

This book presents important contributions, although with gaps on certain pertinent issues. Its strength remains in its panoramic view and in the broad range of topics covered, including the specificities of Brazil's

technical and financial cooperation with Africa, the power of regionalist mechanisms, and the militarization of the South Atlantic (the later covered by Analúcia Pereira's chapter). The importance of the ineluctable shared history of Brazil and Africa to the foreign affairs agenda is certainly one major aspect covered by the book, about which we can emphasize two topics: Afro-descendancy and religion.

The chapter by Antonia Quintão provides a comprehensive contribution to a racial history of Africa's legacy to Brazil, highlighting how inequalities originating from slavery have produced enduring effects. The interconnection between government and civil society—especially with black activism and black feminisms—produced responses in the form of new policies that valued racial identities, promoted inclusiveness, and reduced inequalities, particularly in education, including the enormous affirmative action program and a bill making African history required teaching in every school in the country (2003). Briefly covered in this publication, religions are another a major force that have influenced Brazil's social and political life since colonial times. The book mentions Candomblé and Umbanda, which are widely understood as Afro-Brazilian religions with origins in the Bantu diaspora, and the presence of Brazilian Pentecostal churches in Africa. Brazilian Protestant denominations have also played a crucial role by interfering in local politics and economies on the continent, to the point of provoking violent riots, the deportation of Brazilian pastors, and splits between African and Brazilian-based churches.

Allowing greater space for topics such as these helps readers to understand what has been happening outside of, or in spite of, or even competing with Brazil's official agenda. In fact, small-scale, ground-level initiatives—unfortunately somewhat absent in this book—have worked to instruct or provide consistency for government decisions. Examples may be found in the attempts of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement to establish ties with the South African Landless People Movement (2005); or the projects developed at the Brazilian Unified Workers' Central, promoting cooperation with and capacity building of workers in Africa and the Global South (2012); or, significantly, the decision of the World Bank to make Brazil's science funding agency CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) a model for nineteen funding agencies in higher education and science and technology in eleven African countries (2013).

In the early 2000s, Brazil strengthened its horizontality in international cooperation (whether South-South or South-North), accentuating the country's orientation toward a multilateral agenda, promoting coalitions with countries that were outside its regular political framework, such as Algeria, China, India, the UAE, and parts of non-Portuguese-speaking Africa. But "the times they are a-changin'." In December 2018, one month before naming his cabinet members, President Bolsonaro ordered the withdrawal of all works of art portraying Afro-Brazilian themes from government facilities. His Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also systematically closed diplomatic and commercial representations in Africa and the Caribbean, making it unlikely that Brazilian

government engagement with Africa will be restored to the standards of years ago. The book organized by Seibert and Vizentini ultimately relates to a time when Brazil dared to conceive a different national project that implied revisiting its past, reviewing its structurally racist domestic and foreign policies, and readdressing its presence on the international stage, particularly regarding its relationship with Africa.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Gocking, Roger. 2020. "Ghana's Bui Dam and the Contestation over Hydro Power in Africa." *African Studies Review*: 1–24. doi:10.1017/asr.2020.41.

Shaw, Timothy. 2009. "South Africa in The Changing Political Configurations of Africa." *African Studies Review* 52 (3): 158–60. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0241.