

An exclusive white club

Brazil

BRAZIL SUPPORTS its diplomatic relationship with Africa by projecting the image of a racial democracy devoid of ethnic and racial discrimination. Its effort to improve relations with black Africa was accompanied by an emphasis on the African heritage of about a third of its population, through cultural exchange programmes and the opening of an Afro-Brazilian museum in Salvador in the north-eastern state of Bahia.

Historically, Brazil's black population, sent there as slaves, was concentrated in Brazil's now poverty-ridden north-east. Brazil was the last of the major slave societies to abolish slavery in 1888, mainly because the north-eastern sugar economy had declined so much that it was unable to resist southern coffee growers' desire to remove this source of friction with Brazil's major trading partner, Great Britain.

Unlike in the US, though, not even a token attempt was made to provide the former slaves with plots to make a living, and thus the ensuing sharecropping arrangement was little more than economic slavery. The south, meanwhile, preferred to remedy its shortage of coffee farmers by actively promoting the emigration of European farmers and workers rather than offering an alternative to north-eastern blacks.

In the last two decades, migration to the industrial south has precipitously increased, with blacks joining up in the 'favelas' (slums) with poor white agricultural workers and farmers who are leaving the rural areas. Until the debt crisis, the growth in industrial employment was sufficient to absorb this migratory stream and to provide a measure of upward social mobility. Since then, the informal service sector has become the main avenue for this, including careers in crime. For most observers, the overrepresentation of blacks in the poor income strata appears a matter of history

and economics rather than present-day race discrimination, because visible indicators of such discrimination that are common in other countries are virtually absent in Brazil. The black ghettos, of the US and South Africa do not exist and there is no equivalent of 'nigger' in Brazilian Portuguese. Also absent is any public debate or consciousness of race prejudice or discrimination.

But what some find disturbing is the fact that blacks only have a strong presence in sports, popular music, literature and the arts. Brazilian carnival and football are the most famous and attractive expression of this. The first blacks ever to attend the foreign ministry's prestigious diplomat school, the Instituto Rio Branco, were junior African diplomats coming under an exchange agreement in 1976.

With the exception of a handful of black Congressmen and Senators from the north-east, blacks are excluded from the country's political and business elites. Being white remains an essential requisite for joining this exclusive club which exhibits an amazing continuity in composition. Many of its current members can trace their ascendancy back to the last upheaval within the Brazilian political and economic classes, the 1930 'revolution', and the ensuing governments starting with that of Getulio Vargas. The big private industrial conglomerates such as Matarazzo and Votorantim sprang up under Vargas. So did the regime spawn important military leaders, former President Geisel being one of them. Many of the important contemporary politicians and technocrats earned their first spurs in the late 1930s or early 1940s, and the succeeding generation by and large owes its status to the patronage of the old guard.

Solidarity within the elites is accompanied by this keen sense of maintaining exclusivity. It took the Japanese immigrant minority from 1908, when they ar-

rived in Brazil with Japanese government sponsorship, till 1974, when President Geisel appointed the first of its descendants to a ministerial post, to celebrate its 'arrival' among the powers that be.

For blacks, rising to the top is even more of an uphill struggle. The fact that 'negritude' (blackness) in Brazil is judged by the degree of blackness not only by whites but also by blacks, and furthermore depends on gender as well as educational status, complicates the veiled racism they face. Anthropologists trying to unravel the puzzle posed by an apparently multiracial but non-racist culture, maintain that all this is firmly embedded in Brazilians' consciousness, thus impeding blacks' self-recognition as a homogenous ethnic group.

Despite the fact that women have been rapidly advancing into professional, entrepreneurial and political positions in recent years, a 'morena' (a black woman with 'brown' as opposed to 'black' skin and with relatively straight hair), while representing the epitome of the desirable Brazilian woman who can achieve considerable social status, is frequently barred from any professional position in business and politics. For black men, the level of acceptability depends on even lighter shades of skin. As a consequence, black men are generally confined to menial positions. Those few who 'make it' continue to encounter veiled hostility from the people they have to deal with. These patterns of behaviour go back to the days of Brazilian slavery in a Catholic frontier society, where appearances had to be maintained but where slave women often served as parallel wives, and their children were often accepted into the slave-owner's and landlord's family. Old habits die hard, particularly in a country which has found such remarkably flexible ways to maintain them.