THE DREAM OF MANY AFRO-BRAZILIANS IS to touch African soil, to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors – at least once in their life-time to be in Africa, even if just for a while. That is why we are known here in Brazil as Afro-descendents.

My first missionary assignment was to Angola where I worked for two years, so Africa as such was not new to me. But this year I had the privilege of spending three months in Nigeria. Once again, the experience of living on the Continent of our Ancestors held deep meaning for me.

Everyone knows that Brazil, discovered and colonized by the Portuguese around 1500, has a history of slavery. The northeast of Brazil where I am now on mission, owes its development to West African slaves. There were three mainstream groups who – as victims of the slave trade – were made to leave their homeland and under horrendous conditions were forced to build up the New World.

The first stream was formed by the Yorubá group called Nagô, together with the Minas and smaller clusters coming from Gâmbia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Sudan. The second group is largely made of Muslims like the Peuhl, Mandinga and the Hausa from the North of Nigeria. The Bantu tribes from Congo and Angola make up the third group.

Throughout the centuries, many initiatives have been taken to recuperate our African heritage and value our roots. The situation of Afro-descendents in Brazil has much improved over the last decade, especially since Luiz Inácio da Silva

---

**Tuning in to the Music of our Ancestors**

*by Sister Maria José da Silva*

Sister Maria José discovers the traditional African instrument, the Kora, in the Benedictine Monastery at Ewu
(Lula) was elected as Brazil’s President. He encourages the organization of groups which raise awareness among the population of their African background.

One of the practical ways in which Lula values the richness of our African roots, so often prejudiced, was to pass a law which demands of all the public universities to reserve 40% of their student places for African and Indigenous descendants. He also created a Secretariat for Reparation for Afro-descendants. In the past, the discriminatory structure of the educational system excluded most of the Negro population from third level education and higher-paying jobs. Lula saw our struggle and helps us fight our cause by obliging schools to have on their curriculum the subject of African history and traditions. The Federal University of Bahia took it further and offers a Master’s degree in African Studies.

It does not take an expert to observe that Brazil has a lot in common with many African countries. After Nigeria, Brazil has the second highest African population in the world! Even though most Brazilians would prefer to ignore that fact, we need to begin to recognize ourselves as being African.

The experience of slavery still lies in our bones and needs redemption. We need healing and to grow in self-esteem, not allowing others to consider us as mere objects, but indeed people of equal rights who have the ability to learn and to think. In neo-liberal times, slavery is disguised by harsh living conditions, low incomes and high unemployment among the Negro population. Statistics reveal countless Negro women struggling and living on little or nothing, while the minority of white men bear the title of ‘Doctor’, relishing their wealth.

Brazil’s Afro-descendants, suffering from much discrimination and little access to school, live on the fringes of society and on the periphery of the big cities. Yet, we continue to conquer a very significant space for ourselves, hoping that the pride of our African cultural background will grow, especially here in the north-east of Brazil.

Visiting Nigeria allowed me to compare Brazilian and West African culture and tradition. They have much in common, especially in religious terms. I was struck by the existing numerous rituals honouring with highest respect the aging population, their wisdom and life experience, their acceptance and simplicity, their authority and power.

Brazil is renowned for Candomblé, the traditional African religion. Listening to some of our African MMM Sisters talking about their family rituals, felt like coming home. For me, as an African Brazilian woman, to be able to experience life on our Mother Continent meant a lot, especially as I journeyed in a reflective way with a group of eight young African women, wanting to dedicate their lives to God in MMM.

There is a strong bond between the African and Latin American population. This was recently pointed out during the second conference on the African Diaspora held in Salvador in July 2006. The purpose was to bring together African descendants who would reflect on issues of justice, religion, cultural heritage etc. Attending the conference, it was beautiful to realize that Salvador has been the cultural cradle for Afro-descendants. It is very much tangible in Salvador’s art – be it music, dance, theatre, crafts, sculpture, painting and others. Tourists from all over the world stop at many street-corners admiring the traditional dance called Capoeira.

Returning from Nigeria to Brazil, I brought with me a renewed energy and enthusiasm. My dream for a people’s freedom was revitalized. It will come true by walking the road with those still held in bondage. Human trafficking continues, especially of beautiful Negro women, falling victim to the system. My dream is that my involvement with women and gender issues will help fight the cause and bring about liberation. The healing charism of MMM is my fountain and the inspiration for my mission here.