

Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia

At the University of Salvador

Salvador, Bahia State, Brazil

April 8, 2010

Mr. Rector, Vice Rector of the University of Salvador;

Government Officials Present;

Distinguished Guests, Faculty, Students, Citizens of Salvador, Bahia;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me enormous pleasure to be here in Brazil once more. Sadly, after so many years, my Portuguese is virtually non-existent, but I have extremely fond memories of this fine nation – a country where I had the good fortune to work when I was a World Bank staff in the mid-1970s. It is good to be back!

I want to thank you, Mr. Rector, in particular, for your kind invitation to speak here today on a topic so dear to the heart of all Africans – the importance of cooperation and mutual support between all people, but especially between and among African nations and those of African descent.

The wisdom of working together, learning together, and looking out for one another's interests is summed up neatly, as wisdom so often is, in a saying that is widespread in our continent: "If relatives help each other"...[we say]... "what evil can hurt them?"

For me, this is a particularly appropriate place to be able to expand on such an important theme for two reasons.

One is personal. While on a World Bank mission to Brazil, I first learned about *arixa* and participated in a brief experience of “*Candoble*” (macumba) – the religion that owes so much to its African spiritual roots.

It was just one of the many times that I saw, again and again in this country, powerful and familiar glimpses of our African culture and tradition. I saw how far African influence has spread and how deeply it had taken root.

The other reason that Brazil is an important place to talk on this theme is the fact that here you have the largest black population of any country outside the African continent. And here in Bahia, you have the highest concentration of those of African descent, with nearly three quarters of those living here related by blood to the continent of Africa.

This year is of great significance to Africa and to all those of African descent whose forefathers and mothers were forced to leave the land of their nativity and to bear the burden of servitude in the development of other lands while their own were balkanized and exploited.

This year, 2010, marks the golden jubilee of the independence of many African nations. It marks 50 years since Benin and Togo, Burkina Faso and Cameroon, Chad and Somalia, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal – all these countries now firmly on the path of determining their own future – firmly took hold in gaining their rightful place as free nations in a continent of free nations.

My own country, Liberia, is proud to have played a role as one of only three independent African countries not colonized, as we advocated and promoted the independence of our continent.

Since then, Africa has faced many difficulties but it is also determined to find ways to overcome them, not least of which is working ever more closely together for a common cause and common good for our continent.

And this determination does not, indeed it cannot, stop at the shores of our continent.

The African Union has made this explicit by recognizing that the Diaspora population living around the globe should be seen as the sixth region of Africa – by recognizing that we should look beyond geographical boundaries to find common cause in our shared history, our shared culture, and our shared aspirations for the future.

This is the best of reasons, and the best of times, to strengthen further the ties between the continent of Africa and the worldwide Diaspora – the ties of culture and tradition, education and science, the potential ties of technology, finance and economy.

These ties should enable us to support communities facing challenges in the countries where they live, so that they may, in turn, take part in the growth and

development of Africa. Such mutual interest and cooperation must be at the heart of a better future for us all.

Indeed, our two countries, Brazil and Liberia, could not make the importance of this relationship more plain.

It is tragic, but true, that to a great extent what makes Brazil the country it is today is rooted in the fact that in a period of little more than 70 years, over 2 million proud and free Africans were brought to these shores, with an unknown number succumbing to the perils of the journey.

Liberia, too, would not be the country it is today were it not for the legacy of the reversal of that evil trade in human misery, founded as it were as a symbol of freedom and new beginnings for those who had cast off the shackles of bondage.

Today Brazil is a force in the global economy, a force in global politics because of its unique history, geography, and diversity of cultures.

In science, technology, commerce and sports, this exceptional achievement gives testimony to the richness of your history, the strength of your diversity, and distinct national character.

Just as brittle iron can be forged into unbreakable steel by the addition of new elements, so are nations immeasurably strengthened by the contribution that different cultures can make.

The richness of your African culture, reflected in arts and culture, is a major tourist attraction, bringing in visitors from all corners of the planet. Today, we do not only hear but feel the rhythm of Africa in the Brazilian Samba music. Capoeira is practiced around the planet, and Brazilians of African descent are known worldwide – Pele and Ronaldinho for their sporting skills, of course; but in literature, Machado de Assis, and in music, Wilson Moreira and Gilberto Gil, for example.

Even more significantly, black Brazilians are also asserting themselves in areas where previously they may not have had significant roles, with Benedita da Silva (first female Senator of Brazil) showing the way not only for women to succeed in politics, but for black women at that.

So just as Brazil is building a bright future from the legacy that it received from history, Liberia is on the path to doing the same.

After such bright hopes at the founding of our nation, tragically the clash of cultures between the returning freed slaves and the indigenous Africans caused strife and discord.

The seeds of conflict were sown, and our recent history is a stark reminder, if one were needed, of the importance of inclusion, of equality in society, of equal opportunity and social justice and under the law, of mutual respect and cooperation.

These are not merely fine words or noble sentiments. They are, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Today, we remain on a path of national reconciliation, going beyond ethnicity to a nation that recognizes the vast contribution made by all segments of Liberian society, a long-delayed bonding of the indigenous Africans who never made the Trans-Atlantic Crossing and our citizens who are descended from those who did.

Our country continues to be a haven for all men and women of color.

Today, the definition of African has to be broad, from the Berbers in the North, to the Zulus in the South, from the Nubians in the East, to the Yorubas of the West.

We are one people, bonded together by a common goal of improving the lives of all races on the planet through peaceful coexistence, political and economic cooperation. The Diaspora Africans are an important segment in that family.

It is in recognition of that fact that the Government of Liberia is calling upon all Africans everywhere to bring their talent, their skills, and their expertise to join us in our Liberia odyssey.

We want you to be part of the rebirth of the Liberian nation, to pursue the vision of our forebears, in creating a nation that will be a haven for all people of African descent.

It is upon this foundation that our National Legislature is considering the passing of a Bill that would recognize the dual citizen rights of all citizens of African descent who are so eligible. We would like to see citizens of Bahia, and, indeed, all blacks in the Diaspora, as citizens of the Republic of Liberia.

We see Africans everywhere as part of the same family, and we want everyone to know that the African family will always have a spiritual home in our country, Liberia.

Citizens of Bahia, Citizens of Brazil:

May the winds of change and success continue to lift you to the deserved position of a world power. May your indomitable spirit reach out and inspire Africans everywhere. May the bonds of our history, culture, and tradition remain strong as we forge towards a destiny that only we can determine.

Thank you.