

Summer Research Proposal

Colonial Portuguese Land Grants in Brazil: Long-term Effects on Inequality and Economic Development

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1. Background

Brazil has one of the highest levels of land inequality in the world, with “[a]n estimated 1% of the population own[ing] 45% of all land” (USAID, 2016). However, this is not a recent issue as even in the 1920 census, average land inequality per municipality was already high (Wigton-Jones, 2020). The goal of this project is to study the historical colonial causes of land inequality in Brazil, by exploiting variation in the request of land grants called *sesmarias*.

The *sesmarias* were the first legal method for obtaining land in colonial Brazil. They have their origin in a medieval Portuguese law established in 1375 that allowed the grant of small plots of land to be used and developed (Diégues Júnior, 1959, p. 16). In Brazil, the first *sesmaria* was granted in 1530, less than thirty years after the beginning of the colonial period (Diégues Júnior, 1959, p. 16). Brazilian *sesmarias*, in contrast to its original use in Portugal, were often large to ensure proper colonization and allow the land to be developed at a low cost for the Portuguese Crown.

Petitioners would write a letter to the governor and provide the reason for the request and proof of the financial abilities to use the land correctly (Smith, 1944). In order to request a land grant the petitioner was required to prove that he had the financial means to develop and use the land requested. As a result, it often favored wealthy settlers which at the time was the Portuguese aristocracy (Lobb, 1976).

The granting of *sesmarias* ended in 1822, briefly before Brazil’s independence. Early work argued it led to the development of the “economic aristocracy of the colonial society” and the “principal cause of the *latifundio*” in colonial Brazil (Lima, 2002, p. 36; Costa Porto, 1979, p. 48). Andrade (1980, p. 18) argues that even in the 1980s “the system of ownership and use of land is a continuation of the colonial system, with the *sesmaria* becoming *latifundia* property”.

2. Research Question

Given the historical importance of the *sesmarias* land grants in colonial Brazil in establishing the basis of land usage in Brazil and its long duration of 300 years, this project aims to establish a novel georeferenced database of Portuguese colonial land grants in Brazil and use it to identify the historical causes of land inequality and economic development in Brazil. I propose that are four main channels in which the *sesmarias* could have long-term effects:

1. Land inequality: only those with sufficient financial conditions were granted *sesmarias*, and were often granted vast plots of land.
2. Income and political inequality: acquiring land was the easiest way to accumulate wealth in colonial Brazil. Limiting the number of people with access to land would lead to wealth accumulation by the few.¹
3. Demographic Differences: *sesmarias* often required African slaves, which could skew the demographics of a location.²

¹“If the land was concentrated by a few owners, the *latifundio* is created and it limits the number of settlers and the possibility of them entering the social class of *senhores de engenho* or farmers” (Bandecchi, 1963, p. 40)

²“Under the auspices of King Philip I (1581-1598), the *sesmaria* was widely applied in the northeast and central coast regions of Brazil where a system involving large properties and slave labor was considered the only way to make a profit in the new land, whether by means of cultivation or cattle ranching” (Lobb, 1976).

4. Economic Development: often the lands granted were developed by the owners, leading to the early economic development of an area.

3. Significance

Given the prominence of *sesmarias* in Brazil and the variation on why the land was granted, this project would contribute to the understanding of the role of colonial land assignment in long-term development. The literature describes the long-term negative effects of colonial assignment of land to different economic activities in Africa and South America (Dell, 2010; Lowes et al., 2020). However, there exists evidence that not all land regimes led to negative effects and instead led to economic development (Banerjee et al., 2005; Dell and Olken, 2019).

This paper also contributes to the understanding of the historical economic development of Brazil by trying to explain the diverging paths in development in each region. The paper the most similar to this project is Wigton-Jones (2020), which studies the effects of land inequality in the 1920 census and how it is persisted in inequality today. The literature has analyzed how different economic cycles and how immigration has led to differential educational outcomes in Brazil (Musacchio et al., 2014; Rocha et al., 2017). Related literature has also analyzed the effect of the Spanish-Portuguese borders in South America, the role of sugarcane, and gold mining in Brazil (Laudares et al., 2022; Naritomi et al., 2012).

4. Data Collection

Most of the current work in the project would require work in cooperation with researchers in Brazil. Part of the project requires the transcription of the original manuscripts into text documents. Once the text is available, then some information such as the date of the request, to whom the petition was asked, the justification for the use of the land, geographical markers, total area, the conditions to which the land was to be granted, and characteristics of the person requesting the land are extracted.³

Given the geographical information extracted, part of the project is to georeference the original location of the *sesmaria*. This is possible by using geographical markers (such as proximity to a river or a city) to get an estimate of the original location of the land grant. Once each *sesmaria* is georeferenced and has the necessary information about it I would then be able to connect each point to Brazilian censuses from 1872-2010 and other sources of historical data.

³The current database, called the *Sesmarias of the Luso-Portuguese Empire*, is available at <http://plataformasilb.cchla.ufrn.br/>.

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