

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

Vinicius Okada da Silva

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

# Motivation

- ▶ Inequality, in both land and income, is high in Brazil.
  - ▶ “Brazil has one of the highest levels of inequality of land distribution in the world. Inadequate access to land by the poor and insecure land tenure are factors behind rural poverty violence, human rights abuses, and exploitation of rural workers in conditions of servitude” ([USAID, 2016](#))
  - ▶ “An estimated 1% of the population owns 45% of all land in Brazil. Nearly five million families are landless.” ([USAID, 2016](#))
- ▶ How much of it can be traced to colonial institutions?
  - ▶ Goal of this research would analyze the effects of the Portuguese *sesmarias* land grants on long-term inequality in Brazil.

## History/Background

- ▶ Originally a medieval Portuguese Law used to grant lands to be used and developed ([Diégues Júnior, 1959](#), p. 16)
- ▶ First mention of it in Brazil was in 1530, and often favored the Portuguese aristocracy ([Diégues Júnior, 1959](#), p. 16; [Lobb, 1976](#))
  - ▶ Often very large with early ones up to 2,000  $km^2$  ([Nozoe, 2006](#)).
  - ▶ Early studies argued it led to the development of the “economic aristocracy of the colonial society” and the “principal cause of the *latifundio*” in Brazil ([Lima, 2002](#), p. 36; [Costa Porto, 1979](#), p. 48).
  - ▶ “Today the system of ownership and use of land is a continuation of the colonial system, with the *sesmaria* becoming *latifundia* property” ([Andrade, 1980](#), p. 18).

## History/Background

- ▶ Officially stopped being granted in 1822 shortly before Brazil's independence ([Silva et al., 2019](#)).
- ▶ Land reform in Brazil came under a new regime in 1850 with the *Lei das Terras* ([Costa Porto, 1979](#), p. 148)
  - ▶ *Sesmeiros* who had owned land and had developed it would be able to retain their lands, however, if not taken care of they would be retaken by the government.
  - ▶ However, the land reform did not mean the end of the local political power of land owners ([Motta, 1998](#)).

# Research Question

- ▶ What are the long-term economic effects of the *sesmarias* land grants in Brazil?
  - ▶ Land inequality  $\Rightarrow$  only those with sufficient financial conditions were granted *sesmarias*, and were often granted vast plots of land.
  - ▶ Income inequality  $\Rightarrow$  land was associated with wealth, fewer people with land lead to wealth accumulation by the few.
  - ▶ Demographic Differences  $\Rightarrow$  *Sesmarias* often required African slaves, which could skew the demographics of a location.
  - ▶ Economic Development  $\Rightarrow$  often the lands granted were developed by the owners, leading to the early economic development of an area.
  - ▶ Political corruption: Dominance by aristocrats often hampered efforts for local reform and investment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "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)

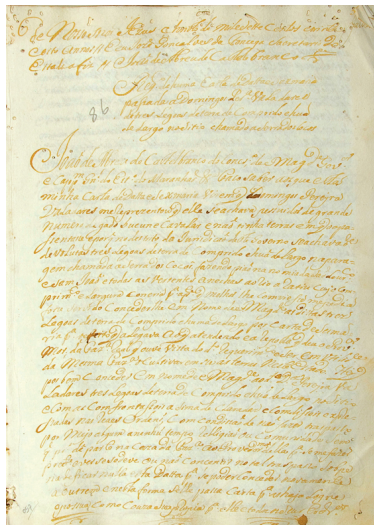
# Literature Review

- ▶ Role of colonization and land tenure in present outcomes:
  - ▶ Brazil: [Naritomi et al., 2012](#); [Musacchio et al., 2014](#); [Wigton-Jones, 2020](#); [Laudares et al., 2022](#)
  - ▶ India: [Banerjee et al., 2005](#)
  - ▶ Africa: [Lowes et al., 2020](#)

# Data

- ▶ Brazilian Censuses (1872-2010)
  - ▶ Possibility of exploring other demographic data from other sources (eg. [Counting Colonial Populations](#))
- ▶ Brazilian Agricultural Censuses (First one in 1920 (?)).
- ▶ Location of *sesmarias* from [Sesmarias of the Luso-Brazilian Empire Database](#).

# Example of Document



PA 0001  
Carta de concessão a Domingos Pereira Valadares - 19/06/1738

Registro de uma carta de data e sesmaria passada a Domingos Pereira Valadares de 3 léguas de terra de comprimento e uma de largura, no sítio chamado a Serra dos Cocos.

João de Abreu Castelo Branco, do Conselho de Sua Magestade, governador e capitão-general do estado do Maranhão, etc. Faço saber, aos que esta minha carta de data e sesmaria virem, que Domingos Pereira Valadares me representou que ele se achava possuidor de grande número de gado vacum e cavalar, e não tinha terras em que apascentasse, e porque no distrito da jurisdição deste governo se achavam devolutas 3 léguas de terra de comprido e uma de largo, na paragem chamada a Serra dos Cocos, fazendo pólo na nomeada São Lourenço e São João, e todas as vertientes anexas ao Rio Araticú, cujo comprimento e largura correria para a parte que melhor lhe conviesse, me pediu fosse servido conceder-lhe, em nome de Sua Magestade, as ditas 3 léguas de terra de comprido e uma de largo, por carta de sesmaria, para efeito que alegava; ao que atendendo, e a resposta que deu o provedor-mor da Fazenda Real, que houve vista do dito requerimento, e ser em utilidade da mesma Fazenda o cultivarem-se as terras neste estado. Hei, por bem, conceder, em nome de Sua Magestade, ao dito Domingos Pereira Valadares, 3 léguas de terra de comprido e uma de largo, no sítio e com as confrontações acima declaradas e condições expressadas nas Reais Ordens, com condição de não fazer trespassse, por meio algum, em nenhum tempo, religião ou comunidade, sem que primeiro dê parte na Casa da Fazenda ao provedor-mor dela, para se me fazer presente e ver se se deve ou não consentir no tal trespassse, sob pena de ficar nula esta data para se poder conceder novamente a outrem. E, nesta forma, se lhe passa carta para as suas hajas, loges e possua como coisa sua própria, para ele e todos os seus herdeiros, ascendentes e descendentes, sem pensão, nem tributo algum mais que o dizimo a Deus, Nosso Senhor, dos frutos que nelas tiver; a qual concessão lhe faço não prejudicando a terceiro nem a Sua Magestade, se no dito sítio quiser mandar fundar alguma vila, reservando os paus Reais que nelas houver para embarcações, com declaração que mandará confirmar esta data por Sua Magestade dentro de 3 anos primeiros seguintes, e cultivará as ditas terras de maneira que dê fruto, e dará caminhos públicos e particulares onde forem necessários para pontes, fontes, portos e pedreiras; e se demarcará, ao tempo da posse, por rumo de corda e braças craveiras, como é estilo e o dito senhor ordena. E, outrossim, não sucederão nelas religião ou pessoas eclesásticas por nenhum título; e, acontecendo, possuí-las será com o encargo de pagar delas dizimos a Deus como se fossem possuídas por seculares; e, faltando a qualquer destas cláusulas, se houver por devolutas e se dário a quem das denunciarem. Pelo que mando ao provedor-mor da Fazenda Real, e mais ministros e pessoas a que tocar, que, na forma referida, deixem ter e possuir ao dito Domingos Pereira Valadares as ditas terras, para ele e todos os seus herdeiros, ascendentes e descendentes, como coisa sua própria. Cumpram e guardem esta carta de data e sesmaria tão inteiramente como nela se contém, a qual lhe mandei passar por mim assinada e selada com o sinete de minhas armas, que se registrará onde tocar e se passou por duas vias. Dada na cidade de São Luís do Maranhão, aos 19 dias do mês de junho do ano do nascimento de Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo de 1738. E eu, José Gonçalves da Fonseca, secretário do estado, a fiz // João de Abreu Castelo Branco//.



## Identification/Possible Sources of Variation

Unsure exactly what's the best way for identification. Below are some of the variation that can be obtained from the data:

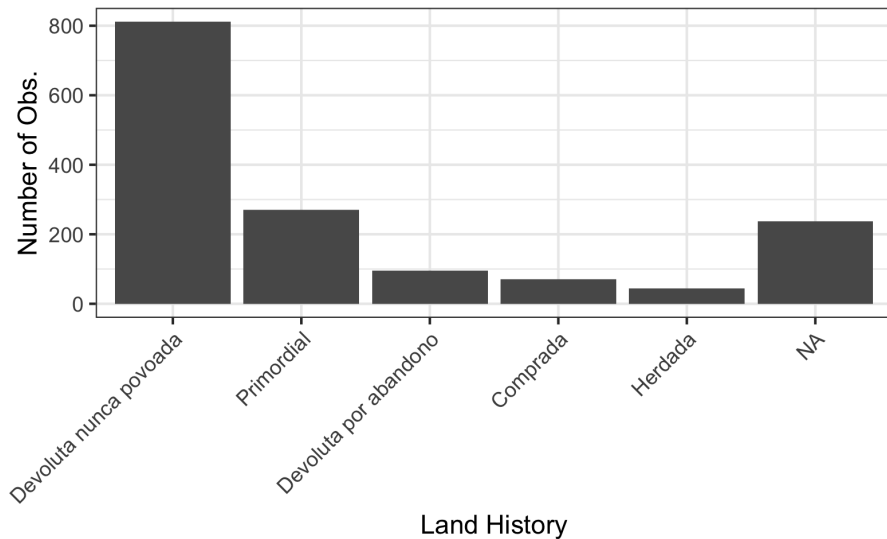
- ▶ Geographical Variation.
- ▶ Time Variation.
- ▶ Type of Settler to whom it was granted.
- ▶ What purpose was the land requested (cattle, sugar plantation/factory, etc.).

## Work to be Done

- ▶ Transcription of Manuscripts and information extraction are being done in Brazil.
  - ▶ Four states in the Northeast will be finished by March.
  - ▶ My state of **Para** (and **Minas Gerais**) has all the transcriptions  $\Rightarrow$  only needed to extract the information.
    - ▶ Machine Learning techniques to extract the information (?)
- ▶ Georeferencing would be most of the work required.
  - ▶ By myself, try creating a group, or looking for professional help?

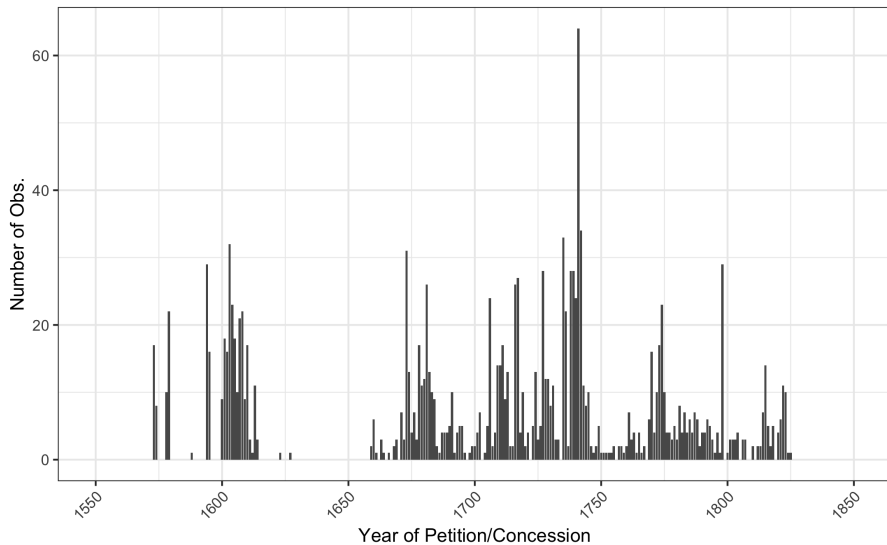
# Basic Descriptive Statistics

## Land History



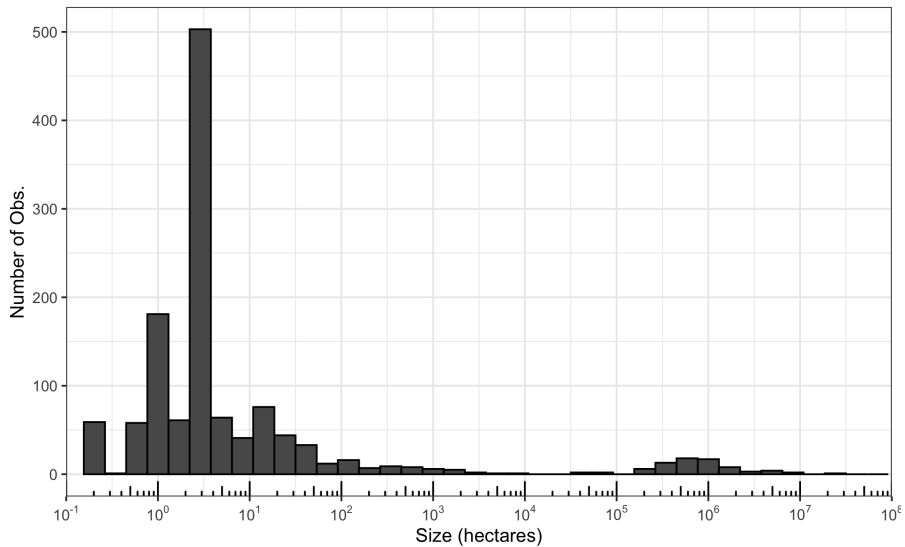
# Basic Descriptive Statistics

Year Dist.



# Basic Descriptive Statistics

Size Dist.



## Other Angles

- ▶ Possible to focus only where we would expect them to have an effect and spend time transcribing/focusing on them (eg. Northeast).
  - ▶ “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)
  - ▶ Sugarcane plantations required extensive amounts of slave labor (Silva et al., 2019; Baer, 2014, p. 16).
  - ▶ “Much of the windfall profits of the sugar cycle had been appropriated by Portuguese and foreign intermediaries, whereas a large part of the profits accruing to the *fazenda* and *engenho* owners were spent on imported consumer goods rather than technical and infrastructural improvements” (Baer, 2014, p. 16)

## Other Relevant (?) Information to Add


- ▶ Sesmarias caused economic uncertainty in colonial times as often poor people would settle, develop land, and then lose the right of the land because a richer person would claim it ([Costa Porto, 1979](#), p. 142).

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