Competing Narratives of Agricultural Development and Indigenous Land in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil

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Abstract:

In Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, competing narratives of agricultural development shape both soy agribusiness policy and Indigenous land dispossession. Drawing on the Narrative Policy Framework, it analyzes how dominant agribusiness narratives construct the Cerrado as an underutilized space requiring scientific intervention, thereby legitimizing large-scale soybean expansion. Similarly, it analyzes how Guarani-Kaiowá counter-narratives reframe land as *tekoha*, asserting *retomadas* as acts of survival and self-demarcation in response to prolonged state failure. Through a qualitative analysis of primary sources including agribusiness policy documents, institutional publications, and Guarani-Kaiowá political documents, this paper compares narratives across the elements of setting,

characters, plot, and morals. The findings demonstrate how narrative power shapes land-use policy and constrains Indigenous food sovereignty and land rights.

I. Introduction

Over the past five decades, Mato Grosso do Sul (MS) has become a major hub of soybean cultivation in Brazil, producing roughly 9% of the country's total soy output (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service 2025). Much of the state lies within the Cerrado biome, whose conversion into arable land for soy is widely celebrated as a national development success (The Economist 2010). Yet this narrative of development conceals profound social and ecological costs, particularly for Indigenous communities whose territories have been enclosed, fragmented, or erased in the process. Among the most affected are the Guarani-Kaiowá, one of the largest Indigenous groups in Brazil, with approximately 45,000 people living in MS (Ioris 2020, 6).

This paper approaches soy agribusiness policy not simply as an economic or technical project, but as a narrative-driven political process. In MS, dominant narratives of agricultural modernization, food security, and scientific progress have legitimized territorial dispossession while framing its consequences as unavoidable trade-offs. At the same time, Guarani-Kaiowá communities have mobilized counter-narratives that challenge these claims by reframing land as *tekoha*—territory as inseparable from collective identity, relational co-being, and spiritual obligations (Ioris 2020a, 392) —and by advancing the Indigenous retaking of land (*retomadas*).

This central question guiding this analysis asks: How have dominant narratives of agricultural development legitimized soy agribusiness policy in MS, and how have Guarani-Kaiowá communities mobilized counter-narratives to contest land dispossession and its associated harms? It argues that agribusiness narratives, rooted in Green Revolution ideology and institutionalized through agencies such as Embrapa, present productivity, exports, and scientific expertise as solutions to a supposed "rural problem." On the other hand, Guarani-Kaiowá narratives contest this legitimacy by re-framing land as tekoha and mobilizing retomadas as an essential tool for their survival.

The sections proceed as follows. Section II outlines the analytical framework. Section III traces the expansion of soybean farming in MS and its impacts on Guarani-Kaiowá land and livelihoods. Section IV presents a qualitative narrative analysis of agribusiness and Indigenous discourse. The conclusion reflects on the implications of these competing narratives for food policy, sovereignty, and agricultural development in Brazil.

II. Analytical Framework

In MS, dominant narratives of agricultural development have legitimized agribusiness land use, while Guarani-Kaiowá communities have mobilized counter-narratives to contest land dispossession and associated harms. This dynamic is analyzed through Jones et al.'s (2022) Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), which explains how narratives shape policy by defining problems, assigning responsibility, and legitimizing solutions.

Within the NPF, narratives are defined as meaning-making tools used to influence policy outcomes, shaped not only by material conditions but by actors' interpretations and communications (Jones et al. 2022, 1-12). Policy narratives are analyzed through four core elements: setting (relevant context), characters (victims, villains, heroes), plot (causal story linking characters), and moral (policy solution or call to action) (Jones et al. 2022, 3). Dominant actors often deploy narratives strategically to resonate with audience beliefs, normalizing structural inequalities and framing land dispossession or environmental harm as technical necessities or inevitable trade-offs (Crow and Jones 2018, 223).

A qualitative analysis of multiple primary sources is used to examine how narratives of land use and development are constructed and contested. Before this analysis, this paper provides a brief historical overview of soybean expansion in MS and its implications for Guarani-Kaiowá land tenure and livelihoods.

III. History of Soybean Farming in MS

Prior to the 1930s, Brazil's population was heavily concentrated along its coastal regions. This was largely because the climate was well suited for sugar and coffee cultivation and because coastal areas had easier access to ports for trade. This spatial imbalance began to shift with the launch of the "March to the West" under President Getulio Vargas to promote inland settlement. The goal of this campaign was to encourage movement to the inland regions and to make use of the land the state viewed as underutilized (Ferreira and Da Silva 2025, 2; Nehring 2016, 206-217). The construction of Brasilia and the relocation of the capital from

Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s further encouraged movement and development to Brazil's interior (Nehring 2016, 208).

At the same time, Brazil began efforts to modernize its agricultural sector. The Abbink Mission, started in 1948, was an alliance between the United States in Brazil to finance and industrialize Brazil's economy after World War II. The mission operated under the presumption that "development and modernization of agriculture would go a long way to making Brazil Prosperous" (Nehring 2022, 3). In 1953, official development assistance from the U.S. to Brazil was outlined in an institutional agreement. These early initiatives relied heavily on U.S. scientific expertise to assess the viability of developing the Cerrado, marking the beginning of the Green Revolution in Brazil. The Brazilian Green Revolution was characterized by scientific collaboration, academic formation, and intergovernmental negotiations between Brazil and the U.S. (Rocha et al. 2022, 223).

Following the 1964 military coup, the government furthered the movement of the Green Revolution by prioritizing research focused on agricultural development to solve the "rural problem." The military government saw rural areas as "underdeveloped" due to their lack of proper economic policy, infrastructure, and technology (Nehring 2022, 2). Consequently, agricultural research became the forefront of the Green Revolution. The government's strategy focused on high-yield crops, particularly soybeans, as a pathway to profitability and modernization. This led to the creation of the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), which began in 1973. Embrapa played a critical role in modernizing Brazil's agriculture, especially soybean production, eventually helping Brazil surpass the U.S. as the world's largest producer and exporter of soybeans (Nehring 2022, 2).

Soybean farming programs began in 1975, driven by the rising demand for soy and a decline in cattle farming (Rocha et al. 2022, 223). Expansion continued throughout the late 1970s and 80s, supported by both public and private investments, low land prices, and mechanized farming practices (Rocha et al. 2022, 224). National policies reliant on investment, financing, and research partnerships propelled agronomic development in the Cerrado, making it one of Latin America's main agrarian frontiers (Rocha et al. 2022, 225). While these innovations are widely celebrated as major successes, what is not commonly acknowledged is that they simultaneously fueled land dispossession, deepened food insecurity, and caused ecological degradation for Indigenous communities in regions such as MS.

The crisis facing the Guarani-Kaiowá people in MS is rooted in a long history of settler colonial violence, territorial dispossession, and agrarian expansion. As a result of this long history of harm, the Guarani-Kaiowá are faced with disproportionate rates of substance abuse issues, suicides, food insecurity, exploitation of manual labor and unwarranted murders and arrests over land disputes (Survival International 2010). Proximity to large-scale monocultures has also exposed communities to chronic pesticide contamination. Human Rights Watch documented multiple cases of acute poisoning from aerial and ground spraying, with some families resorting to improvised remedies due to limited access to healthcare facilities (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Since the inception of the "March to the West" movement, the influx of migration from other parts of Brazil has intensified the landgrabbing and displacement of Guarani-Kaiowá. During his presidency, Vargas created the National Agricultural Colony of Dourados (CAND), which was a large colonization

project in MS. The project involved demarcating land for new settlers; however, most of this land was historically inhabited by Guarani-Kaiowá (also known as tehkoha) (Ioris 2020, 7-8). Tekohas can be defined as ancestral family land and sites of collective memory for the Guarani-Kaiowá. The government, facilitated by the Indian Protection Service (SPI), attempted to move the Guarani-Kaiowá off these lands and onto reservations. If they refused, SPI reserved the right to remove them by force, often resorting to torture and murder (Ioris 2020a, 386). The establishment of the CAND institutionalized the displacement of the Guarani-Kaiowá communities in favor of agricultural expansion and reinforced an "agro-neoliberal" growth model premised on the erasure of indigenous communities (Ioris 2020, 8). As Ioris (2020, 9) notes, "the regional economy was built and continues to expand because of the appropriation of indigenous land and tacit subjugation of the original inhabitants."

Since then, Guarani-Kaiowá territory has become increasingly reconfigured through agricultural and commercial development. Despite limited advances in land recognition, such as Article 231—enacted in the 1988 Constitution—which mandates land demarcation for Indigenous peoples, most demarcated Indigenous territories remain without definitive possession. Legal challenges initiated by landowners can delay implementation for years and render actual Indigenous occupation of recognized land minimal. At the same time, deforestation and environmental degradation have continued, particularly on lands still classified as private property (Ferreira and Da Silva 2025, 15). Even when lands are reclaimed, years of intensive use, burning, and chemical dependency leave the land depleted.

Despite ongoing violence and dispossession, the Guarani-Kaiowá's

contemporary condition reflects a long and deliberate process of political mobilization that has sustained the core foundations of Guarani-Kaiowá social and territorial life. Since the late 1970s, Guarani-Kaiowá communities have drawn on elements of labor and union movements to build durable alliances across territories, giving rise to collective political institutions such as the Aty Guasu (Great Assembly) (Ioris 2020a, 387). These assemblies function as central spaces for collective decision-making and coordination, particularly in their fight for land recovery .

Guarani-Kaiowá resistance is grounded in an understanding of identity that ties existence to land, captured in the principle that one must fight to continue to exist (Ioris 2020a, 397). This worldview is most clearly enacted through retomadas—autonomous, collectively organized land reoccupations that reclaim tekohas. Retomadas are enacted from sustained community deliberation, spiritual preparation, and collective resolve, and they directly confront an agribusiness development model that depends on the continued appropriation of Indigenous land. In this sense, the conflict is not simply legal or economic but ontological: while agribusiness treats land as an object of exchange, Guarani-Kaiowá political action asserts land as a condition of existence, sustaining Indigenous identity and agency in the face of continued attempts at erasure (Ioris 2020, 296).

Section IV. Competing Narratives of Agricultural Development and Land Use

For the institutional agribusiness narrative, the analysis draws on Embrapa institutional histories and policy materials, public statements by Embrapa

leadership, the Embrapa report *A Successful Case of Institutional Innovation*, and *The Economist*'s "The Miracle of the Cerrado." For the Guarani-Kaiowá counter-narratives, the analysis examines Indigenous political documents and advocacy materials, including the *Documento Final da Aty Guasu 2019*, letters from the Grande Conselho da Aty Guasu, statements published by APIB, and news reports from *Brasil de Fato* documenting retomadas, land conflict, and Indigenous political claims.

Institutional Agribusiness Narrative

Setting: The Cerrado as Underutilized

Agricultural discourse consistently framed the Cerrado as a space of ecological deficiency and economic underperformance prior to scientific intervention. Multiple accounts have characterized the Cerrado soil as "poor" and "acidic" and that farming in Brazil's interior posed an inherent challenge requiring external expertise and technological correction (IFRPI 2018; The Economist 2010). As former Embrapa president Maurício Antônio Lopes explained, Brazil's agricultural transformation required "a model of agriculture heavily based in science, a lot of investment in science and knowledge, in capacity building" (IFRPI 2018, at 0:58). The *Economist* reflected a similar sentiment, describing these regions of Brazil as remote, "poverty-stricken parts of Brazil's backlands" whose transformation through agribusiness is described as "nothing short of miraculous" (The Economist 2010). In these accounts, the Cerrado appears not as inhabited Indigenous territory, but as untapped potential for agricultural and economic growth.

Characters: Agribusiness and Embrapa as Heroes of Modernization

Within this narrative, Embrapa and allied agribusiness actors are cast as heroic agents of national transformation. Embrapa is repeatedly described as the primary driver of Brazil's agricultural success. As described in *Economist*, "if you want the primary reason [for Brazil's agricultural success] in three words, they are Embrapa, Embrapa, Embrapa" (The Economist 2010).

Embrapa leaders explicitly frame their work as a civilizational achievement. According to Lopes, Embrapa transformation of the Cerrado enabled Brazil to become both "a food secure country" and a global exporter (IFRPI 2018, at 2:11). Another former Embrapa president, Eliseu Alves, similarly characterizes the institution as "a successful case of institutional innovation," emphasizing its role in the "redemption of the Cerrado for modern agriculture." (Alves 2010, 70).

In contrast, alternative land users are implicitly devalued. Smallholders and non-modern forms of agriculture are described as "inefficient hobby farms," while large-scale operations are praised for being "vastly more productive" (The Economist 2010). Indigenous communities are mostly absent as narrative subjects, appearing neither as legitimate land managers nor as political actors within this storyline.

Plot: Scientific Innovation as the to Prosperity

The causal plot linking problems to solutions is centered on scientific and technological innovation. Agribusiness narratives describe a sequence in which state-backed research, large-scale credit, and technological packages transform unproductive land into a global breadbasket. Federal programs "financed the recovery of land and introduction of modern agriculture," stimulating migration of

experienced farmers and researchers who “opened the land, creating the agriculture that now characterizes the region” (Memoria Embrapa). In this narrative, the transformation of the Cerrado was seen as linear and inevitable. Science produces productivity; productivity produces exports; exports produce national prosperity.

Morals: Large-Scale Soy Agribusiness as Necessary for Brazilian Prosperity

The morals that shape the agribusiness narrative *are* that intensive, export-oriented agriculture was both necessary and desirable. Embrapa frames this outcome as a public good, emphasizing that Brazil now produces food “for consumption of the Brazilian market as well as for export of surpluses” and could reach “350 million tonnes of food” using existing technologies (Memoria Embrapa).

Sustainability discourse is incorporated not as a challenge to agribusiness, but as its justification. Embrapa leaders argue that intensified production reduces pressure on protected lands and aligns Brazil with global development agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (IFRPI 2018, at 2:33). Through this lens, commercial soy production becomes not only economically rational but morally defensible. This narrative normalizes land appropriation by presenting displacement and ecological degradation as unfortunate but necessary trade-offs of progress. By emphasizing productivity, scientific expertise, and national achievement, agribusiness narratives encourage policies that consolidate land under large-scale soy production while legitimizing Indigenous dispossession and alternative visions of development.

The Guarani-Kaiowá Counter-Narratives

Setting: Confinement, Violence, and Legal Abandonment of the Guarani-Kaiowá

Guarani-Kaiowá narratives situate MS not as an empty or underutilized frontier, but as a space of dispossession and ongoing rights violations. The 2019 Aty Guasu Final Document describes the region as exhibiting "the worst situation regarding the violation of indigenous rights in all of Brazil," with some of the "the worst rates of demarcation of traditional lands and the worst rates of access to fundamental rights" (Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil, 2019).

This setting is marked by prolonged legal insecurity. Multiple documents emphasize that many Guarani-Kaiowá territories have already been recognized and delimited yet remain undemarcated due to state inaction. In Panambi-Lagoa Rica, for example, demarcation has been stalled since 2011, leaving communities exposed to repeated attacks by landowners and armed groups (Moncau 2024).

Characters: Guarani-Kaiowá as Victims of State Violence and Active Political Agents

Within this narrative, Guarani-Kaiowá communities are simultaneously cast as victims of state violence and as active political agents. Aty Guasu documents repeatedly invoke the memory of "the spilled blood of our warriors," framing contemporary struggle as part of a centuries-long resistance to dispossession and genocide (Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil, 2019). However, Guarani-Kaiowá leaders emphasize their endurance, stating: "we are willing to die in the fight for the liberation of all our ancestral territories… nor take a single step back" (The Grand Council of Aty Guasu of the Guarani and Kaiowa people, 2016).

They explicitly link their suffering to identifiable antagonists. Large

landowners, ruralist politicians, and complicit state institutions are named villains who sustain dispossession through violence and legal obstruction. In Panambi-Lagoa Rica, farmers mobilized armed convoys against Guarani-Kaiowá families during a retaking, while a federal deputy publicly accused the "supposed Indigenous people" of "causing terror" (Moncau 2024). Other state actors such as the President, the Ministry of Justice, and FUNAI officials are similarly implicated for blocking demarcation reports and prioritizing agribusiness interests (The Grand Council of Aty Guasu of the Guarani and Kaiowa people, 2016).

Plot: Retomadas as Survival

Guarani-Kaiowá narratives reject the characterization of retomadas as invasions. Instead, retomadas are presented as a response to prolonged state failure and as a form of self-demarcation necessary to guarantee life itself (Moncau 2024). Throughout these documents, retaking land is repeatedly linked to survival, autonomy, and the recovery of social reproduction. "We are occupying land because we need to retake what has been destroyed," explains Erileide Domingues. "We are not invaders, we are retakers: we take back what is ours… to recover our seeds, to keep our language, our culture: our way of life (Moncau 2024). Retaking land is "also a way of healing," restoring freedom after decades of forced confinement.

Moral: Retomadas,

The moral claim advanced by Guarani-Kaiowá narratives is unequivocal: demarcation is not a concession, but a constitutional and existential necessity. Land is not divisible into productive units or negotiable percentages. "For us these 14

farms do not exist," states the Guarani Open Letter. "All this land is part of the same tekoha… Indigenous land has always been Indigenous land (Guarani of Yvy Katu and Aty Guasu Council of the Kaiowá, 2013).

This moral framing rejects compromise models proposed by state and agribusiness actors, including reduced reserves or modular land allocations. Instead, tekoha is asserted as the minimum condition for cultural survival, food sovereignty, and political autonomy.

Overall, this analysis shows that conflict over land in MS is not only material but narrative. Agribusiness discourse constructs the Cerrado as an underutilized space rescued by science, casting Embrapa and large-scale producers as heroic agents of national progress. This narrative supplies the moral logic through which land concentration, displacement, and ecological degradation are rendered acceptable, or even necessary, within agricultural policy. In contrast, Guarani-Kaiowá narratives reverse this framing by situating land conflict within histories of violence, legal abandonment, and survival, and by asserting retomadas as legitimate acts of self-demarcation. A comparison of these narratives reveals how policy outcomes are shaped not only by institutions and incentives, but by whose stories are recognized as credible, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, and whose visions of land and food systems are allowed to define Brazil's agricultural future.

V. Conclusion

This analysis has shown that soy agribusiness policy in MS is sustained not

only through economic incentives and state institutions, but through powerful narratives that legitimize land use and development. Using the NPF, the analysis demonstrates how dominant agribusiness narratives, rooted in Green Revolution ideology and institutionalized through agencies such as Embrapa, frame the transformation of the Cerrado as a technical and necessary response to a constructed "rural problem." At the same time, Guarani-Kaiowá communities mobilize counter-narratives that re-politicize land use by asserting tekoha as the basis of collective existence and by advancing retomadas as acts of survival, justice, and sovereignty.

These findings have direct implications for contemporary land demarcation and food policy debates in Brazil. As long as agribusiness narratives continue to frame large-scale soy production as synonymous with national food security and sustainable development, Indigenous land claims risk remaining politically marginalized. Recognizing Guarani-Kaiowá narratives of *tekoha* and *retomadas* as legitimate forms of policy knowledge challenges dominant sustainability discourse and opens space for food sovereignty frameworks that prioritize land restitution, ecological restoration, and Indigenous governance rather than export-oriented productivity alone.

More broadly, this case shows that conflicts over food systems are also conflicts over whose knowledge is recognized, whose histories are ignored, and whose visions of development are treated as legitimate. Narratives are therefore central to policy outcomes, as they structure policy debates by defining problems, assigning blame, and legitimizing particular land-use outcomes while denouncing others.

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