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# NATURE'S REVENGE: WAR ON THE WILDERNESS DURING THE OPENING OF BRAZIL'S 'LAST WESTERN FRONTIER'

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## Abstract

This article seeks to identify the key confrontations between frontier expansion and nature present in the discourses and documents generated by the 'The March toward the West' (*Marcha para o Oeste*), a Brazilian federal policy of territorial occupation initiated during the first half of the twentieth century. The paper identifies the representation of the frontiersmen of the Brazilian West, dealing with the creation of the heroic image of the road-building engineer Bernardo Sayão. Sayão was responsible for the construction of the 2,169 km highway that connects Brasília, the then new federal capital, to Belém, located in Brazil's Amazon region. In 1959, shortly before the completion of this major road, Sayão died in a dramatic accident, crushed by a falling tree. Research for this paper was based on biographical accounts, combined with studies generated by environmental historians and historical geographers.

Keywords: Brazil; Bernardo Sayão; March toward the West; environmental history

## Introduction

The French geographer Pierre Deffontaines, writing in 1939,<sup>1</sup> emphasised the historic dependence of Brazilians on waterways in their travels through the distant hinterland and particularly through sections covered by rainforests. He stated that in forested lands, rivers provided the only travel routes. He portrayed a vision of human helplessness in the face of the challenges posed by the wilderness with regard to movement and transportation. These challenges spurred the obsession of explorers and politicians to confront the natural obstacles in Brazil's vast West. At different times in Brazilian history, this obsession was common among those who

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1 Pierre Deffontaines, 'A floresta a serviço do homem no Brasil', *Boletim Geográfico* 28 (1945): 561–8.

supported the idea of territorial integration and conquest.<sup>2</sup> Throughout Brazilian historiography, a group of interpreters worked consistently to build a convincing narrative about the barriers imposed by nature (its geography and its landscapes) to human movements within the national territory.<sup>3</sup> This historiographical tradition reveals much about the relationship between society and nature in Brazil,<sup>4</sup> describing characters (the *bandeirantes*) who march into the hinterland as historical agents who dared to confront natural, economic and political challenges.

The crossing of the geographical barriers by the *bandeirantes* helped the expansion of Brazilian territory and the definition of international boundaries. However, these accounts have not provided answers to some pertinent questions: How does environmental history help us understand territorial conquest and the reasons Brazilians felt the opening of pathways into the wilderness (through development of roads, waterways, railways) was necessary? More specifically, how does the challenge of territorial conquest, particularly the progress of the highways, help illuminate the relationship between society and nature in Brazil? Hence, this article seeks to identify the key points of confrontation with nature as demonstrated during the *Marcha para o Oeste* (March toward the West) policy in the mid-twentieth century. We focus in this article on the biography of the engineer Bernardo Sayão (1901–59), who, despite acting in the twentieth century, was in many ways a typical historical *bandeirante*.

2 According to the study that was conducted on the Central Brazilian frontier by Mary Karasch, three standards of *bandeirante* expeditions for the expansion and territorial conquest were established. With an anthropological focus, she correlated *bandeirante* expedition and indigenous conflicts: '[i]n the invasions of Central Brazil, there were at least four types of expeditions that penetrated indigenous land. The first type of expedition is the most difficult to document since these were more similar to predatory gangs of adventurers and corsairs, travelling Central Brazil by canoe and on foot with the goals of enslaving indigenous peoples and runaway Africans and discovering gold and emeralds ... The second type of the bandeira was organized and partially funded by the Portuguese colonial government, if only in supplying regular troops ... The third type of bandeira often escaped Portuguese notice. These were the locally recruited expeditions formed by a city council to protect its town or to attack nearby indigenous communities and quilombos in order to acquire captives'. Mary C. Karasch, *Before Brasília: Frontier life in Central Brazil* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016).

3 Viana Moog, *Bandeirantes e pioneiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1981); Pierre Monbeig, *Pioneiros e fazendeiros de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Editora Hucitec / Editora Polis, 1984); Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *O extremo oeste* (São Paulo: Brasiliense / Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, 1986); Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *Monções* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1990); Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *Caminhos e fronteiras* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1994); Lucia Lippi de Oliveira, *Americanos: representações da identidade nacional no Brasil e nos EUA* (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2000).

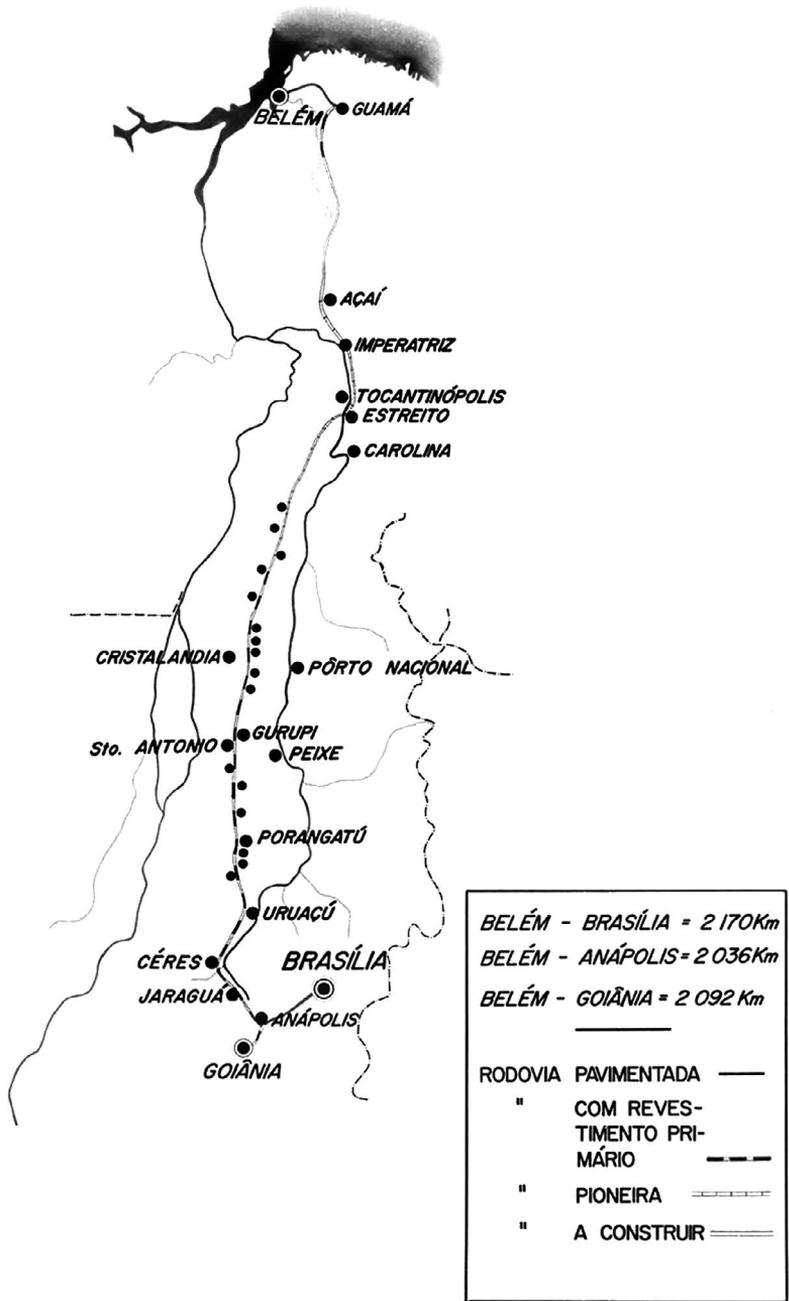
4 Sterling Evans and Sandro Dutra e Silva, 'Crossing the Green Line: Frontier, environment and the role of bandeirantes in the conquering of Brazilian territory', *Fronteiras: Journal of Social, Technological and Environmental Science* 6 (2017): 120–42.

Sayão was responsible for building the highway that connects Brasília, the federal capital, built in central Brazil, to Belém, northern Brazil, in the Amazon region (See Map 1). Sayão, who graduated from the *Escola Superior de Agronomia e Medicina Veterinária de Belo Horizonte* in 1923, served as an agronomist in different agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture in Rio de Janeiro, the former federal capital, during the 1930s. In the early 1940s, he was nominated by President Getúlio Vargas to coordinate the implementation of the first *Colônia Agrícola Nacional de Goiás* (National Agricultural Colony in the state of Goiás). Sayão remained as the coordinator of the national colony until 1950. In 1954, he was elected vice-governor of Goiás. In 1956, he was appointed director of the *Companhia Urbanizadora da Nova Capital do Brasil—NOVACAP* (Urbanising Company for the New Capital of Brazil), coordinating a series of projects in Brasília. In 1958, President Juscelino Kubitschek appointed Sayão as the director of *Rodobrás*, a federal company responsible for the construction of the 2,169 km highway. In 1959, shortly before completing this major road, Sayão died in an accident, crushed by a falling tree. The accident happened while workers were clearing the forest: a huge tree accidentally fell the wrong way, landing on Sayão's quarters. He was soon celebrated as a hero of the Brazilian republic. Different speeches at the time of his death described him as a *bandeirante* of the twentieth century, comparing him to the mythical pathfinders of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

There is a certain irony in the storyline, though. It involves the creation of the myth that this heroic frontiersman became a victim of nature's revenge. However, Sayão's death and the manner in which it was treated reveal a cultural trait of Brazilian society, characterised by an aggressive posture against nature. The circumstances of his death did not serve as a warning. Developmental narratives intensified the call to expand the war against nature, while the dead engineer was awarded the glory of the historical *bandeirantes*.

5 A report published in *Time* magazine made references to the important role played by him as a road builder and as an ingenious administrator and his challenge in the distant Brazilian Backlands: 'Engineer Sayão, an old Government roadbuilder, faced the crisis in communications in his own way. The first thing he did in 1941, when Goiás rice sold for 15¢ a bag for lack of transport to markets, was to cut a trail to Anapolis through 100 miles of forests. He soon turned this into the state's best road. Down it last year the colony's trucks carried 30 different products to market—including 20,000 bags of sugar, 12,000,000 pounds of watermelon, 120,000 dozen eggs, 50 jaguar skins ... In 1945 it was different: the whole rice crop rotted for lack of gasoline to get it to market. The following year Sayão wheedled the Government into shipping an abandoned sugar mill from the coast, set it up in Ceres, and distilled enough alcohol from the colony's sugar to keep the trucks on the road to Anapolis. So in 1946 the colony marketed 160,000 bags of rice in Sao Paulo at prices ranging from \$3 to \$4.50 a bag'. 'Brazil: Boom In the Backlands', *Time*, 7 April 1947, 39. Henry J. Bruman Papers (Collection 1665). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

**RODOVIA BELÉM - BRASÍLIA**



Map 1: The Belém–Brasília Highway. Map produced by the *Comissão Executiva da Rodovia Belém–Brasília, Rodobras*.

Source: Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal (ArPDF), NOV-D-4-4-B-17 (945). Rodovia Belém-Brasília DF 1956–60.

Using concepts from the American tradition of Western history,<sup>6</sup> this article interprets the events surrounding Sayão's death, trying to understand the conquest of the West and the manner by which this conquest was depicted in Brazilian social thought, which considered the wilderness as an enemy of the nation. Sayão's death received overwhelming coverage in the Brazilian media. Politicians took advantage of the situation to immortalise Sayão as a hero in the war between Brazilian society and Brazilian nature. His death was used as a symbol and a myth of the conquest of the hinterland and of the last Brazilian frontier. Hence, this article focuses on specific events related to the biographical study of Bernardo Sayão,<sup>7</sup> and how his character was used to create the image of the heroic pathfinder in the war against the wilderness.

During the twentieth century, several researchers produced fundamentally influential studies of the Brazilian frontier.<sup>8</sup> A common feature of them was the usage of the *bandeirante* as a historical character, the key actor in the geographical conquest of the Brazilian hinterland. Prominent among these authors is Cassiano Ricardo and his book *Marcha para Oeste: A influência da bandeira na formação social e política do Brasil*, first published in 1940.<sup>9</sup> This book was widely used by the federal government as a source of powerful discourses publicised in the 1940s and 1950s to justify Brazilian policies of territorial occupation. Government public statements were basic for the ideological construction of the *Marcha* as a movement of national proportions and consequences.

6 Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010); Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the human place in nature* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996); Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1982); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as symbol and myth* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2009); Walter Prescott Webb, *The great frontier* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2003); Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

7 For detailed biographical studies, see: Christian Brannstrom, 'John Shary, Charles Pease, and contested irrigation landscapes in early-twentieth-century South Texas', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 38 (2012): 234–46; Christian Brannstrom, 'The discovery of Hispanic Child Labor in Agriculture in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas: A Life Geography Approach', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 106 (2016): 705–21.

8 Alfredo Ellis Junior, *O bandeirismo paulista* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1934); Francisco de Assis Carvalho Franco, *Bandeiras e bandeirantes de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1940); Castilho Goycochêa, *Fronteiras e fronteiriços* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1943); Alfredo Ellis Junior, *Meio século de bandeirismo* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1948); Richard M. Morse, ed., *The Bandeirantes: the historical role of the Brazilian Pathfinders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); João Capistrano de Abreu, *Capítulos de história colonial (1500–1800): Os caminhos antigos e o povoamento do Brasil* (Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília, 1968); Affonso de E. Taunay, *História das bandeiras paulistas*, vols 1–3 (São Paulo: Melhoramentos, 1975); Moog, *Bandeirantes and Pioneers*.

9 Cassiano Ricardo, *Marcha para Oeste: A influência da bandeira na formação social e política do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olímpio, 1959). References to F. J. Turner are not clear in the Ricardo's work. Nonetheless, we can identify similarities between them. In an explanatory footnote for the 1959 edition of Ricardo's work, we find references to classical works on the subject, including direct quotations from the texts written by Pierre Monbeig, Viana Moog, Basílio de Magalhães and Sergio Buarque de Holanda, among others, all of them strongly influenced by Turner's 1893 text.

## The March toward the West: A symbol and a myth

The death of Sayão was used politically to promote the government's goal of conquering sections of western Brazilian territory. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, Brazil adopted policies for the promotion of economic development and territorial expansion.<sup>10</sup> Conquest was associated with (i) the allocation of land by the federal government to pacified indigenous groups, who were to be included as citizens in the Brazilian polity and (ii) human subjugation of the wilderness and subsequent transformation of the landscape by means of agricultural expansion. Vargas summarised the expansion policy:

Brazilian civilization is at the mercy of geographical factors, extended in the sense of longitude, occupying the vast coast, where the main centres of activity, wealth and life are located. More than a simple image, it is an urgent and necessary reality to climb the mountain, to cross the plateaus and to expand towards the remote regions. Taking back the trail of the pioneers who planted in the heart of the Continent a vigorous and epic start, [are] the landmarks of territorial borders. We need again to remove obstacles, shorten distances, open paths and extend economic frontiers, confirming the foundations of our Nation. The true meaning of Brazilianness is the March toward the West.<sup>11</sup>

The conquest of the *sertão* (a popular name in Portuguese, designating frontier land, backlands or outback, etc.) displayed the government's desire to expand the Brazilian demographic frontier, heavily concentrated since the sixteenth century along the Atlantic coast. However, the *Marcha* was not planned to affect the frontier specifically; it was aimed at a more encompassing entity, the West. The West, at that moment, appeared as a new symbolic category, full of meanings that referenced the *bandeirantes'* willingness to engage in the territorial conquest of Brazil's vast interior lands.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the *Marcha* exposed the relationship between modern frontiersmen and nature, characterised by an attitude of confrontation and conflict. This resulted from the perception of the frontier as wild territory, untamed nature, and the very opposite of civilisation and progress. The wild landscape was to be tamed by human settlement and agricultural expansion.

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10 This policy was announced on a national radio network. See Getúlio Vargas, 'Saudação aos brasileiros, pronunciada no Palácio da Guanabara e irradiada para todo o país, à meia noite de 31 de dezembro de 1937', 31 December 1937, Casa Civil, Secretaria de Administração, Diretoria de Gestão de Pessoas, Coordenação Geral de Documentação e Informação, Coordenação de Biblioteca, Arquivo da Presidência da República.

11 Vargas, 'Saudação aos brasileiros'.

12 Sandro Dutra e Silva, Dominichi Miranda de Sá and Magali Romero Sá, *Vastos Sertões: História e natureza na ciência e na literatura* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2015).

The concept of human domination of the wilderness reinforced the image of the pioneer and the frontiersman, who were exalted as the conquerors of the West. The extensive exploitation of the native vegetation by logging, charcoal manufacturing, sawmilling and the opening of extensive agricultural land, highways and new settlements or cities were among the immediate causes of landscape transformation. The *Marcha's* policy, in many ways, constituted a declaration of war on the natural environment. In the first half of the twentieth century, policymakers, politicians and settlers saw nature as an impediment to territorial expansion and economic progress.

Ricardo is a member of a select group of Brazilian intellectuals who used the frontier as an object to interpret Brazilian history. His text fulfilled a wider social function—the creation of the Brazilian western frontier as a symbol and a myth. According to him, the twentieth-century territorial conquest of western Brazil was a belated outcome of the *bandeirantes'* long expeditions to the hinterland dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ricardo argued that the current Brazilian geographical territory had been established by those expeditions. The central role of the *bandeirantes* was not the original component of Ricardo's historical interpretation. What distinguished his arguments from those proposed by contemporary Brazilian commentators was that he saw the role of the *bandeirante* ethos as a cultural trait of the Brazilian people in general. Another original trait of Ricardo's literature was to emphasise the role of the frontier as an important symbolic reference for the Brazilian identity ('Brazilianness'). In this sense, Ricardo came close to a 'Turnerian' vision of the frontier,<sup>13</sup> allowing us to consider him the 'Brazilian Turner'.<sup>14</sup>

In Ricardo's analyses, historical characters were highlighted to demonstrate that the expeditionary spirit was still alive in Brazilian society in the twentieth century. He called the migrants that were moving to the Brazilian West the 'new *bandeirantes'*'. Ricardo intended to show that the historic expeditionary movement was not only an extraordinary event, but also a vital movement in Brazilian history. Another important and original aspect of Ricardo's book is the creation of a typology used to qualify the components that define what constituted a *bandeirante*.<sup>15</sup> These components highlighted the ability to perform certain tasks, such as (i) opening trails in the backlands; (ii) incorporating the native population into the 'live forces of nationality'; (iii) naming rivers and mountains; (iv) penetrating virgin lands; (v)

13 Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921).

14 Evans and Dutra e Silva, 'Crossing the Green Line'; Sandro Dutra e Silva, *No Oeste, a terra e o céu: A expansão da fronteira agrícola no Brasil Central* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2017).

15 Ricardo sought to relate the historical *bandeirante* movement to modern episodes of frontier expansion. In his words: 'As the *bandeira* in its historical, original version has ceased to exist, it returns in a different cultural horizon. At the very least, we see a revival of *bandeira* feats, and those who achieve these feats are, consequently, *bandeirantes*.' Ricardo, *Marcha para Oeste*, 337.

discovering natural resources; (vi) safeguarding the adventurous spirit and love for the wilderness; (vii) establishing geographical boundaries; and (viii) defending the integrity of the national territory.

Ricardo considered Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon (1865–1958), a high-ranking army officer who participated in numerous long-range expeditions to many sections of the Brazilian West, the most important ‘modern *bandeirante*’. Ricardo argued that Rondon embodied all the traits of the twentieth-century *bandeirante*, as he extended the telegraph network to many remote parts of Brazilian territory. Ricardo considered his work crucial for the integration of the vast Brazilian territory. Rondon was a prime example of a frontiersman who overcame the difficulties imposed by nature. The most prominent features of Rondon’s expeditions in the context of the historical *bandeirante* movement were (i) the military aspect of the *bandeiras* (their character of conquering and defending the territory) and (ii) the redrawing of the country’s political boundaries. In that sense, the *bandeirante* shaped and defended Brazil’s geographical integrity.<sup>16</sup> Another quality of Rondon was his ability to deal with the natives in a peaceful manner (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Rondon hands out gifts to Pareci natives (date unknown).

Photograph: Luiz Thomaz Reis. Courtesy: Acervo do Museu do Índio/FUNAI–Brasil, Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>16</sup> Ricardo, *Marcha para Oeste*.

Ricardo's narrative became propaganda of the Brazilian state for the colonisation of the West, while it defined the settlers and pioneers as the new *bandeirantes*. The *bandeirante* myth, reborn in the twentieth century, characterised the new frontier expansion efforts as having the same attributes as the historical pathfinders. The myth gained new features and symbolic meanings.

Brazilian social thought during the 1940s and 1950s was strongly influenced by *Marcha* propaganda. This helps us understand the repercussions of the memorial speeches made about Bernardo Sayão, as I present below. We can also see how his death was used as a symbol and a myth to support the conquest of the twentieth-century western Brazilian frontier.

## Bernardo Sayão and the archetype of the frontiersman

The image of Bernardo Sayão as representative of the *bandeirante* ethos was iconic for the national integration policies and developmental programs of President Kubitschek's administration (1956–61).<sup>17</sup> The archetype of the frontiersman, used in the construction of the Sayão myth, appears in official speeches, Brazilian press notes and oral narratives, maintaining an analogy to Ricardo's *Marcha*. The image of Sayão as a heroic frontiersman was related to his biography.

According to Peter Burke, an image is constructed, not only by the dramatisation of a role that imposes itself, but also by the construction of individual scenes that add up to collective storylines.<sup>18</sup> This is evident in the case of the building of Sayão's public image between 1941 and 1959, and in his connection with the symbolic power of expanding frontiers to the Brazilian West.<sup>19</sup> The identification of Sayão as a heroic *bandeirante* brings us to the analysis of symbolic elements, which elucidates the concepts present in the imagination of society that develops the mythical contents. The first element of this symbolic representation can be identified in the narratives presented by Ricardo, particularly by the archetypal images of the heroic *bandeirante*.<sup>20</sup>

17 It is important to emphasise that Ricardo's text, in its original edition, never mentions the name of Bernardo Sayão. In the 1959 edition, used as a source for this study, two new chapters were added, dealing with the ongoing construction of Brasília. This edition was published in the same year as Sayão's death, but it was Kubitschek who was depicted by Ricardo as the bearer of the *bandeirante* 'spirit'.

18 Peter Burke, *A fabricação do rei: A construção da imagem pública de Luís XIV* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1994).

19 According to Pitta, the value of an image is measured by the extent of its imaginary aura. See Danielle Perin Rocha Pitta, *Iniciação à teoria do imaginário de Gilbert Durand* (Rio de Janeiro: Atlântica Editora, 2005), 13–16.

20 Ricardo, *Marcha para Oeste*.

The Rio de Janeiro press emphasised that this was the first illustrious burial in Brazil's future capital and that Sayão was the general in a terrible war. According to *Última Hora*, Sayão died in the war against the forest, as he opened the trail for the Belém–Brasília Highway.<sup>21</sup> Other memorial reports described Sayão's biography up to the moment of his death, recounting his development as a public man endowed with certain character traits such as charisma, enthusiasm, an adventurous spirit and the energy that he invested in his activities, thus establishing his relationship with the *bandeirante* of the *Marcha para Oeste*. In an article published in the *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro), on 17 January 1959, we notice the intent of enlarging Sayão, the person, into the myth of the heroic frontiersman:

His name was Bernardo Sayão and it was almost impossible to want someone that looked more like, in spirit and body, to what is called a *bandeirante*. However, he went beyond the *bandeirante*, the woodsman who tames the forest, establishes corrals and farms and starts taking care of the future. Sayão founded cities in the modern sense; he founded cities not for his own people, but for all Brazilians. He cleared the forest with machetes, swam across rivers, planted settlements and headed it as a Chief, a King, and a Judge ... But he was mainly the cheerful and handsome athlete, who was confident in his strength and full of that faith that only people with great hearts place in their fellow man.<sup>22</sup>

The construction of the myth was not done by describing the everyday facts as ordinary attitudes, but with their inclusion into the context of an extraordinary script. Traits that were present before the exposure of Sayão to the public eye were invoked as components of a pre-existing heroism. In an interview published by the *Correio da Manhã* on 23 January 1959, the journalist expressed his pride in having met Sayão 'before [he was] the indomitable frontiersman that he became during the second stage of his life'. By identifying a 'second stage' in Sayão's life, the journalist made the distinction between the common person and the frontiersman, trying to convince readers that the *bandeirante* spirit had always been present in Sayão:

The *Bandeirante Spirit* of Sayão manifested itself in all of its glory, in the company of his colleagues who loved him deeply and admired him enthusiastically. He swam across the Rio das Almas, losing a friend in the rushing current that carried him away forever. On the other bank, he founded the National Agricultural Colony of Goiás. Using empty gasoline drums, he built a temporary bridge across the river. Ten years later, the Colony became the city of Ceres, with a current population of 50,000 inhabitants. His name grew, his fame spread and when a person was considered for

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21 *Jornal Última Hora*, Manuel Bernardes Müller, 'A morte do general', 17 January 1959, 50. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República. Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal (ArPDF).

22 *Correio da Manhã*, 17 January 1959, 45. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República. Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. ArPDF.

the construction of Brasília, he was naturally nominated. He continued being, as Antonio Callado said, a joyful and handsome athlete, confident of his strength and of the greatness of his country.<sup>23</sup>

This excerpt exemplifies the strategy of relating events belonging to the private universe to a mythologised public image, in which ordinary facts gain larger proportions than they normally would have. Thus, the fact that Sayão had been an athlete in his youth was not seen as a natural indication of having lived on the coast, but as a strategy of fortune, which conspired in favour of the hero. The common person who was a good swimmer would become the frontiersman. What makes the story more interesting is the fact that the journalist synthesised Sayão's life, based on Sayão's personal experiences. However, these experiences became public, confirming not only the opinion of one major newspaper, but also the collective consciousness of society. Moreover, the use of Sayão as a hero had a political undertone, which was to consider him as a *bandeirante* and as a general who died in a terrible war against the forest.<sup>24</sup> The death of Sayão reinforced the image of nature as an enemy. An article published in *Última Hora* on 22 January 1959 called out to those who had not yet adhered to the ideal of national development—it stated that Sayão's death was an exemplary gesture that would motivate many people. Criticising opponents of development policies, the article makes use of symbolic elements present in the historical narrative of the Marcha, disqualifying and weakening the political opposition to Kubitshek's policies. The article argued:

Nothing can resist Sayão's enthusiasm, his willingness to fight and to win the war. He knew that the forest was the enemy. If those millions of soldiers [the trees] were defeated, the men in 'black tie' [the political opposition] would have no option but to shut up. His battle was with nature, his fight was against the natural elements, because he knew that the nature of men was easier to defeat. The other elements, of politics, changed according to the wind.<sup>25</sup>

In the quotation above, we notice that the author seeks to discredit the political opposition as too weak to inhibit frontier expansion. The same article stated that 'no opposition, no fair or unfair argument, would prevent this government from achieving its milestone objective'. The motivating myths of the frontier were located within the universe of politics, particularly regarding developmental programs. The discourses of the Brazilian press and government clearly appropriated Ricardo's

23 *Correio da Manhã*, Anderson Magalhães, 23 January 1959, 68. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República. Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. ArPDF.

24 Müller, 'A morte do general', 50.

25 *Última Hora*, 'O homem e a árvore', 22 January 1959, 63. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República, Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. ArPDF.

arguments, especially when they depict the old myths of nature (forests, rivers, streams, fevers, etc.) as enemies.<sup>26</sup> This is what the article below, published on 23 January 1959 by *O Globo* in Rio de Janeiro, exemplifies:

A huge tree fell and killed the brave and promising Bernardo Sayão. *Curupirá's* [a Brazilian folkloric entity responsible for the protection of forests and animals] war uses the trees when fevers and traps fail. Nonetheless, the highway has penetrated the frontier, and that immense and wide gash in the forest will not be closed any more. The cement will sterilise the inhuman fertility of the tropical forest; birds will no longer drop seeds on this desecrated field. The army divisions of progress will pass through it, trucks from Manaus and Belém on its way to the country's geo-economic centre ... I would like to see the huge pile of uprooted trees: myths and totems full of rage at their powerlessness. I would like to see Brazil defeat the *Curupira* and take over that which it had almost forgotten that belonged to it. I want revenge for my terrors on the river, of the roar of the fallen lands, the sensed presence of the invisible enemy.<sup>27</sup>

In this statement, the writer mentions the myths and allies of the Curupira (fevers, traps, trees and birds), natural entities furious about their powerlessness in the face of Sayão and development. The winning myths, on the other hand, faced the 'sensed presence of the invisible enemy' through roads that were being built, the roads that would allow the flood of the 'military divisions of progress' to pass. Brazil in a developmental mode would take control over 'that which it had almost forgotten belonged to it', an allusion to the revival of the *bandeirante* ethos in the twentieth century.

In the 1950s, progress and territorial expansion served as justifications for colonisation policies, and mythical elements of the Marcha were identified with a new *bandeirante* movement toward the West: 'if it weren't for these myths ... Brazil would not be what it is today, in its geographical grandeur'.<sup>28</sup> Ricardo interpreted the new *bandeirante* movement in terms of mythology, albeit no longer in the fabulous sense of the historic expeditions, but incorporating elements of modernity and claiming attitudes and behaviours seen as superior to those of the common person. This typified the frontiersman's behaviour and his audacious spirit.

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26 The war against nature is not peculiar to Brazilian environmental and political history. For instance, China has and the Soviet Union had their own share of this kind of war. See more details in Paul Josephson, Nicolai Dronin, Ruben Mnatsakanian, Aleh Cherp, Dmitry Efremenko and Vladislav Larin, *An Environmental History of Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

27 *O Globo*, Henrique Pongetti, 'A linha Currupira', 23 January 1959, 66. Governo do Brasil, Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República, Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. ArPDF.

28 Ricardo, *Marcha para Oeste*.



Figure 2: President Juscelino Kubitschek at the funeral of Bernardo Sayão in Brasília, 17 January 1959. Photograph by Mario Fontenelle.

Source: Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal (ArPDF), NOV-D-4-4-C-2 (2277).

According to several reports of Sayão's funeral, speakers sought to highlight his participation in the war against nature (Figure 2). The eulogy given by President Kubitschek had a typically belligerent tone. He highlighted the heroic character of Sayão as a soldier in the war against nature:

He died standing, in the midst of the final resistance of the vast forest, when the end of his effort was in sight. He was struck by one of the plentiful trees that he had to bring down so that Brazil could open its forceful path ... He was knocked down by a fatal blow by the fall of one of its colossal trees, which reverberated throughout the forest. It was nature's revenge against this modern pathfinder, this incomparable *bandeirante*.<sup>29</sup>

Ricardo and Brazilian propaganda dominated by the ideal of development located the *bandeirante* as a symbolic category. Therefore, the giant tree that represented nature's revenge, instead of assigning a negative attribute to development, made the effort become heroic. The ideological sense of the historic frontier expansion also appears in the iconic images of republican Brazilian development. More than merely describing and capturing the moment, these images indicated the victorious awareness of western demographic and economic frontier expansion.

<sup>29</sup> Juscelino Kubitschek, 'Oração do Presidente Juscelino Kubitschek', 1959, 15–16. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República, Bernardo Sayão: *Bandeirante Moderno*. Nos funerais. ArPDF.

The figure of Sayão allows Ricardo to update the characteristics of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century *bandeirantes*. He emphasises the importance of Couto Magalhães, a nineteenth-century backlands explorer who marched over long sections of the West and tried to introduce regular waterborne transportation on the Araguaia River. Ricardo mentions also Teófilo Ottoni, who built Brazil's first paved road, in 1857, as an archetypal image of Sayão, the road builder. Senator Gilberto Marinho, in a speech to the senate on 20 January 1959, made remarks highlighting the image of Sayão as a road builder, including references to the Belém–Brasília highway.<sup>30</sup> Senator Victorino Freire, representing the state of Maranhão, said: 'I evaluated his devotion to achieving the ideal of a highway linking the state of Pará to Brasília ... The region crossed by the highway has been colonised and filled by the simple means of road and construction'.<sup>31</sup> Senator Lameira Bittencourt, of Pará, stated that Sayão was the 'greatest labourer in highway construction'.<sup>32</sup> According to him, Sayão was responsible for connecting the Amazon region to the rest of the country.

Several other statements highlighted Sayão's qualities as a road builder. The dramatic and fatal episode of his death in the act of road building had a strong symbolic power. Multiple meanings were ascribed to this episode. Thus, as a road builder, Sayão symbolises integration, progress and national development. The strength of this image legitimised his public identity as a hero of the Brazilian backlands and updated the mythology of the frontiersman. His death also revealed the perception that Brazilian society held on environmental issues, especially its warlike view of the confrontation between humans and nature. Deforestation and environmental destruction were justified, since forests and other natural features of the backlands constituted an enemy army that had to be confronted and defeated in order to pave the way for national greatness.

## Theatrical aspects of the war declared against the nature

On 2 February 1959, a few days after Sayão's funeral, President Kubitschek participated in a ceremony in Açailândia, in the state of Maranhão in the Amazon rainforest, instating the new highway. At the end of the ceremony, he drove a bulldozer and tried to cut down a giant tree, in honour of Sayão. The president's symbolic and theatrical gesture tried to fulfil a promise made by him, days earlier,

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30 Discurso do Senador Gilberto Marinho, 20 January 1959. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República. Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno, Repercussão no Parlamento. ArPDF.

31 Discurso do Senador Gilberto Marinho, 20 January 1959, 24 (interjections by Senador Victorino Freire). Governo do Brasil.

32 Discurso do Senador Gilberto Marinho, 20 January 1959, 25 (interjections by Senador Lameira Bittencourt).

in Brasília, at Sayão's funeral: 'When a man finds his reward, dying in battle on the eve of victory, we need to follow him by redoubling his efforts, being faithful to his desires, aspirations, and martyrdom'.<sup>33</sup> Handling the bulldozer, Kubitschek was commanding an army of soldiers, bearing heavy weapons, seeking to destroy the giant trees that stood in the way of winning the 'final western frontier'.

A news report in the *Diário de Notícias* on 3 February 1959, under the headline '*O Presidente da República chorou ontem em Açailândia*' (The President of Brazil cried yesterday in Açailândia), described in detail the feelings generated by the ceremonial conclusion of the highway. The theatrical ceremony was described as another political act of the Brazilian Government, with the participation of President Kubitschek, accompanied by his family and a large entourage. This included several cabinet ministers, ambassadors, representatives of the civil and military authorities, national and foreign journalists, frontiersmen, explorers, surveyors, engineers and workers, all of whom were proud of Sayão's accomplishments. The report described the manoeuvres of tractors, belching huge columns of black smoke over the Amazon forest. Five airfields were opened in the forest and planes were flown over the dense tree canopy.

The ceremony began with the hoisting of the national flag by President Kubitschek, followed by a greeting given by engineer Valdir Lins, who had replaced Sayão as the superintendent of the *Comissão Executiva da Rodovia Belém–Brasília—Rodobrás* (Executive Committee of the Belém–Brasília Highway). The news report informed readers that Kubitschek cried when Lins said that Sayão was present at the gathering. The *Diário de Notícias*' reporter wrote that Mrs Sara Kubitschek wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. The president spoke shortly after, praising the technicians and workers for their patriotic spirit and emphasising Sayão's contribution, for which all Brazilians were grateful.

The ceremony continued with a speech made by Valdir Bouhid, from the *Superintendência de Valorização Econômica da Amazônia* (Superintendency of Economic Valorisation for the Amazon Region, a regional development agency), whose subsidiary Rodobrás was responsible for the road project. Bouhid described the highway as an enormous achievement and paid tribute to the victim. Pedro Calmon, Dean of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, offered a prayer seeking the protection of Our Lady of the Forest. This prayer was not for the protection of *jatobá* trees or nature in general, but for the divine protection of forest explorers, who were fighting for the territorial unification of Brazil.

To close the ceremony, the authorities prepared a symbolic 'scaffold' to facilitate the felling of a giant *jatobá* tree with two bulldozers. It would be a celebration of highway completion. This implied that nature had to be 'punished', to the

33 Juscelino Kubitschek, 'Oração do Presidente Juscelino Kubitschek', 15.

delight of the spectators. This enactment took longer than expected, as the arduous felling of the giant tree took more than two hours. It was the forest's final act of defiance. The felling of the *jatobá* destroyed also some smaller trees.<sup>34</sup>

The report published in the *Diário de Notícias* on 3 February 1959 leads us to the following questions: What is the significance of the cutting down of a *jatobá* tree besides the most immediate and obvious intent of this act? What attitudes and values did this gesture seek to promote? In the mid-twentieth century, the evolution of land routes marked the conquest of a territory that was earlier considered insurmountable by most Brazilians. The scars of the highway in the savannahs and Amazon forest canopy justified the celebration of human domination over nature. As mentioned earlier, Deffontaine portrayed human helplessness with regard to movement and transportation because of the huge challenges and natural barriers of the forest. These challenges were directly associated with the determination of backlands explorers and politicians who, at different times during Brazilian history and with very different objectives, sought the integration of the national territory. This motivated the adoption of water transportation, railways, complex water–railway projects and other forms of travel. In all of these projects, the challenges were huge due to the immense size and the difficult terrain of the Brazilian territory.

## Final remarks

According to Sterling Evans and myself, the end of the story of the Brazilian frontier is yet to be written. Nowadays, the Amazon is indeed the Brazilian economic, territorial and environmental frontier. The authors emphasise that some comparative reports related the *bandeirante* experience of westward expansion with the industrial and agricultural advancement into the Amazon region. Indeed, the recurrent discourse that seeks to relate the *bandeirante* spirit to Brazil's national development is common and recurrent.<sup>35</sup>

The episode of the *jatobá* tree being attacked and felled as a sign of territorial conquest reinforces the prevailing concept among Brazilians that nature had to be confronted and overcome. At the same time, it highlights the importance of various issues in conquering the Brazilian geographical territory. The conquest of the 'final western frontier' by the development-oriented republican regime of Brazil demanded the appropriation of the remains of the hero who died in battle, victim of the revenge of nature.

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34 *Diário de Notícias*, 'O presidente chorou ontem em Açailândia', 3 February 1959, 161–70. Governo do Brasil. Serviço de Documentação da Presidência da República. Bernardo Sayão: Bandeirante Moderno. ArPDF.

35 Evans and Dutra e Silva, 'Crossing the Green Line', 137.

The archetype of the frontiersman and the option of dominating nature by taking land for the purpose of national integration materialised in the construction of the highway that connected the new federal capital to the Amazon region. The 'execution' of the *jatobá* tree was not a random act. The symbolic intention was to show the confrontation with nature and the domination of the natural world through the representation of the neo-frontiersman myth embodied in the construction of the highway. The ceremony in the forest fulfilled old ambitions, but was much livelier after the 1940s, in the occupation and integration of the national territory.<sup>36</sup>

The narratives that drove the expansion and occupation of the last Brazilian territorial frontiers updated the myth of the *bandeirante* destiny, to legitimise and enhance the heroic act of pioneering. It was this 'heroism' that allegedly ensured the progress and development of the national wealth. Symbolically, the ceremony at the Amazon rainforest marked the final act of human victory over the untamed geography. The militaristic and warlike tone of the relationship with nature proclaimed victory over the wilderness, along with the death of old myths and fears of what the natural world represented in Brazil. Hence the revival of the *bandeirante*, associated with new myths, symbolising the conquest of the last Brazilian frontier.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the CAPES—*Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (Brazilian Organisation to Coordinate the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and by CNPq—*Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* (National Council for Technological and Scientific Development).

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<sup>36</sup> Orlando Valverde, Catarina V. Dias, *A Rodovia Belém–Brasília: estudo de geografia regional* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação IBGE, 1967).

This text is taken from *International Review of Environmental History*,  
*Volume 5, Issue 1, 2019*, edited by James Beattie, published 2019 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/IREH.05.01.2019.02](https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.05.01.2019.02)