

BLACK BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Death in the field: ruptures, ethnographic rearrangements and reflections on producing anthropological knowledge

ANA CLARA SOUSA DAMÁSIO DOS SANTOS ¹

MIGUEL ANTONIO DOS SANTOS FILHO ²

¹ Universidade de Brasília, Departamento de Antropologia, Grupo de Etnografia das Circulações e Dinâmicas Migratórias – MÓBILE, Brasília, DF, Brasil

² Universidade de Brasília, Departamento de Antropologia, Laboratório de Estudos em Economias e Globalizações – LEEG, Brasília, DF, Brasil

Abstract

In this article we reflect on death as a disruptive event for social relations and social (re)arrangements, based on research carried out by the authors in Canto do Buriti, Piauí, Brazil, and in Timor-Leste, Southeast Asia. Based on ethnographic accounts, we discuss how the death of interlocutors expands knowledge about kinship and gift-giving relations, which inform the constitution of the person as a privileged social phenomenon for theoretical and analytical reflections. The article demonstrates that death, by representing a rupture in a vital course, initiates a series of other relational dynamics that reconfigure a person's sociability, as well as the ways of experiencing field research, relations of interlocution and ethnographic research and writing/production. It emphasises the theoretical importance of deaths as events whose impacts on social relations and the production of anthropological knowledge need to be approached with close heuristic and epistemological attention, beyond a discussion focused solely on categories like emotions and affects.

Keywords: Death; Anthropology; Anthropological Theory; Ethnography; Field Research.

Morte em campo: rupturas, rearranjos etnográficos e reflexões sobre a produção de conhecimento antropológico

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre a morte como evento disruptivo em relações e para (re) arranjos sociais, a partir de pesquisas realizadas pelos autores em Canto do Buriti (PI), Brasil, e Timor-Leste, país insular do Sudeste Asiático. Discute-se, com base em relatos etnográficos, como a morte de interlocutores amplia (re)conhecimentos sobre as relações de parentesco e dádiva que informam sobre a constituição da pessoa enquanto fenômeno social privilegiado para reflexões teórico-analíticas. Demonstra-se que a morte, ao representar uma ruptura em um curso vital, inicia uma série de outras dinâmicas relacionais e que reconfiguram sociabilidades e formas de experimentar o campo de pesquisa, as relações de interlocução e a produção etnográfica. Destaca-se a importância teórica das mortes como eventos cujos impactos nas relações sociais e na produção de conhecimento antropológico precisam ser tomados com atenção heurística e epistemológica para além de uma discussão concentrada nos acionadores das emoções e afetos.

Palavras-chave: morte; antropologia; teoria antropológica; etnografia; pesquisa de campo.

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Death, as a phenomenon or moment of social life, has received attention from diverse anthropologists concerned, in general, with the meanings, practices and rites involved in the various processes of dying, making people die or allowing them to die (Mauss 1979, Cunha 1978, Medeiros and Hattori 2020, Mbembe 2018, Medeiros 2017). These discussions have yielded many valuable insights for anthropological theory on social organisation and kinship, on juridical and political regimes and rights over persons, but also on practices of governance and population management. In this article, we revisit the debate surrounding various topics of classical anthropological theory in light of death events in two quite distinct ethnographic settings: Canto do Buriti in Piauí, northeastern Brazil, and Timor-Leste, an island nation in Southeast Asia.¹

In our previous studies, the themes of kinship relations (Damásio 2022, 2023) and the relational construction of the person (Santos Filho 2019, 2022) – both fundamental issues for Anthropology as theoretical approaches – have been ever-present, considered primarily through the relationships established in the field with our interlocutors, in the everyday contact and conviviality with their actions and discourses. However, it is when we are confronted with the death of interlocutors that another universe of analytical possibilities opens up, with other kinds of reflections, albeit still supported by the framework of classical anthropological theory.² In this article, our aim is to highlight the nuances and intersections of kinship, reciprocity (more in its compulsory, demanding and expectant dimension than in its voluntary and cordial dimension) and conceptions of personhood in our respective ethnographic fields

1 We thank the reviewers of the original version of this article for their criticisms and recommendations, which proved invaluable for the preparation of this published version.

2 On the use of the term ‘classical’ to refer to authors and concepts in the field of anthropology, see, for example, the discussion of Teixeira and Cunha (2023).

in contexts shaped by death. Here, death is taken as a disruptive phenomenon that terminates one phase of the life course but simultaneously opens new forms of management, care, and maintenance of the social life of/for the deceased person. In doing so, we contribute to the debate that explores death as a physical, social and cultural phenomenon that potentializes theoretical reflections on the groups with whom we conduct research. Since while different groups and agents organise and manage death and dying (Medeiros and Hattori 2020), anthropologists must also contemplate the impact of this phenomenon on their own relationships with interlocutors and their groups, and on its repercussions for the production of knowledge within the anthropological discipline.

We therefore explore death in the field – or the death of interlocutors (at moments when we were not physically present in the field) – as disruptive events, investigating them along three axes: (1) how these deaths significantly affect the groups and individuals of their immediate social world, whether or not the people who died were our interlocutors in these specific ethnographic contexts; (2) how the deaths recounted here also impacted us personally, whether through the quality of the relationships we maintained with the deceased interlocutors or through our sense of concern for those who had been (even) more closely connected to them; (3) finally, the epistemological opening provoked by these significant events: (re)thinking analytical, theoretical and methodological questions through deaths that profoundly altered the social atmospheres in which they occurred, while also directing our attention towards the deceased persons themselves and the relations they constituted both in life and post-life.

This article divides into four sections in addition to these preliminary remarks. The first section presents the theoretical framework guiding our work, situating it within a debate on kinship, gifts and personhood, while also outlining the kind of ethnography we seek to produce. The second section introduces the first death event, which took place in Canto do Buriti, Piauí, Brazil, discussing how the death of the eldest member of a kin group generated frictions within the group through the distribution of the deceased's belongings. The third section describes a friendship between one of the authors (who was conducting research on gender and violence in Timor-Leste) and a Timorese man, which was abruptly ended with the latter's death. In our concluding remarks, we outline a connection between these two sombre events, discussing their analytical potential beyond the notions of affects and emotions.

THEORIES OF KINSHIP, PERSONHOOD AND RECIPROCITY: INITIATING DIALOGUES

From a phenomenological perspective, death can be conceived as the closure of a life cycle, the loss of consciousness, physical-material agency or self-determination, or even, from a theological perspective, as a transition from the carnal to the spiritual plane (Oliveira 2021). Although our aim is not to propose any kind of digression on the philosophical meanings about/for death, it is important to note that, in certain contexts, death can be taken as an

event that terminates one stage of the social life of a subject, while simultaneously inaugurating another moment in the social life of the person, understood here in its anthropological sense not confined to the bodily limitations of the individual (Mauss 2003). Setting out from this principle, reflecting on and analysing the social life of the deceased person directs our attention back to a series of fundamental and structuring questions of social relations, long identified among the core concerns of anthropological theory.³

If we consider that death is primarily realised, mourned, grieved and experienced among kin, then we need to situate it within the sphere of kinship and the relations that constitute it. In this discussion, we approach kinship as a field that involves the intersection of two approaches that may appear distinct but are in fact complementary since they make evident the complexities that compose both social structure and everyday practice: formal kinship (Miller 2007) and kinship as process (Carsten 1995). While the first approach conceives kinship predominantly in terms of explicit formal roles and norms, which are largely unaffected by major changes, the second emphasises kinship as a dynamic process in which familial bonds can be made, unmade and remade through everyday interactions within the family environment. Recognizing death as part of the process of kinship relations not only means analysing death in terms of its impact on people's everyday lives (though this of course happens), but also to contemplate how daily interactions between family members are immersed within a broader structure, encompassing the different roles performed by subjects within the family context. Not by chance, as Marshall Sahlins (2013) points out, kin live and die each other's lives.

Crucially, one of the principal outcomes of kinship relations is the social constitution of personhood. Understood in Mauss's (2003) terms, the person should not be confused with the individual, in the sense that Louis Dumont (1985) gave to the term, since the former is an eminently collective and inescapably relational construct. The person is a social and moral subject, enmeshed in complex moral and juridical relations, an entity on whom expectations of rights and obligations fall, a social reading is constructed, and solid and enduring relational apparatuses are invested that ensure its firm embedding in socialities (Strathern 2015). The person is, above all, a social perception of the subject, not an objective or universal reality, even though some ideological strands of human rights discourse seek to constitute it as such (Duarte 2003). Notions of what a person is are thus multiple and contextual, responding to the particularities attributed by different collectives to what they recognize as a person, as a full person and as categories of personhood,⁴ including what or who does not qualify as a person in these terms.

3 We adopt the category of the social life of the deceased person in allusion to the volume organised by Appadurai (2008), looking to discuss how death and the dead person are embedded within a living network of relations, which confers these deaths and the dead a life with particular characteristics that need to be socially embedded and conceptualized – something to which ethnographic and anthropological analysis can contribute.

4 The discussions of Tânia Salem (1992), Maurice Leenhardt (1997), Marcel Mauss (2003), Duarte (2003) and Simião (2017) are significant for this debate.

Specifically in relation to the two ethnographic contexts presented below, the discussion of personhood cannot overlook the classical contributions of Marcel Mauss (2003) on reciprocity and the gift. By showing the obligatory nature of gift relations, Mauss taught us that the extension of relations of reciprocity constitutes the subjects themselves involved in these networks. In other words, subjects, as persons, may be constituted as such through their own entanglement in exchange relations (Mauss 2003, Silva and Simião 2016). From *potlatch* to *kula*,⁵ classical representations of circuits of circulation and reciprocal exchanges of goods and services, it has been argued that subjects and ritual actions, mediated by symbolic exchanges, are intertwined in the constitution of moral persons, socially (re)constructed and validated in the interplay of relations (Mauss 2003).

It is therefore crucial to understand that the constitution of the person, in different contexts, depends on a visceral engagement in relations of reciprocity, kinship and familial relationalities, spheres of life in which demands, expectations and obligations (debts), informed by the grammar of reciprocity, tend to be constitutive and (almost) inescapable (Strathern 2015). This is precisely the case in the two contexts presented below. Although geographically distant, Canto do Buriti and Timor-Leste share an important similarity in the way their social relations are constituted: reciprocity is indissociable from people's everyday experiences, responsible for the construction of relations, of subjects in their particular positions, and consequently of the expectations and prerogatives that compose relational webs. It follows that, in the narratives presented below, we can observe that moral and juridical demands on subjects, in life or after death, were activated and sustained by what was (or had been) expected of the protagonists of the events discussed here.

Our aim with these brief observations has been to foreground the connections between the notions of kinship, personhood and the gift, looking to show how they manifest in our ethnographic contexts, becoming even more evident through a commonplace phenomenon: death.

'REBINHA PASSED AWAY': WHEN THE ELDEST MEMBER OF THE KIN GROUP DIES⁶

In August 2023, in Taguatinga (Federal District), I received a phone call from Itamar, calling from Canto do Buriti (Piauí) to tell me: 'Rebinha passed away.' At first, the impact of the news was profound since I had been planning a trip to Canto do Buriti precisely to interview her. Despite being frequently bedridden, a constant issue over the past decades, Rebinha had always managed to recover and resume her routine as best she could. I had expected her new episode of illness to be like all the others. However, as Itamar, Rebinha's daughter, told me: 'She [Rebinha] lay down to sleep like every other day, but did not wake up again.'

5 All words in italic are emic categories.

6 This section is based on research conducted by Ana Clara Damásio, one of the authors of this work.

Rebinha was the eldest member of her kin group, the guardian of family memories that no one else possessed. At the same time, she was the only interlocutor who knew details about the life of her grandmother Regina, someone whom I had known very little about until then. Regina, as I later learned from other members of Rebinha's family (the same family that had been my interlocutors during my master's and doctoral research), had been born between the late 1890s and the early 1900s. As the sole surviving member of her generation, Rebinha was the only person who could take me back to that period – an era that interested me particularly, since it offered the possibility of ethnographically exploring the processes involved in the constitution and migration of Rebinha's entire family in the decades before and after her birth.

Rebinha's death, in the terms set out so far, went beyond a physical loss, since it also represented the end of a narrative. With her passing, I bade farewell not only to a person or interlocutor, but to an entire story that encapsulated a unique and meaningful time. Her absence left a void not only in the lives of those within her kin group, but also in the very fabric of the ethnography I had intended to produce. No one had told me that death in the field would generate inescapable situations for the ethnography and fieldwork. Nor had anyone told me that, from the event of death onwards, a new ethnography would have to be designed.

But who was Rebinha? Josefa Maria da Anunciação, a black woman, was born in São João do Piauí (Piauí state) on 1 November 1928. In her youth, she moved with her grandmother Regina and her siblings to Canto do Buriti, also in the state of Piauí, where she built her life, married, and raised five children, including Itamar (the one who telephoned me). During my fieldwork in Canto do Buriti in 2019 (Damásio 2020), Rebinha would speak at length about the lives of all her other relatives. This would have made it possible to undertake a longitudinal ethnography (Fonseca 2010), analysing family cycles and intergenerational relations.

With Rebinha's passing, I came to understand that death does not wait for the time of research but creates other ethnographic processes. At that moment, following Itamar's phone call, I was reminded of a reflection by Sahlins (2013) in *What Kinship Is... And Is Not*. As the author sketches out, kin are intrinsically part of one another's existence: they share a mutuality of being and are members of one another. We die the deaths of our kin and we also live their lives. And I was feeling this viscerally at that moment, since Rebinha, besides being an interlocutor, was also my great-grandmother (the only one I had the opportunity to know).

Since 2019, I have been theoretically exploring how creating a family is equivalent, in my case, to realizing an ethnography. A few years ago, I took the decision to look inside my own home and analyse my family as a group of kin-interlocutors. This choice led me to my current doctoral research, which focuses on examining how black women build their families, how they migrate in search of better living conditions and how race and gender play determining roles in various historically constructed processes of the precarisation of life, which continue to affect many black families to this day.

As we know, fieldwork is permeated by imponderables that cut across life and our relations in the field. Primarily and ultimately ethnographic data are not simply given in reality;

they are constructed along with the people who become our interlocutors. Although we frequently discuss the building of these relationships, we seldom investigate the ruptures or the moments when they fail to prosper or even when our interlocutors pass away. So what happened to the Silva Sousa family after Rebinha's death? Rebinha had received care, support and guardianship from her eldest son and his wife. After her death, a story began to circulate within the family, which I have called 'the story of the bedsheets.'

Some items from Rebinha's house had vanished. At first, I suspected that her house had been burgled or broken into. I was immediately corrected by one of Rebinha's granddaughters: 'As if! It smells like family to me. It must have been that woman who was looking after her.' At that moment, another world was unveiled before my eyes. Of course, I knew that inheritance is a sensitive topic when it comes to kinship relations, but I had yet to ethnographically follow the evolution of this kind of process during my research.

From then on, I resolutely tracked and tried to understand what had vanished' from Rebinha's house and realised that all the family members already knew which items were no longer there and which remained. The detailed description of the vanished items surprised me. It was not only a matter of bedsheets and kitchen utensils, but things like 'a blue bedsheet she received as a gift when one of the girls [daughters/granddaughters] arrived from São Paulo and brought it for her.' There was a deep knowledge on the part of Rebinha's closest relatives of everything inside her house, her personal belongings but also the plots of land that had not yet been sold, which Rebinha had promised, and even to whom she had promised to leave her house. Whether her wishes would be fulfilled, however, was another question entirely.

For some members of the family, the disappearance of these items from Rebinha's house was outrageous. As one of her daughters said: 'The body isn't even cold yet and they're already helping themselves.' That was when I realised how Rebinha's death shed light (or shadow) on something common in the Silva Sousa family (and in so many others): the conflicts and ruptures that occur between members of the same family over the division of a deceased relative's inheritance. I then came to hear stories to which I had not previously had access. One of them was that Rebinha's two sisters, who had already passed away, had gone through the same situation, though the details had differed.

One of her sisters, while still alive, had been left 'with nothing but the clothes on her back.' The children of this sister of Rebinha had sold off all her plots of land in the town and her house, as well as withdrawing her money from the bank and even taking out loans in her name. In other words, what I had imagined was happening only with Rebinha's property at that moment had already occurred to two other members of the family, her late sisters. As I came to realise over time, these practices were not common to the Silva Sousa family only but were also widespread among other people in the town of Canto do Buriti and their respective families, as other interlocutors narrated to me.

Yet even though the disappearance of belongings was morally condemned by all these families, it continued to take place, since, as mentioned, it was a common and, above all, familiar practice. After the death of Rebinha's sister, various relatives wanted to know what had happened to all of the deceased woman's inheritance. At that moment, a period of tense conflict arose within the family. There were quarrels, arguments, threats and some relatives went years without even speaking to each another. Inheritance was a serious issue, as I came to realise. And this same period of tension emerged after Rebinha's death.

But while the division of an inheritance generates conflicts among the family group's members, this same event can also reunite other relatives (Carsten 2014). As the head of her family at the time, Rebinha had a kindred numbering more than seventy people. Each of her children had formed new families. Some of these families, as one of her daughters told me, 'thought they had more of a right than others.' Others threatened to take the whole process to court, which ideally would be 'resolved within the family.' Still others allied themselves with closer kin to claim the inheritance. These alliances were formed by those who felt wronged somehow or who believed that their common demands regarding the inheritance – which they insisted was theirs 'by right' – had been ignored.

The story of the pilfered bedsheets was just the start. The episode continued to reverberate in many other stories that emerged following Rebinha's death and the disputes over her legacy. From the events after her passing, I perceived that the family's main concern was what to do with 'what was left of her things,' not with her death itself. After all, her dying had long been anticipated, since Rebinha was already 95 years old. Who would keep the refrigerator? Did her house already have an heir? Had she left a will? Who had rights over what? These questions did not disappear with time and even today there are those who ask: 'Was he really supposed to get her smallholding? All of that?' While other branches of the family reply: 'Of course he was, he was the one who looked after her until the end.' And yet another side of the family retorts: 'He had to look after her given he ended up with the smallholding.'

The power of accusation and speculation stood out at this moment, intensifying as her legacy was divided up. Families, who frequently share gossip (Fonseca 2000) about their members, now saw these practices transform into accusations and speculations, strategies used to safeguard their rights over the inheritance. Questions like 'who got what' generated open conflicts between members, at times even resulting in physical violence. Moreover, there had already been cases of theft and fraud against older members of the Silva Sousa family, as had happened with Rebinha's late sisters. Even so, the situation was rarely treated as a 'crime' and the frequent threats of legal action never put into action, since everything was ultimately deemed a question to be 'resolved within the family' (Santos Filho and Damásio 2022).

Although recognised, this facet of family relations is rarely discussed outside the family circle. As an insider observer, I was able to follow the process closely, gaining access to the developments surrounding kin relations, inheritance and conflicts. The analysis of Rebinha's case and her (our)

family reveals a complex network of interests emergent after the death of a relative. Death not only ends a life within the family but also precipitates events that expose the challenges and conflicts inherent to the distribution of property and the preservation of family memory.

These events invite us to reflect more broadly on the role of death in the production of relations among the living, as in the case of inheritance disputes, which reformulate family dynamics. The event reveals the need for a theoretical elaboration of the challenges emerging after the death of a member of a kin group, insofar as this death generates new family dynamics. In the above case, the phenomenon affected not only family relations but also the personal and professional life of the anthropologist, doubly implicated in this arrangement as both researcher and great-granddaughter. It is a reminder that, just as ethnographic data is constructed with people in life, it is also constructed with and through their deaths.

DINO: PERSON/INDIVIDUAL IN LIFE AND DEATH⁷

In September 2015, during my first weeks of fieldwork in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, I made a friend and interlocutor who left a deep mark on both my ethnographic experience and my personal trajectory. Here I shall refer to this friend as Dino.⁸ We first met through a Facebook community that advertised events due to take place in the city, in this case a fair due to be held in Dili's port, where Dino worked for a Chinese shipping company. The event was scheduled to take place later that September, the first of the four months I would spend in the country that year.

My stay in Timor-Leste was supported by an international cooperation agreement promoting the exchange of students between universities of the member nations of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). In addition to taking courses at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FASIPOL) of the National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), I was conducting a research project seeking to understand the involvement of women's organisations and movements in the judicialization of domestic violence in Timor-Leste (Santos Filho 2022). Living in a new context and attempting to learn the language actually spoken by Timorese people in their daily lives – Tetum⁹ – I longed for friends with whom I could socialise and build a truly dialogical experience.

In this sense, Dino, then aged 40, was more than just the company I was seeking. Having adapted to the work routines of the NGOs where I conducted my field research, I was a volunteer during business hours, Monday to Friday, from 8 am to 5 pm. At the same time, I was attending classes at the university two evenings a week. Friendship and conversation with

7 This section is based on research conducted by Miguel dos Santos Filho, one of the authors of this article.

8 I used this pseudonym to protect his identity and the privacy of his memory.

9 Tetum is a Creole language that combines words from Portuguese and Tetum Terik, a native language of Timor Island of Austronesian origin.

Dino were virtual refuges from the exhausting routine of fieldwork in bureaucratic settings. It was with him that I became immersed in diverse aspects of local life, which he carefully mediated, almost like a teacher of *kultura* in Timor – the term used locally and popularly to refer to practices understood as traditional (Silva 2014).

Dino shared with me stories about the Portuguese era (which ceased in 1974 with the end of Portuguese colonisation), about forms of slavery, about the now extinct practices of headhunting and about traditional marriages in which the groom's family was expected to offer seventy-seven cattle to the bride's family. We would go together to eat the traditional rice cake (*katupa*) with grilled fish at the fairs, but Dino also took me to eat fast food, assuming that this was what foreigners liked. He was one of the most generous people I had ever met. He was helpful to everyone around him, careful and attentive, extending to me the same kind of care he gave to his family and long-standing friends.

Dino was also deeply curious about life and the world. He had travelled to various countries in Europe and almost all the neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia, both for work and for leisure. As a result, he spoke at least five different languages (Tetum, English, Indonesian, Portuguese and his mother tongue, Fataluku). He would tell me about his adventures abroad while preparing Timorese food for the meals we shared together in his own house in a neighbourhood of Dili – purchased with money from his own work, not by inheritance, as he liked to stress. It was during those moments that we shared confidences, which he insisted remain strictly between us, always calling me *bro* – slang for 'brother' – while I called him *maun* (elder brother, in Tetum).

Dino confided to me that, since his youth, he had been in sexual and affective relationships with men. His most intimate secret was revealed neither to his many friends, nor his work colleagues and especially not to his family. Although the situation in Timor-Leste in terms of the freedom to express diverse sexualities and gender identities is not as restrictive as in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries¹⁰ (which impose prohibitive legislation on non-heteronormative ways of being in the world), reprisals, intimidation and even physical assaults against members of the LGBTQIA+¹¹ community are frequent (Niner 2022, Hatutan 2018, Fidalgo-Castro, Silva and Santos Filho 2024). Although Dino would say that his 'private life was nobody else's affair,' he did not make the matter public, nor did he assume any of these identities as a form of political (self-)affirmation. He even seemed reconciled to the fact that he would marry a young woman from Lospalos, his hometown, something he had no wish

10 On this point, see the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) publication *Our identities under arrest: A global overview on the enforcement of laws criminalising consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults and diverse gender expressions*, available at https://static.poder360.com.br/2021/12/Our_Identities_Under_Arrest_2021.pdf, consulted 02/01/2025.

11 The LGBTQIA+ acronym is used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual people, as well as other identities and sexualities that diverge from cisgender, heterosexual, and heteronormative.

to do but considered mandatory: *tenke*, as he put it (a matter of duty, obligation, ‘must do’), according to his *kultura*.

His family belonged to the local elite of Lospalos, in the far east of the island of Timor, around 200 kilometres from the capital, in the municipality of Lautém. Among his kin were *suku*¹² chiefs and village chiefs, teachers, police officers, traders, members of the military and some agricultural producers. Dino’s family was extensive and highly valued by him. He, in turn, was also highly valued by his family members. Having lost both his father and mother during the violent and turbulent period of Indonesia’s military occupation (from 1975 to 1999), Dino was raised by his father’s sister, Sika, who still lived on his paternal family’s lands, despite being married and having had several children.¹³

Dino had a large number of classificatory siblings (children of his parents’ siblings). He referred to these people, the children of his uncles and aunts, as brothers and sisters, and to his father’s brothers as fathers and his father’s sisters as mothers, especially Sika, who had raised him. Thanks to these complex arrangements of adoption, fostering and bonds of kinship/affinity, he could only acknowledge the efforts of the many people who had participated, directly and indirectly, in his upbringing, reinforcing a position of indebtedness towards them all. In the Timorese context, the notion of debt concerns the obligatory recognition that a subject always has debts with other subjects and the ancestors (who bless life), meaning that it is ethical to express due deference to the persons to whom one is indebted, whether living or dead (Silva and Simião 2016).

In Dino’s trajectory, these relations of expectations, obligations, gifts and debts were expressed in all kinds of moments from ritual impositions (when Dino was formally asked to contribute the goods required for the performance of weddings, births and funerary rites of his kin)¹⁴ to the exchanges of courtesies and kindnesses he showed whenever he visited his family in his homeland during new year celebrations or extended holidays.

Excited for me to see his place of birth, Dino took me on a visit to his family’s house in a village in the lowland region of Lautém. The journey took about eight hours by bus plus another hour by motorbike, leaving Dili at five in the morning. On the way, as soon as we

12 Following Law No. 11/2009, Timor-Leste is administratively divided into territories designated as municipalities, which are subdivided into administrative posts and, in turn, *sucos* (*suku* in Tetum). These *sucos* are made up of villages, each of which has chiefs and members who together form the *suco* councils, responsible for deliberating on political-administrative decisions at local level.

13 After marriage – particularly once the marital prestations from the husband’s family to the wife’s family have been fulfilled – the bride commonly takes up residence on the lands of her husband’s family, so that the couple’s children tend to follow the paternal line, belonging to their father’s ritual House (*uma lisan*) (Silva 2010). In the case of Aunt Sika, however, her husband had not paid these prestations in full, which meant that he had to take up residence with his wife’s family.

14 This was certainly not an obligation imposed solely on Dino, but something that forms part of the decorum of local social relations, which are thoroughly permeated by the various rituals that mark the stages of life and death (Fidalgo-Castro 2015).

boarded the bus, I noticed Dino urging the driver to take special care with a 20-kilogram sack of rice and two crates of beer he was bringing to distribute among his kin's households.

The journey was virtually a procession: we stopped at three households in different villages before reaching our final destination. At each home, he delivered something: the sack of rice went to the first house, inhabited by his sister and the aunts and uncles who had raised him, while the crates of beer were left at the houses of other relatives, where he insisted on stopping to pay his respects. Everywhere we passed, we were greeted with warmth and generosity. Dino was the guest of honour and was offered coffee, biscuits, cassava, boiled potatoes, fried bananas and beer, rice, more potatoes, chicken in sauce, fried pork, boiled vegetables, roasted peanuts and whatever else the household economies could provide. Children and younger people sought his blessing, lowering their heads and greeting him with hands clutched to their chests in a gesture of respect, all in order to welcome *maun bo'ot*, great brother Dino, in the manner befitting his position as a person.

During the days we stayed there, hosted in his parents' house, Dino insisted that everyone teach me words in Fataluku and take me to visit places where the true *kultura* of Timor could still be found – like cockfights (*futu manu*) and gatherings to drink palm wine (*tua sabu*) – and listen to stories about his family and other topics. Seeking to show me as much as possible of his life and history, Dino rented a small van to take me, along with his family, on a tour of the local tourist hotspots: Kom Beach and the viewing point at the Tutuala guesthouse, a building from the 1970s, dating back to the Portuguese late colonial period. Throughout the trip, Dino and Aunt Sika would walk together arm in arm or hugging, continually expressing their affection and tenderness for each other. The joy of having him there meant that not only Sika pampered him, but everyone else around him too.

Dino's prestige, and the numerous demonstrations of respect shown towards him by kin of varying degrees, were symptomatic of his position as a person and, above all, the relations that he cultivated. These same elements, although securing him certain privileges, also entangled him in webs of obligations that required him to meet expectations such as marrying a woman and forming a family to reproduce his prestigious lineage.

At a certain moment during my first visit to his homeland, we rode a motorbike down a road facing a verdant plain, a pasture with about fifty cattle and a few horses grazing in a paddock. He asked that we stop to look at the landscape and told me that some of those cattle belonged to one of his uncles and had already been promised to him to pay the *barlake* for his future bride.¹⁵ Although he did not voice any complaint, I could sense, from the dryness of his words, the lack of enthusiasm he felt in telling me this. The bride did not yet exist, but sooner or later he would need to find her or else his uncles would indicate a suitable union.

15 The *barlake* is one of the sets of goods that make up the marriage prestations offered by the man's family to the woman's family in recognition of the bride's value or wealth (Silva 2010).

I left that place shaken by his expression as he gazed towards the horizon, as though his eyes passed through all those cattle to linger on something I could not see, breathing deeply.

I could only think – somewhat ethnocentrically and paternalistically, I admit – how unfair the situation was for my friend and interlocutor, who seemed to find it unthinkable that he might break with the expectations placed on him and declare his desire not to marry. The situation was certainly not so simple. It was not just a matter of a ‘simple’ choice or ‘imposing his will’ vis-à-vis relatives who ‘valued tradition.’ Precisely because the situation was not simple, neither were his choices and possibilities for agency. As Strathern (2015) reminds us, obligations imposed by family relations, anchored in the juridical language of kinship, create situations in which individual agency, guided by autonomous desires, tends not to be the ethos privileged by the conduct of subjects. It was precisely this kind of relationality that encapsulated Dino’s experience at that point in his life.

This entire experience with my friend Dino enabled me to comprehend highly significant aspects of the constitution of the person (Mauss 2003), the networks of reciprocity and the debts and obligations as constituent elements of the moral person (Silva and Simião 2016). But it was only some years later that I became truly aware of how my friend’s personal experience spoke volumes about the notion of individualism (Dumont 1985) and how such a notion – still incipient in diverse local arrangements in Timor-Leste – reveals much about the paradigm of ‘modernisation’ or the transposition to/into modernity (Silva 2014). Ideologies, also in the sense proposed by Louis Dumont (1985), concerning the self-determination of subjects in all their potentiality, valued positively in the ‘Euro-American’ world (Strathern 2015), or the universe of possibilities of personal will and autonomy, characteristic of free and independent subjects along the lines of what Michael J. Sandel (1984) called ‘the unencumbered self,’ are contextually constituted through small (and slow) sequences of events, occurring through the complex and concrete experiences of subjects like Dino, embedded in a context of intense ideological and ethical disputes in contemporary Timor-Leste, something that unfolds in a processual and negotiated manner. It was Dino’s death that opened my eyes to these and other questions. I return to this point after one more brief paragraph concerning the relationship we had and how I learnt about his sad and premature death.

When I said goodbye to Dino in January 2016, I gave him a framed copy of a photograph I had taken of him with Aunt Sika at the Tutuala viewing point, a moment when they were walking in a hug with his right arm around her. I remember his joy on receiving the photograph and learning that I had also made another framed photograph for him to give to Aunt Sika. I could not have imagined that these would be my last memories of them both.¹⁶

On my return to Brazil, we kept in touch through Facebook and WhatsApp messages. In 2019, after trying to contact him for several days without a reply, I decided to reactivate my

16 Aunt Sika passed away in February 2020, shortly after Dino and just weeks before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Timor-Leste.

Facebook account in December. When I visited Dino's profile, I was stunned to find hundreds of posts from grieving friends and relatives lamenting his sudden passing. Dino had died in November 2019, from causes that remain mysterious. Although many people continue to speculate about the reasons to this day, not even his family – whom I visited again in 2022 during another period of fieldwork – were able to say precisely what had caused his death, referring only to complications from an unnameable and serious illness (*moras komplikadu*).

Looking at the photographs of Dino inside an ivory-coloured coffin, his face pale and lifeless, brought a lump to my throat. I thought of how his unexpected death had brought an end to the dilemmas he had been experiencing, including preparations for his wedding that had apparently been advancing.¹⁷ Despite the intense emotions provoked, seeing the photos of his wake and his grandiose tomb – built in front of his sister's house in Lospalos,¹⁸ more than a metre high and clad in ceramic – made me more sharply aware of his distinct social position, as did seeing how his coffin had been laid out in the Kampung Baru Church, on Comoro Avenue in Dili, a privilege granted only to people of influence in the city. All the photos of his wake, his funeral and even those of the later ritual marking the end of mourning for his kin (*koremotan*), held in 2021, depicted copious amounts of food, large gatherings of people and offerings of many different kinds, given by those who owed deference to him and his grieving kin.

Although I was unable to mourn my friend together with his other friends and family, I felt the impact of his death at an emotional and affective level. But I also realised that his death was a decisive event for my own intellectual reflections, especially on how death shapes the production of anthropological knowledge through ethnography. While Dino was first and foremost my friend, he became an even more emblematic interlocutor after his death, since it was from that moment on that many of the theoretical questions and anxieties loomed large: (1) the liminal trajectory of a subject with a well-established professional career and social position, deeply enmeshed in the webs of obligation and reciprocity of his *kultura*; (2) the incipience of the expression of autonomous, self-centred desires in the face of expectations of social reproduction within a well-defined model of conducts and possibilities for action; (3) the tenacious trajectory of a subject whose 'private life was nobody else's affair,' yet who was, above all, an adoptive eldest son, heir and well-regarded figure among aunts and uncles who entrusted him with the responsibility of perpetuating a ritual House (*lisan*) and lineage; (4) the subaltern place, in his trajectory, of identity politics and engagement with the demands of the expanding LGBTQIA+ movement in the country, reflecting the greater value he placed on what he understood as his *kultura*. In sum, observing how his relationships in life were constituted and how his social existence continued to be prestigious even after his death – probably because he had remained attentive to the expectations and relations of gift and

17 In one of our last conversations, Dino told me that the wedding would take place with a woman chosen by his uncles. He had already met her.

18 Returning again to the field in 2022, I visited his sister's home to light candles on his tomb.

debt – opens pathways for reflecting on this relation of interlocution (with him) through the memories we constructed together in 2015, but also through the dialogue with his relatives and friends who remained, lamenting his death since 2019.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND SOME POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

By taking death as an event that precipitates other relations, obligations and (diverse) rights in the social life of subjects – both living and dead – we can reapproach the debate on the notion of the person, understood as a conception that affords differentiated, distinct and special statuses to subjects (Mauss 2003). The two deceased persons presented in the preceding sections proved to be – even after death or indeed all the more so after their deaths – constituted by and through the networks of obligations and/or expectations in which they were still immersed once their life course had been completed.

They were also constituted as persons by those subjects still alive, who acquired obligations toward the deceased subjects by virtue of their special condition as dead persons, albeit with a new social life. At the same time, these persons (Rebinha and Dino) also emerged as entities actively participating in the construction of new arrangements (enmities, affiliations, resentments, obligations and so on) in the relationships of those who remained alive. Among other dimensions, this shows us how death and post-death reveal and produce the social continuity of these persons, something marked by obligations established within the sphere of kinship and reciprocity.

Thinking about the social life of the dead person through the experiences of the deaths of interlocutors, whether family or friends, beyond the affects stirred in researchers – which, again, is not our main object of discussion here – demands reflecting on the potential multiple agencies of the dead. The potentialities that dead people acquire in agentive terms, precisely at the moment of their physical/biological demise, have already been highlighted in the literature on Timor-Leste – for example, in the discussions of authors like Bovensiepen (2014) and Población and Castro (2014). Their explorations present local perspectives on the disastrous consequences of the actions of the dead on and in the lives of the living, should the former feel badly treated or insufficiently honoured with appropriate demonstrations of respect in the diverse mortuary rituals celebrated in the country. Represented as resentful or disrespected, the dead may mobilise sources of misfortune, illness and further deaths (Bovensiepen 2014), as Victor Turner (2013) similarly emphasised in relation to rituals among the Ndembu peoples.

Our provocations in thinking about the implications of death are not limited, however, to the issues that potentially arise when the dead feel offended by the actions of the living, as in the Timorese case. This discussion also seeks to incite reflections on what the living do in the wake of a relative's death, whether with their memory or with the property left behind, as suggested by the Canto do Buriti case narrated here. What emerges in this latter context is how the living (re)organise their relations on the basis of the social life of the deceased: a person who, enmeshed in webs of kinship and relationalities, becomes a source of anxieties

and disputes over the division of property, as well as narratives concerning which living subjects held (or should hold) rights and responsibilities over the inheritance.

Although we may contribute to reflections on how fieldwork is impacted by the death or passing of interlocutors or key persons, our objective is somewhat broader. Even though we were not in the field at the moments when we were affected by the loss of these people, we set out from the observation that death is a crucial element in the production of our ethnographies and thus in our production of anthropological knowledge too. We seek to draw attention, therefore, to how these funerary events were catalytic in our research and mobilised our production of knowledge, beyond the affective impact such situations produced. In other words, to speak of death in the field is not only to delimit how the researchers were affected by deaths at the moments when they happened, but also to consider how they caused the reorganisation of the relations that constituted the researched fields – fields which were themselves reconfigured by the deaths narrated here.

Here it is worth repeating Peirano's (2014) observation that ethnography should not be confused with fieldwork, nor is it limited to the period spent in the field. The impacts of a death may certainly be events that generate ruptures in the field itself, but they may also lead to redirections or clarifications in how we frame questions and (re)direct our concerns and interests. It may likewise be funerary events that enable us to rethink or (re)analyse trajectories, relations, the conduct of persons and the consequences of phenomena preceding and following experiences of death.

The narrative of Dino's life and death in Timor-Leste is richly illustrative of this potential: his life and the relations he cultivated while alive were permeated by gifts and debts that revealed much about the relational constitution of the person (Strathern 2015, Silva and Simião 2016). Yet it is his death – seen through the largely personal and affective concerns of the researcher/friend/interlocutor – that prompts another series of reflections, this time on individualism, autonomous agency and the freedoms and rights of subjects in a context of modernisation. The narrative on Rebinha's death, on the other hand, led the anthropologist/great-granddaughter to examine how, in the research context, dynamics of distancing and reconciliation within families occur following the passing of a person considered significant for the kin group. This event (death) mobilises the whole group around the possessions left by the deceased, unleashing new family dynamics.

A theoretical-analytical potential exists in analysing these phenomena that goes beyond the sphere of affects and emotions, which are the epistemological yields of such events or the questions that arise after and beyond them. These happenings certainly move, touch and affect us, but they go beyond discussions of this kind and therefore seem especially powerful. Indeed, one of Favret-Saada's (2005) most significant contributions, we would argue, was to demonstrate how lived experiences of suffering, shock and impact in the field generate theoretical and methodological reflections in anthropology. What some discussions do, however, distorting this potential offered by the French anthropologist, is to reduce debates on affect and emotions in the field to a

relational, episodic or even anecdotal dimension, often emotive in character. As memorials and records of the experiences of anthropologists, this approach can be productive. Yet we believe a greater potential is actualised when the relational dimension of striking events in the field is accompanied by a theoretical-methodological discussion aimed at contributing to the widening of debates on anthropological theory, ethnography or anthropological practice (methodology).

Estrangement and distancing from the discussion on emotions and equivocal uses of the notion of ‘affect’ is necessary in this article, principally to avoid the superficiality of the debate on feeling/thinking/perceiving death in the field. The risk of approaching the issue from such a perspective is the reduction of a debate that is both powerful and fundamental, one that may even appear vile or abject from certain viewpoints that prefer to turn away from sombre phenomena. Events of this kind, which mess with our emotions, need to be reported as such, but can nonetheless remain attuned to the heuristic and epistemological criteria/care that frame them within a series of events significant in/for anthropological discussion.

Throughout this article, we have focused on discussing how the departure/death of people within a group enables reflection on this same group, its dynamics and its moral and juridical (re)arrangements, beyond an exclusive discussion on the trajectory of the person. Exploring death events, even in distinct fields and permeated (naturally) by distinct issues, allows a wider debate to take shape, addressing significant theoretical questions (such as the notion of the person, gift-giving and kinship), a critique of the somewhat careless use of notions like affect and the pertinence of revisiting the debate on death in the field from the sphere of emotions in order to consider the production of knowledge in anthropology. This is both a theoretical-methodological proposal and, simultaneously, a provocation to think about death in the field, bringing a serious debate about anthropology conducted by people and with people, with feelings and affects, but not limited to the field of emotions.

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ANA CLARA SOUSA DAMÁSIO DOS SANTOS

University of Brasilia, Department of Anthropology, Group of Ethnography on Circulations and Migratory Dynamics – MÓBILE, Brasilia, Federal District, Brazil

anaclarasousadamasio@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7426-7486>

MIGUEL ANTONIO DOS SANTOS FILHO

University of Brasilia, Department of Anthropology, Laboratory for Studies on Economies and Globalizations – LEEG, Brasilia, Federal District, Brazil

miguel.antonio1993@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7846-2526>

DOSSIER EDITORS

Vinícius Venancio (vini.venancio2@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3245-1204>)

Federal University of Goiás, Faculty of Social Sciences, Goiânia, GO, Brazil

Universidade Federal de Goiás, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais, Goiânia, GO, Brasil

Andréa Lobo (andreaslobo@yahoo.com.br | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7525-1953>)

University of Brasília, Department of Anthropology, Brasília, DF, Brazil

Universidade de Brasília, Departamento de Antropologia, Brasília, DF, Brasil